Winthrop G. Brown, Oral History Interview – 2/1/1968
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Biographical Note
Brown, U.S. Ambassador to Laos from 1960-1962 and Ambassador to Korea from 1964-1967, discusses key political and military figures and events in Laos during his tenure as ambassador; instances where his opinion of the best course of action differed from that of officials in the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C.; U.S. aid and military involvement in Laos; and the frustrations of his job, among other issues.

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Winthrop G. Brown

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Oral History Interview

with

Winthrop G. Brown

February 1, 1968
Washington, D.C.

By Larry J. Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Ambassador Brown, did you know John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] at all before he became President, any relationship with him?

BROWN: No, I did not.

HACKMAN: Why don't we pick up then in 1960, in July of 1960, when you first went out to Laos, and maybe you can recall the briefings you received here before you went out as to what our policy was or how clearly it was spelled out at that point?

BROWN: Actually, I have no very clear recollection of the briefings that I got in the Department. There was a certain amount of time pressure, and I didn't really have what you might call a briefing in depth. I was given a lot of things to read, but I also usually feel that you can learn an awful lot more on the spot than by being told about something that you're unfamiliar with at second or third hand. So I just did what was necessary and then went on out to the field to pick up the threads as best I could there.

HACKMAN: Maybe you can recall some of your initial contacts with some of the political leaders in Laos when you arrived. Of course, it was a pretty tense situation. Pretty soon after you arrived, I believe, that's when Kong Le, in August...

BROWN: I arrived at the end of July 1960. At that time the government was headed by Tiao Somsanith. It was a pro-Western government, rather conservative, and things were on the whole very quiet. There was a certain amount of Pathet Lao activity going on. There was sporadic fighting of the kind which has continued pretty consistently ever since. But there were no major engagements and on the whole the atmosphere was reasonably peaceful, as I recall it.

Shortly after I got there—I arrived on July 27—shortly after I got there, during the first week in August, the whole of the Cabinet went up to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, to confer with the King [Savang Vatthana, King of Laos] about the funeral arrangements for his late father [Sisavang Vong], who had been awaiting those ceremonies, those obsequies, for almost eighteen months, reposing in a very impressive gilded urn in the front hall of the palace. It was a problem of finding the auspicious day and all that kind of thing. It was during the absence of the entire government in Luang Prabang that Kong Le executed his coup on the ninth of August, I believe, is the date.

One of the first things that I did within two or three days after arrival and making my calls on the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister and presenting my credentials, which I did within a couple of days after arrival, was to call on Prince Souvanna Phouma. Of course, I had heard a great deal about him during my briefings in Washington, and we had had many experiences with him over the preceding five or six years. Those experiences have been considered by the Administration to be, on the whole, quite unsatisfactory.

I called on him at his house where he was—he was out of office and totally unofficial. And I must say I was very impressed. He took the line that the only proper role for Laos was to be completely neutral. He stressed the fact that he was a sincere and vigorous anti-communist, but he did not want to be tied up in alliances with the West anymore than he wanted to be dominated by or tied up with alliances with the Communist world. He seemed to be pretty well persuaded that he would be able, if he were in charge, if the country followed a neutral policy, to maintain its independence, he had confidence that the other side would respect it. He certainly felt that any strong and overt pro-Western alliance would be something which would attract reprisals from the other side and that Laos was neither inclined nor equipped to deal with that kind of thing. He spoke very warmly of the idea of trying to reconcile the conflicting factors in the country. He didn't believe that his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, was, in fact, a communist. He had a great deal of confidence in his ability personally to reconcile the conflicting factions in the country.

Now, I took a lot of this with substantial grains of salt, both because of the past history I had been told about in Washington and because of the fact that I didn't think the communists were quite as gentle and accommodating as he seemed to think that they would

be. But nevertheless, the way in which he presented his thesis of trying to unite the different elements in the country into a national and a neutral leadership and to pursue a course of real neutrality for the country seemed to me to be very sincere. The impression I got of the man, as such, was that he had qualities of leadership and that he was likely to appeal to his people. I felt this very strongly, and at the same time I had very serious qualms because this was my first experience in Asia; it was my first experience with Souvanna; it was my first experience as an ambassador; and my superiors in Washington did not agree either with Souvanna's sincerity or with his abilities as they seemed to emerge in this first interview

Well, as I said, the situation changed radically, when Captain Kong Le executed his coup on the, I think it was the night of August the 9th, by seizing a radio station and other government offices and taking charge. I don't think I need to go through the details of the subsequent events, the formation

of the government and the action of the Assembly—I mean, these are all matters of record and of history. One thing, and it is relevant, I think, however, to the whole situation, was the fact that, given the situation as I could observe it and as my colleagues in the field advised me, I did not think that Captain Kong Le was a communist nor that he was inspired by the communists.

HACKMAN: Who was giving you this advice in this connection?

BROWN: Well, this was the reaction that came from Washington after the event. Captain Kong Le had actually been trained by the United states as a paratrooper, and we had no reason to think of him as being anti-American or pro-communist. But the fact that he did overthrow a pro-Western government and that he immediately called in Prince Souvanna, whom Washington felt to have, at best, a very soft attitude toward the communists and, at worst, a pro-communist reaction. He was at best gullible and at worst, not venal but subject to Communist influence. The fact that Captain Kong Le distributed arms to the people, that he immediately established contact with the Pathet Lao, and all of these things led Washington to the belief that he was certainly pro-communist; if not, that the whole enterprise had been inspired by the communists.

My judgment was much simpler than that. My judgment was that—and this was the judgment of my country team as well—that this fellow was a good paratroop Captain, that he was fed up with fighting, particularly fighting fellow Laotians. He said to somebody—I've forgotten whom; I've always remembered this remark—he said, "I have fought for many years, and I have killed many men, and I have never seen a foreigner die." I was persuaded that he shared the feeling of a great many Laotians—to the extent that there were thinking Laotians about these problems; there weren't too many of them—that somehow or other if they could establish a neutral position, if they could stop being involved with the Americans or with anybody else, that somehow or other all these problems would go away

and they would be left alone to be peaceful and pursue their placid and their day-to-day existence.

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Also, Kong Le was very fed up with the vast disparities in wealth which existed with the conspicuous spending of senior military officers. And it was perhaps significant that the coup started by a mortar and machine gun attack on the very comfortable and elaborate home of the Chief of Staff of the Army. Kong Le was very fed up with the treatment given his troops, the quarters which were given to them, the fact that they spent a great deal of time out in the bush hunting Pathet Lao while their superiors stayed comfortably in Vientiane.

Well, right or wrong, anyhow, I was not persuaded that this guy was a communist nor that he leaned toward the communists. So that I started off, with all my ignorance and inexperience, with a totally different judgment about two key personalities in the *dramatis personae* than my superiors in Washington had. I strongly believe that the thing that counted out there in Laos was people and that one of the elements in the determination of our policy in Laos, which we subsequently changed, was the fact that we misjudged three people: Souvanna and Kong Le and Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan], whom I'll come to later. I'm a little hazy about the chronology of these events. I'd have to look it up, and I haven't prepared for this interview. Hold it a minute while I....[Interruption]

HACKMAN: Okay, You had mentioned earlier that—I believe on the question of Kong Le you said your country team was fairly united. Did this extend to other...

BROWN: I mentioned that my country team shared the opinions which I had, and I might comment on that. There's been a great deal of talk about divisions of opinion between the different agencies of government in Laos. In fact, all through the time I was there, the whole two years, I was plagued by the absolute conviction on the part of many Laotians and a large part of the American and foreign press and by most foreign diplomats that there was a wide divergence of opinion between the State Department and the Ambassador on one hand and the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the military on the other.

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Now there had been, I believe—I was told—differences of opinion between the CIA station chief and the Ambassador before I got there. The CIA station chief had been changed before I came. This is something that troubled me very much, and I went over to see the people in CIA before I left. I was received by Mr. Allen Dulles [Allen W. Dulles], his Deputy, General Cabell [Charles Pearre Cabell], Mr. Bissell [Richard Mervin Bissell, Jr.], and Mr. Fitzgerald [Desmond Fitzgerald], who were the people primarily concerned with Laos. Mr. Dulles said to me, “Before we get into a discussion of this problem, I want you to understand one thing, and that is that you have my authority to send home any

member of my staff at any time on twenty-four hours notice, without explanation and without damage to his career, if you feel that he is not loyally carrying out your instructions or working harmoniously in your country team. And now, let's discuss the problems of Laos."

So I went out to Laos with a considerable peace of mind on that subject, and this was greatly enhanced by the fact that the station chief, Gordon Jorgensen, was a man of exceptionally moral character, of very great professional ability, and a very wise person. I had nothing but the most harmonious professional and personal relationships with him and his staff. His number two man, Strathern [Clifton R. Strathern], was a first rate person, served with me later in Korea. And I thought that they were top flight people. In fact, I relied on Jorgensen as my political advisor much more heavily than any member of my State Department section. And I never had any differences of opinion with him except on one occasion when he wanted to go further in support of Prince Souvanna than I did.

It was a very rewarding experience to spend those two years with that country team because we did see eye to eye on the fundamentals of what the situation was and what our policy should be. In the course of that whole period, every message that went from the Embassy on a matter of policy was cleared word by word with every member of the country team. And there was only one occasion, as I say, on which there was a dissent. This included General Heintges [John A. Heintges] and Colonel Hollis [Joel M. Hollis], the army attaché. My military colleagues were under considerable criticism from their superiors in the Pentagon for, as one of them said, "in supporting that communist Ambassador." But they were fair minded people and independent minded people, and they went right ahead and said, "Put my name on the telegram." This was a very exciting and a very comforting experience.

HACKMAN: Well, that's surprising in terms of what Hilsman [Roger Hilsman] says in his book and what Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.], I think, also said, where they seem to place great emphasis on what they see as continued problems in the field, I believe, between the CIA, military people, and the Embassy people.

BROWN: Well, there may have been before I got there and there may be at other posts, but just as a general observation, I've worked in posts where there were major CIA staffs in India and Laos and in Korea, and I have found exactly the same situation prevail in all three of those posts. I've never had any problems with the CIA, and my own personal view is that if any ambassador has trouble with the CIA in his post, it's his own damn fault because he has the authority to cope with the problem and if he inspires the right kind of an attitude, I think he'll get cooperation.

HACKMAN: Maybe you would want to pick up the story, then. In this period Phoumi was, let's see, he had moved his army down to—is it Savannakhet?

BROWN: No. There was a previous step in there. The situation was quite confused for the first week or so after the August ninth coup. But by the end of the month, as I remember, all the factions had gotten together and Souvanna had been called.... Kong Le realized that he was no politician: he was a soldier, and he needed some kind of a political leadership, political figurehead, to lead this neutralist movement. He called on Souvanna. Souvanna supported him. And Souvanna formed a government which included General Phoumi as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. They went up to Luang Prabang and got the King's approval. I think it was the 31st of August, after many negotiations and to-ing and fro-ing and so forth, this government was agreed upon, and the King approved it. I've often thought subsequently that if we could have had that government later on, we would have paid a

very high price for it. It had no communists, although it did have Quinim Pholsena, who was a very complex character and very left wing and may very well have been a communist at the time, although he hadn't emerged in those colors at that time. Aside from that, it was a pretty conservative government, a pretty well balanced government.

It was my recommendation to Washington, supported by the whole country team, that we should come out with a strong declaration of support for that government at that time. This recommendation was not accepted. I regret now that I did not make it in stronger terms than I did. Whether that would have been productive or counterproductive in Washington with the climate which existed then, I don't know. But I still felt very much a neophyte, having only been there less than a month at the time, or about a month, five weeks. Well anyhow, that's what we recommended.

Then, as you remember, when the government came down to Vientiane to take their oath at the Wat (pagoda) on the first of September, Kong Le threatened that he would not accept the government and that Phoumi would be shot. Phoumi, who had been told in the past by an astrologer that he would meet a violent death, didn't choose to come. I don't think he liked working under Souvanna anyhow. So he went down to Savannakhet. The rest of the government came down and was sworn in, and that was on the first of September.

Now, Souvanna told me, told everybody, that his strategy was that he wanted to get the rightest and the neutralist groups in the country together and then, with them united, negotiate with the Pathet Lao. He said—and I like to say it the way he “said” because I don't know what was completely in the back of his mind—that he did not want to have the Pathet Lao in the Cabinet, that he was concerned about the fact that the previous election had been very much rigged, that he felt that the Pathet Lao had been improperly excluded from representation in the Assembly, and that he was prepared to have supplemental elections which would give them a chance to have representation in the Assembly, and that he was prepared to have supplemental elections which would give them a chance to have representation in the Assembly. At that time he was definitely taking the position that he did not want them in the Cabinet.

Now, whether he would have stuck to that or not is another question, because Souvanna did have a tendency, very strong tendency, to think that he could accomplish a hell of a lot more than he was in fact able to accomplish. He indulged in a great deal of wishful thinking, and he might very well have found himself in a position where he couldn't get anywhere except offering a Cabinet position and have gone back to the position he took in 1957 when he had a coalition government. But anyhow, his gambit at the time was, “Let's get all the non-Communist forces together and then, from a position of strength, let's negotiate with the Pathet Lao.” But he did insist that a reconciliation of some kind with the Pathet Lao was indispensable. It seemed to me that this was the only kind of approach that would have any chance of working.

I happened to have a very low opinion of the Laotian Army at the time. I thought we were training the wrong kind of army and with the wrong kind of people. My military colleagues weren’t quite so sure that I was right on that one.

HACKMAN: You mean the people in the field?

BROWN: In the field, and certainly the people in the Pentagon. I spent two hours trying to persuade General Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] that the Laotians were not the best soldiers in the world. But, he said, “Well, we made good soldiers out of the Koreans. Why can't we make good soldiers out of the Laotians?” And the Laotians have become rather better soldiers in the several years that intervened since I was there, so maybe he had some right on his aide. But at that time they were a feeble lot. And even only a few weeks ago three thousand of them disappeared from an outpost, and they still haven't found fifteen hundred of them. But anyhow, that was Souvanna's line, and it was our feeling in the country team that he ought to be given a chance to work it out. I sent…. Well, let's stop a minute.

HACKMAN: Okay.

BROWN: I sent a lot of people down to Savannakhet to try to persuade Phoumi to come back and take his position in the government, and was not successful in that respect. On the tenth of September, Prince Boum Oum and General Phoumi made their announcement that they had suspended the Constitution, dissolved the Assembly, and declared the government illegal. Souvanna had called in all the diplomatic corps and told them that this, of course, rendered his strategy of dealing with the Pathet Lao unworkable. From that time on, things began to deteriorate seriously.

In Washington, as I understand it, there was a very wide difference of opinion. The people in the Pentagon were persuaded that the only thing that we could do was to support General Phoumi to build up a rightist force and a rightist government and deal with the Pathet Lao by force. They distrusted Souvanna, and I suspect that a lot of people in the CIA felt the same way about it, and certainly a lot of people in the State Department felt the

same way about it. The Department wasn't quite as strong on that line as was the other agencies.

The instructions that we got from Washington were frequently masterpieces of double-talk instructing us to do contradictory things, to which I used to reply by saying, “We're urgently embarking on the course of action A, B, and C, but would greatly appreciate instructions as to how in the light of those activities we can carry out courses D, E, and F,” which were incompatible, I used to dictate those telegrams with my country team present and get their suggestions and work it all out at the time. But Washington never could make up its mind.

We had a terribly difficult legal position because, you see, we recognized, we were in diplomatic relations with the government of Souvanna; General Phoumi was in open rebellion against it President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] had just made an eloquent speech to the United Nations on the respect for the sovereignty of independent nations and not interfering in their internal affairs. Washington sympathies were, basically, with General Phoumi. And yet, he was actually trying to overthrow the government of the country, approved by the King and the Assembly, with which we were in diplomatic relations. So we were in a really very difficult position.

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We solved that problem by a rather simple device which would probably only work in Laos, which was that I went to Prince Souvanna and I said, “Look here, you don't want to see the Laotian army fade away, do you?” He said, “No.” I said, “You don't want to see the Pathet Lao take over more territory by force, do you?” And he said, “No.” I said, “Okay. Will you let us supply the army even though Phoumi is in command of it, directly with military equipment?” And Souvanna said, “Yes, provided you don't use it against me.” And that's the basis on which we operated, so that we were supplying the rebels with arms with the permission of the government against which they were in rebellion.

Now this, the military solution that eventually Phoumi would have to come and take Vientiane and that he'll be supported in doing that, and since this obviously fitted his desires and since it was consistent with support he'd gotten in the past and what he could read in the papers about divisions of opinion in the United States government, this was sufficient to guarantee that he would not come back and join the government and take his place as he should have done. And it caused a great deal of our difficulties because Phoumi was persuaded that when the chips were down we would back him, regardless. Therefore he was in the position of running American foreign policy and not the United States. This was a terrible mistake. It was not an easy decision because if we had chopped off all support to General Phoumi there would be a serious risk of very extensive Pathet Lao gains in control over the whole of the country.

There were a number of reactions, one particularly, that followed where we did things which added to this support of General Phoumi, this conviction of General Phoumi's that he would be supported by us under all circumstances. We had military advisors in Savannakhet with General Phoumi, and we had a CIA character named John Hasey, who has been subject to a certain

amount of criticism by some people as being perhaps someone who breached the unanimity of our mission out there and went against instructions. I personally don't believe it. I think that his sympathies were entirely with General Phoumi, but I think he was a good soldier, and I think he followed out his instructions. And, in fact, when General Phoumi took Vientiane and came back to the city and ruled there, I appointed Hasey as my direct liaison officer with General Phoumi. I am persuaded that he served me loyally even though in many cases he disagreed with what I asked him to do.

Well, there are all kinds of little things, like when General Phoumi's forces finally took Vientiane, I had a hell of a time getting Prince Boum Oum and General Phoumi to come to Vientiane and assume control of the place. The two or three days after the battle was over were worse than the battle because there was such a terrible disintegration: no police, no law and order, no government, no direction. These guys just.... I finally persuaded them to come up, and they came and spent four or five hours and then went away again.

It wasn't until after the Kennedy Administration came in that, in my opinion, we began to come to our senses I believe, for example, that we simply pushed Souvanna into the arms of the Soviet Union and the Chinese and the Pathet Lao. We were always complaining that he was too weak, that he couldn't control his forces, he couldn't control the Pathet Lao, and yet we've always denied him the resources and the political support which would be necessary to enable him to do so. When he was choked off by the Thai blockade, which again Marshal Sarit [Sarit Thanarat] contributed to that, he couldn't get rice and oil. He came to me and asked for help; I had to tell him no, we wouldn't give it to him. So he asked the Russians, and the Russians acted, according to one man who told Governor Harriman [William Averell Harriman] about this later on, in Russia, with a speed that is unprecedented in the Kremlin, organized an airlift to do all the things that you know about.

HACKMAN: What was your own personal reaction to his request for the rice and oil at that time?

BROWN: I think we should have given it to him.

HACKMAN: Did you request that from the Department, and was it refused, or was this something you knew you just would not be able to...

BROWN: I can't remember specifically how I put it. I passed on the request and I think—I'd have to check the telegrams—I think I recommended that we do it. The answer I got back was on the very practical ground of the enormous expense involved. What we did do, which was helpful, was to twist Sarit's arm to try to get him to lift the blockade. He did modify it and eventually lifted it, but by

that time it was too late. Souvanna had gone, and the battle of Vientiane was on, and the situation had changed.

HACKMAN: At what point did you first talk to Souphanouvong, the brother.

BROWN: I never talked to him except on a couple of social occasions toward the end of the negotiations for the coalition government. He's a very impressive fellow and was, I believe, quite a good Minister when he was in the Cabinet. Souvanna would never believe that his brother was a communist, and there he was just wrong because I think his brother is a communist.

HACKMAN: There was always a lot of discussion as to whether he was a strong figure on his own or how much the North Vietnamese influenced him.

BROWN: He was never considered by anybody to be the top man in the Pathet Lao. He was the figurehead because he was the nationalist, he'd stayed out of the country until the French were completely out, and he hadn't come back on that first compromise that they made. But he was number three or four in the hierarchy, according to our intelligence reports.

HACKMAN: Maybe we can go on to the Kennedy Administration, then, and you can take off on the first meeting.

BROWN: Well, when I…

HACKMAN: Let me turn this around just a minute.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

BROWN: When Kennedy came in I was called back for consultation, and that was, I think, February of 1961.

HACKMAN: February 3rd, I believe.

BROWN: The President asked me to come and see him. I shall never forget that hour. It was a very, very moving experience. You say, “No eulogies are expected,” but I'm going to tell you just exactly how I felt.

I went expecting to meet a young man, and, of course, I did. But that wasn't the impression I got. The impression was of a personality. He greeted me very pleasantly, sat down at his desk, and we had a couple of pictures taken. Then he started to ask questions, extraordinarily well informed questions. He had obviously read all the telegrams. He had the situation at his fingertips.

Among the first questions he asked me was, “What kind of people are these people: Souvanna and Souphanouvong and Phoumi and the King and Kong Le?” And my heart leapt up when he asked that question, since I had long since come to the conclusion that the mistakes in our policy were fundamentally based upon a misjudgment of the characters and abilities and motivations and personalities of this small group of men. It seemed to me the President was going right to the heart of the matter when he said, “What makes them tick?” I did my best to explain what they seemed like to one observer. And then he asked me one question, and I've forgotten what it was, but I started to answer by saying, “Well, sir, the policy is...” And he stopped me right there, and he said, “That's not what I asked you. I said, ‘What do you think, you, the Ambassador?’” at which point I became exceedingly indiscreet and said a great many things which were critical of people in higher authority, and I told him exactly what was on my heart. Somehow or other I had the feeling that I could say anything that I wanted and it would be like the confessional, that it would go to the President and he would use it and evaluate it or not use it as he saw fit, but that it would never be used against me and it would never go any further.

So, at the end of fifty minutes, he had extracted just about all the information that it was possible for any one man to give him. All of a sudden the interview was over, and he said, “Goodbye.” But the impression of knowledge, of capacity to analyze a problem, of directness of approach, of quality, of personality, of style, if that's what you want to say, of humanity—it was indelible. I mean, I just thought I'd been in the presence of a great man.

HACKMAN: Do you want to recount any of the specific things that you emphasized to him at that time, what you felt the problems were?

BROWN: I told him that—I can't remember really in detail, but I told him essentially that I thought that there was only one person in Laos who could be a unifying force in the country and I thought that that was Souvanna; that I thought that we had pretty well emasculated him by our policies, that this had been wrong; I thought General Phoumi was greatly overrated, that he'd never been anywhere near a battlefield. He wasn't all that good a general, and he was a poor politician. I thought it was a terrible thing to be in a position where Phoumi was determining our policy and not the United States. I said I thought that we'd misjudged Kong Le, that this was a disgruntled soldier, but a patriot, not a communist; that the King was a total zero who was interested only in one thing, which was keeping on the throne. And I didn't say that necessarily critically because I'm not sure that the King could have done anything if he had descended into the arena. He probably served a greater purpose for his country in the long run, and for all of us in the long run, by staying on the throne even though he didn't do a damn thing. But there was the most naive conviction, wishful thinking, in Washington that somehow or other the King could intervene and right the situation. Well, in the first place, the King was a hundred percent Phoumi man. He didn't like Souvanna, even though they are related. Perhaps because he saw a potential threat there. But anyhow, he was a hard line rightist, provided he could play with somebody else's chips, but a weak man really. He

cried several times when he talked me. Part of our problem Washington was trying to persuade them that this was a broken reed.

[-15-]

And the other thing that used to be so exasperating about Washington was they kept telling us out there to produce a substitute for Souvanna who would have all the necessary attributes of popular appeal and diplomatic experience and leadership and so forth. And there just wasn't any other guy. The only other guy that could have done that was Phoui Sananikone. The only trouble with Phoui was that Souvanna hated him, Phoumi hated him, the King hated him, and Kong Le hated him, and he had no popular support. Otherwise, he was an admirable fellow for Prime Minister.

But it was an interesting thing that President Eisenhower's Administration was supposed to be an Administration which operated on a very carefully staffed out basis and the whole thing was organized and well thought out. I used to get the damndest telegrams from Washington, as I said before, which were obviously papered-over dissension. Nobody at the top had really faced up to these issues and been prepared to make a decision. I don't think you can blame it on Secretary Parsons [James Graham Parsons]. He's been made the scapegoat for so much of this stuff. Actually, he supported me a hundred percent on the whole policy that we tried to pursue of supporting Souvanna in his effort to bring the right and the center together to deal with the left. But, at his level and being a professional, I mean he didn't have the.... The only person who could have resolved this, cut this Gordian knot, was the President, who wasn't, of course, about to do it. So as I say, I used to get these confused telegrams.

Then when the Kennedy Administration, which people said was all very hit or miss and shotgun, the telegrams immediately changed, and they became lucid, clear, and whether you agreed or not with what they said, you knew damn well exactly what it was you were told to do. And there was, at last, a U.S. government position; no ands, ifs, or buts about it. I understand, from other sources, that President Kennedy himself at least read or approved or sometimes even wrote a great many of the messages that came out and that he was in personal command of the situation.

[-16-]

I shall never forget, during this visit when I first came back, I thought. “What a wonderful bit of administrative leadership.” A task force is created to deal with the Laotian problem, and Secretary Parsons was chairman, and Paul Nitze [Paul Henry Nitze] was on it, and I think Dick Bissell, but anyhow, some senior fellow from CIA and a couple of generals and all the necessary paraphernalia. Parsons read the terms of reference, and it went something like this—it was a letter from the President to the Secretary—“Dear Mr. Secretary: I'd appreciate it if you could establish a working group to deal with the Laotian problem on the Assistant Secretary level. I would appreciate at least weekly reports on the progress of your work, and if at any time I can personally be of assistance, I any available, yours truly, John F. Kennedy.”

HACKMAN: In order to keep on top of it.

BROWN: Well, whether the committee wished to or not, they had no alternative but to get on with the job under that type of very courteous but firm instructions. Well, then you know the story of what happened from then on, our struggles to bring Phoumi around and to reach a solution which many people have said was unsatisfactory, that it hasn't worked, to which my answer is, "Of coarse, it didn't work. It wasn't intended to work." The way Mr. Harriman put it to me on a number of occasions was, "We must never face the President with the choice of abandoning Laos or sending in troops. This is our job, to keep him from having to make that choice." And that's precisely what we did. What in effect happened with this coalition government was the *de facto* partition of the country which could never have been negotiated as such, but which reflects the power position which will undoubtedly remain until the Vietnamese situation is settled, and which there wasn't any other alternative to. Now, this is very unsatisfactory, but it's a hell of a lot better than moving task forces around into the Bay of Bangkok, as we did a couple of times.

HACKMAN: Let me ask you, on that first trip back in February, did you talk to any of the President's assistants? Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] was working; probably Bundy's [McGeorge Bundy]

operation was just getting off the ground at that point. Did you talk to any of these people?

BROWN: Yes. I knew Walt Rostow of old, and I went to call on him before I went to see the President, and he had McGeorge Bundy there. They asked a lot of questions. They said, "Are you going to see the President?" I said, "Yes. He's asked me to come and see him." Walt smiled, and he said, "You'll find him a wonderful listener." And that was all.

HACKMAN: Did you see any direct results of this trip as a result of your talk with the President?

BROWN: No, I can't pinpoint anything definite. But I would suspect that what I had to say simply confirmed impressions which the President had received by taking an unbiased look at the facts. Now, you know the story of all the conferences in the White House and the conflicting military advice and all that kind of things; that's also a part of the record that I don't know anything about because I wasn't.... What we did from the field was to try to convey to Washington the hard facts with which we were confronted and the extraordinary poverty of the human material with which we had to work.

HACKMAN: What about the idea that developed in early '61 of the three man commission to ensure the neutrality of Laos? Did you discuss that

with the President at that time, or had that come up yet at that point?

BROWN: No, but I'll talk a little bit about that, and this is very heretical. From the field, this is the way it looked. You mean the idea of Burma, Indonesia—Burma, Malaysia...

HACKMAN: Right. Where did it come from, and what was your reaction?

[-18-]

BROWN: I don't know where it.... I think the first we heard of it, it came from Washington, whether it was the original idea. My chronology is very dim in my memory, but this was the first time that we had decided to come out specifically and clearly in favor of the neutrality of Laos. I think we had always sort of hedged away from that before. I had a hell of a time persuading the Laotians to have anything to do with this, that is to say, Phoumi and the King. The idea of the return of the International Control Commission was anathema to Souvanna and to the King, particularly, and to Phoumi—everybody. They didn't want that. And I've forgotten how we ever persuaded them to let it come back. So this idea of the Cambodians, the Burmese, and the Malayans were proposed from Washington. We finally persuaded the Laotians to go along with that. A little fellow in the Embassy named—oh, a fellow not in the Embassy, but in the Department, named Christian.... What was the Laotian desk officer's name?

HACKMAN: Cross [Charles T. Cross]?

BROWN: No. Before him. Chris….[Christian Addison Chapman] Oh, I'll think of it. But anyhow, absolutely first class guy, absolutely first class guy. He wrote a speech for the King of Laos to deliver which, in essence, said, “We want to be neutral, and we would greatly appreciate it if three of our neighbors could come and supervise the neutrality.” He very reluctantly agreed to broadcast. I'm told that he had to practice his Laotian for two days before he could command it sufficiently fluently to get out over the radio. He did. And, of course, it was an abysmal flop. We learned later, just about the time that it was coming out of the Embassy, that neither the Burmese nor the Cambodians nor the Malayans had been approached about this, which seemed to us to be an insane way to do it, even though that did take place under the auspices of a new Administration. One would think that you would at least, if you were going to ask Prince Sihanouk [Prince Norodom Sihanouk] to be a mediator, you’d ask *him*, particularly if you knew anything about characteristics of Prince Sihanouk, who is vain as a peacock. But that was a flop.

[-19-]

I don' t know whether you're interested at all in our relations with other countries out there. We were, of course, totally at odds with the British and the French and Russians. The French and the British both strongly supported Souvanna and strongly supported

neutrality. But in the field, we had a very good working relationship with all of them. Despite all our differences of opinion, we used to meet for lunch once or twice a week around the different houses. I told them just about everything that we were doing, and they were very good about reciprocating. This all paid off in the end, because when we were working on this question of the coalition government, the final settlement, the British guy could talk to Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao in a way that neither the Frenchman nor I could. And Falaize [Pierre Louis Falaize], who was, I think, a damn good man for France at that particular time and place, although I believe his diplomatic service doesn't think so much or him. He was sent there as a punishment for something, I don't know what. He could tell Souvanna to go jump in a lake, and he did every now and then. Just a damned good guy. So that we worked in very close teamwork in those times, all through that. At the end they made a very great contribution to the final settlement. The Indian, despite all his wobbliness and the indecisiveness of his government—the two Indians who were out there, Avtar Singh and Tinoo Sen [Samarendranath Tinoo Sen], again were helpful in communicating with the other side, taking soundings and taking messages and so forth. The Indian Ambassador was an ass and not at all helpful, but the chairmen of the Control Commission were both capable fellows, for Indians, and very helpful.

HACKMAN: What about the Russian while you were out there? Was he...

BROWN: A very agreeable fellow. His name is Abramov [Aleksandre N. Abramov]. He's somewhere down in Africa now. There was only one occasion when we talked darkly of trading hydrogen bombs with each other, but most of the time he was very pleasant. He used to come around and see me and crack jokes and talk. His whole idea was, “Let’s cool it. Let’s cool it.” What he said behind our backs, I don’t know. The Pole, the Polish member of the Control Commission, was a highly cultivated, very intelligent, very personable man with whom you could discuss

anything, who was a convinced Communist and presented his case extremely well, very reasonably; but, of course, blocked any effective action by the Control Commission on all occasions.

HACKMAN: In March, after you had come back from your visit to the States, the Pathet Lao were more or less on the offensive. Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk], I remember, came out to Bangkok to a SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] conference, I believe, to try to get some support out of our SEATO allies. Did you attend that conference? Can you remember that?

BROWN: I went down there, but primarily to see Rusk. I attended the opening session, I think, but I didn't go into any of the meetings.

HACKMAN: Can you remember what his attitude at that point was?

BROWN: Not particularly, no. But by that time, of course, we'd shifted. Actually, it wasn't until—I think I'm right—I think I'm right that it wasn't until July that we actually came out from behind the bushes and firmly supported Souvanna. But, in March and April and around in there, we were more trying to prevent the situation from getting into where you had to use force.

HACKMAN: I had wondered what your recommendations were on using force. I know Governor Harriman was out; I believe General Lemnitzer was out in April and...

BROWN: My recommendation was very simple, and that is, "Before you use force, look down the road all the way and be prepared to go all the way. If you don't like what you see, don't do it." I said, "Just carefully consider the consequences. Don't take steps and then be in a position where you then have to decide what you're going to do."

HACKMAN: You were not too favorable, then to this idea of putting some limited United States troops into some of the cities, Vientiane and some of the other cities in the Mekong?

BROWN: I can't remember. I think that opinions varied. I think that we might have gotten away with. I was certainly against any idea of going out and cleaning out the Plaine des Jarres and all that kind of thing. That idea would have been crazy. Some troops along the Mekong Valley—I just don't remember what views I held or expressed at that time. I'd have to look it up. I do know that there were many times when the knowledge that the task force, whatever number it was, was down off Bangkok was very comforting.

HACKMAN: In April of '61, Souvanna Phouma was going to visit the Untied States, and then the arrangement didn't work out. Were you involved in attempting to get this visit at all, or do you know any of the reasons why this didn't come off?

BROWN: I was told that.... Well, Souvanna said he could only come at a certain time, and the Secretary said he had a speaking engagement and he couldn't be in Washington on that day, and so Souvanna said he wouldn't go. I think that was an error of judgment on the part of the Secretary.

HACKMAN: In this period, Assistant Secretary Parsons went out, and was it McConaughy [Walter P. McConaughy] came in? Did this change anything, make your working arrangement any easier or more difficult?

BROWN: I don't remember anything about McConaughy's administration, tenure.

HACKMAN: You had commented earlier on the desk officer before Chapman being such a splendid fellow. Did this have any effect when he left and Cross came in?

[-22-]

BROWN: No. Cross was very good, too.

HACKMAN: Was it “Barney” Koren [H.L.T. Koren] who was in at that time?

BROWN: Yes, but in that period the desk officer dealt pretty directly with the Assistant Secretary, or indeed, almost with the President. Christian....

HACKMAN: Well, we can put that in when it comes back. That's no problem. We'll find that. What was your reaction to the order in April of ‘61 that our military people put on their uniforms for the first time and actually become an official advisory group?

BROWN: Well, I thought that was pretty sensible. Everybody knew who they were, of course. Nobody was fooled. On the other hand, it's a comment that laymen frequently make, that everybody knew who they were, but the fact that they weren't in uniform and the fact that they were in uniform did make a definite difference. And there's a hell of a lot of difference in the diplomatic world between things that everybody knows exist and other things that people acknowledge exist. This is a very useful tool. It was a small matter, but it was helpful.

HACKMAN: General Boyle [Andrew Jackson Boyle] was the head of that group at that time, wasn't he? What was your relationship with him? Was he...

BROWN: Oh, I had wonderful relationships with all the military. John Heintges was a first class fellow, but I think he had a little bit too great a faith in the capacity of the Laotian forces to be a good soldier. I think he was a little bit too much preoccupied with the conventional training and the conventional equipment in a country that has no roads. But, this was a line that was laid down for him. He understood the political situation very well, and, as I say, he gave me unstinting support for which I will always be grateful, quite aside from having saved my life on one occasion.

[-23-]

HACKMAN: You mentioned a couple of times this idea of having the wrong kind of training. Was there anything you could do about this to try to get a

change in this operation, any attempts that you made?

BROWN: No, and that probably was something I should have done. Actually, I didn't pay too much attention to that side of it. I was more interested in riding herd on Souvanna and Phoumi and the political side and dealing with the economic problems and stressing the civic action side of the military program.

Actually, one of the best pieces of paper that's ever been written on the subject of civic action and the role of the military in that field is a paper done by a Colonel Little of the MAAG [Military Assistance and Advisory Group] in Laos in ‘61, I think, which is a classic. It's part of the literature of the senior seminars and counterinsurgency courses. And the boys in those teams and the fellows who went out among the Montagnards and the Kha and that kind of thing, they did a wonderful job—and the Meo, because the Meo are very fine fighters. They're born marksmen, very tough people.

But Laos was hopeless. It was described by one of my colleagues as being a classic example of a political and economic vacuum. It had no national identity. It was just a series of lines drawn on a map, and more Lao in Thailand than there are in Laos. Plus, less than half the people speak Lao. They're charming, indolent, enchanting people, but they're just not very vigorous, nor are they very numerous, nor are they very well organized. But there's one thing that they did have which Vietnam doesn't have, which is a man of national stature. Good, bad, or indifferent, he was a man, the only, the one man of national stature.

I must say, you’ve got to hand it to Souvanna. He was sixty years old at that time, and he has had lots of money. He's at home in Paris; he's married to a French woman; he loves the good life. He used to tell me that he always kept his suitcases packed in the hall of the Residence. And yet he stuck it out in this dirty, horrible job that he's got. I think he's proved himself a pretty good citizen.

A lot of people will say—and they may say rightly, I don't know—a lot of people will say that the reason that he's behaving so well from our point of view now is that he has learned the hard way that you can't trust the Communists and that if he'd been backed and supported more in the earlier times when he hadn't learned this lesson, he might have not turned out as well. Now this is a case one can argue. My only answer to it would be that at that time and given the choice with which we were confronted, the better gamble was to back him and ride herd on him. In a way, you can understand Washington's view. I mean, things went on all the time that Kong Le did and that other people did, ostensibly his subordinates, that he didn't know anything about, and I used to have to go around and tell him what they were doing. It was all very embarrassing. But, when the chips were down and when he had a decision to make, he usually made the right one and he usually imposed his will upon his subordinates.

HACKMAN: During this period we were insisting on a cease-fire before the Geneva talks could get started. Were you in full agreement with this,

and was this obvious to you, that we should insist on a cease-fire before the thing got started?

BROWN: Oh yes, that made sense. We didn't of course, get a complete one, but it was good enough.

HACKMAN: Maybe we can go on, then, to when the Geneva talks actually got started, I believe, May 16th of '61. What were your own views on what our goals should be at the conference? A lot of people have talked about people in the Department being very disappointed with what Governor Harriman was trying to do at Geneva or what he eventually arrived at. What are your thoughts on this?

BROWN: I think the answer that we arrived at was the only possible answer under the circumstances. I don't think that it was a desirable one. I think that the Pathet Lao would have been a lot smarter to take their seats and bore from within. I think that it's a terribly risky thing, particularly in a country like Laos, where people are gentle and unselfish and the leadership are mostly self-seeking and with less

sense of public service than you find in the West. I think that it was *faute de mieux*. In this business of foreign affairs, you're never confronted with a choice between something which is definitely good and something which is definitely bad. You've got to find expedients, the choice is between undesirable alternatives. Since we did not want to get into a land war in Laos and since we did not want to see Laos definitely abandoned to the Pathet Lao and since we did not want to lose face, to put it baldly, this was the way out. And I think it's kept the thing, it's kept the pot simmering on the back boiler, the back burner, and that's just about the best you could hope for. Harriman's classic remark, when asked how the settlement worked, he said, "About as badly as we expected."

HACKMAN: There was a hassle all through this period on who was going to get the portfolios, particularly the portfolios of Interior and Defense. What was your view on this?

BROWN: My view was that it was idiotic to expect Phoumi to have the portfolios of Interior and Defense and that it would be suicidal if the Pathet Lao had them. So the only answer was for Souvanna to have them.

HACKMAN: I was reading in—oh, what's the fellow who just wrote the book—Hilsman's book where he talks about a big struggle going on to remove some of the people in the field. From what you have said earlier, I'm not sure if you would disagree with this. Or what can you recall about that?

BROWN: Well, Hilsman said, as I remember, that everybody who had had anything to do with Phoumi was removed by Harriman. That is not so. One person was removed, and that was Hasey. Harriman was convinced that Hasey had been peddling the old CIA line. I think Harriman was wrong on that, and I think I've a lot better basis for judgment than Harriman had on that situation. On the other hand, the reason that I went along with the decision was twofold. In the first place, I had to because Harriman had made it. The second one was that the optics of the situation were such that to remove Hasey was a more clear-cut public acknowledgment of the break, and it also eliminated the suspicions of a lot of people who shared Harriman's

view on Laos and other things. So that I think that in terms of public relations it probably was a good thing to do, but in terms of the merits of the case and the reason given for doing it, I think Harriman was wrong.

HACKMAN: What actions were you taking through this whole period in regard to General Phoumi in trying to get him to cooperate at Geneva, particularly in regard to recommendations of holding back funds? I think January and February were the first time we did withhold funds, right, of '62?

BROWN: Yes. I'd have to refresh my recollections on that. Again, you had the problem of if you held back the funds, could the government carry on doing the things we wanted it to do? I can't remember what we did on that.

HACKMAN: In the spring of '62, Mike Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal], who had taken Rostow's place, and Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan] came out. Can you remember anything about their efforts with the General and if they had any success at all?

BROWN: They had no success at all. Of course, the only person who had any success with the General was Harriman, and he did it in a funny way. Forrestal and Sullivan were sent out, and all my boys were very upset about it. They were very mad, and they said, "Damn it, if they don't have any trust in the Ambassador and the country team, why then they ought to remove you. This is terrible." And I said, "Now listen, boys, these are two very capable fellows, and one of them has the confidence of the President and the other has the confidence of Governor Harriman. Maybe they might have some good ideas. If they have some good ideas, why, we'll adopt them, and if they don't have any good ideas and they go back to Washington and they say they don't have anything better to suggest than what the country team has suggested, then our position is much better than it was before."

So I met them at the airport, and I put them up in the residence. And we lot them go and see Souvanna and Phoumi and the Plaine des Jarres and any other place they went to they had a complete *carte blanche*; they could do anything they wanted. When they came back they said that they thought that everything possible was being done; they had no suggestions for improvement; they thought that everything was fine; and they gave me a nice silver present. Extremely able fellows, both of them, just as nice as they could be. No, they didn't make any dent on Phoumi, any more than anybody else did.

What really got Phoumi, what really got him—of course, Harriman, you know, shook his finger under his nose and did all those things—but what really got Phoumi was, I think, in thinking back on it, was a remark that Harriman made to the Laotian Ambassador here in Washington, who was a brother of the King's. And he said something to the effect that they were going to get rid of Phoumi, which went way beyond the position which I was taking in Laos. I was called in by the Foreign Minister—Sisouk, who was Acting Foreign Minister—was in great agitation because it had gotten to the King and was this really our position? And I said no, this was not really our position because our public position wasn't that far. And Harriman clarified, quote, clarified, this to the Laotian Ambassador later in which he backed away a little from taking the impact of that. He finally got through to Phoumi that he'd had it or that he was in real danger of having it. And I noticed a distinct change in him after that, within a few days of.... But nobody has.... You can't have any effect on a guy when he's persuaded that forces more powerful than you are operating in his favor in the center of power in Washington. And Harriman, after all, was the State Department, you see, and Phoumi still had the CIA and the Pentagon in the back of his mind.

HACKMAN: What was your reaction to his frequent trips out to Laos and to Thailand? Did you request him on occasion, or was this all his own…

BROWN: Ludicrous, ludicrous. The Laotian….

[BEGIN SIDE I, TAPE II]

BROWN: Where were we?

HACKMAN: Let's see, you had talked about the impact, oh no, you were talking about the ludicrous trips, frequent trips.

BROWN: The idea of Phoumi and Boun Oum gallivanting around the world and in Asia when the situation was as critical in their home country as it could be, was just a waste of tax payers' money, provided by us, and no good to them. I'll never forget going around to the hotel where they were staying in Geneva after one of the sessions, when we finally got the two princes together to talk, and I went around to find out how they thought the talks had gone. This was crucial. Phoumi was

sitting in his shirt sleeves at a table, playing some kind of a card game, and Prince Boun Oum was walking up and down playing a violin. [Laughter] Neither of them wanted to talk about what had happened at all. They couldn't get it. And when we talk about negotiations with Hanoi, I keep thinking of the fact that out of the eighteen months I spent trying to arrange negotiations between the three princes, at least a year was spent discussing where they would meet.

HACKMAN: That's right. The question I had asked—you may have answered a different question—was on Harriman's, Governor Harriman's frequent trips out. Were you usually in favor of the trips that he took out to Lao and Thailand, did you request this on occasion, or was this always on his own or at the instigation of the President?

BROWN: I think it was always Washington's initiative, but we always welcomed it very much.

HACKMAN: That's what I wanted to know.

BROWN: I have a profound affection and admiration for Governor Harriman. I started my Foreign Service career working for him in London. He's always been very, very nice to me, and I think the man is an extraordinary human being, an extraordinary public servant, and a wonderful guy.

HACKMAN: I wanted to talk about one other thing. At the time that the Pathet Lao took, is it Nam Tha? And they were moving toward the Mekong, I believe, what were your recommendations as far as to what our reaction should be? Were you in favor of what we did, in effect, in moving the fleet, and moving the two thousand men, I believe, up to the Thai border?

BROWN: Of course, we had done everything possible to dissuade Phoumi from putting all his guys up there, as you remember, and the Laotian officers in charge led the retreat in the only jeep that was available. And after they had all gotten across the river, General Tucker [Reuben Tucker], who was the MAAG chief, had gotten a jeep and drove back up the road toward the Pathet Lao about sixty miles and never encountered anybody at all, which annoyed the hell out of him and also out of the Laotians. Yes, I think what we did was very good, and I think it undoubtedly gave pause.

But again, one doesn't know whether the plans of the other side were to do more than take a very strategic place and to remain as a perpetual threat to the whole Luang Prabang region at no particular cost to themselves or whether they were about to embark on a much larger adventure which would have required a hell of a lot of effort and been somewhat costly. So one never knows whether this action that was taken was in fact the deterrent or not. But it was a very prudent one, in my opinion, on the spot.

HACKMAN: Were you in contact at all on this period with Souphanouvong or the Pathet Lao on spelling out what our policy was?

BROWN: No, all the contacts with Souphanouvong were through Ambassador Addis [John M. Addis].

General Tucker went to General Phoumi on one occasion, and he said, “General Phoumi, your Chief of Staff, General Bounleut [Bounleut Sanichan] isn't competent to lead a platoon around a corner. You ought to get rid of him.” And General Phoumi said, “I know, but he's loyal to me.”

[-30-]

HACKMAN: This is the General Tucker who used to send back such amusing letters or wires back? I believe, I don't know, I think Hilsman or Schlesinger or maybe I've seen it in another interview, someone mentions him as being a very amusing character, Reuben Tucker? There were rumors from time to time that the Communist Chinese forces were helping the Pathet Lao. What was your opinion of that; where do you think the rumors came from?

BROWN: Oh, God, the rumors were a thousand a day in Laos—there isn't a rumor factory in the world as in Vientiane. The night of New Year's eve, 1960—1960, I think it was—Colonel Hollis came in to see me and said, “I think we'd better send a critic message to Washington.” “What's on?” “I’ve got five separate reports which are pretty credible that the Russians are dropping paratroopers on the Plaine des Jarres, and that there are two Chinese divisions crossing the border into Phong Saly.” And I said, “Gee whiz.” Then we got General Heintges in and Jorgy [Gordon L. Jorgensen], and we thought about it and discussed the evidence.

Finally, I said, “Well, you know what's going to happen when this gets to Washington,” and I said, “Joel, you're my intelligence officer, and it's your decision. If you send the telegram, I'll back you up; if you don't, I'll back you up, too.” That guy turned absolutely pea green, and sweat broke out on this forehead. He thought for a while, and he said, “Well, I think let's wait a bit.”

Of course, it was just another rumor. But this kind of thing happened all the time. We think that there were some Chinese who came in and did some road building in the very northern tip of Phong Saly up there, but we had no evidence. And then, of course, there was a small mission at the Plaine des Jarres of Chinese. But here was no significant forces, we were quite sure.

HACKMAN: What about your relations with the American press people over there? Any that stand out in your mind as being particularly, easy to work with or particularly accurate in their reports or the other extreme?

[-31-]

BROWN: We had pretty good relations with the press. I used to see them whenever they wanted to see me. The only thing I would never do was prophesy, and that used to drive them mad because that was the only thing they were interested in. I found them extremely helpful because they could get places where I couldn't get and my people couldn't get, and they brought all kinds of rumors and reports.

Jacques Nevard of the *Times* was especially helpful. In fact, one thing he did was to make an independent study of this persistent rumor that there was a division between the CIA and the Ambassador. And he talked to everybody and his brother and wrote an article in which he said he was convinced it didn't exist, which he didn't tell me anything about; he just showed it to me afterwards. The only fellow that caused us any trouble was the UPI [United Press International] guy, and there were two or three of them—and simply because they printed alarmist stories without checking them out far enough. They were never, you know, difficult in any other way; they just were a little bit too apt to take a sensational rumor at its face value. But the rest of the press were pretty responsible, and they had an uncanny nose for trouble, because whenever the press started arriving in town, my heart always sank.

My British colleague said to me when I went to say good-bye to him, "You know, Win, in all the time I've been in Laos, the phone has never rung, the doorbell has never rung, no visitor has ever been announced, when my heart hasn't sunk." He said, "There couldn't be good news." And he also said that when he was asked by his foreign secretary for recommendations as to the qualifications of his successor, he wrote a dispatch that said to the Secretary of State, "Sir, I have the honor to report that as I know of no member of Her Majesty's Foreign Service who has ever been behind the looking glass, I have no suggestions to make." [Laughter]

HACKMAN: Good recommendation. What were the reasons, any particular reasons, for the appointment of Ambassador Unger [Leonard Unger] to replace you rather than just a normal tour of duty?

BROWN: I recommended him. Well, the first reason is because he's damn good, and the second reason, he probably knew more about Laos than anyone else, because I used to spend a heck of a lot of time in Bangkok working with Ambassador Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson] and Ambassador Young [Kenneth T. Young]. Every telegram that we sent overseas was repeated to Bangkok, and Len was the expert on Laos so that he was terribly well informed on the subject, and he is a man of extreme good judgment and very calm and very pleasant and ideally equipped for that Laotian job. And I don't know whether I was the first to recommend him, but I certainly did recommend him and was very happy when he was selected.

HACKMAN: That's all I have on Laos, unless you can think of something that you want to add—an overall evaluation or any specifics along the way?

BROWN: I think it points out.... I come back to my thesis about people, because the key in Laos was those three or four people and the key in Washington was three or four people. And when the President took command, Secretary Rusk and the President took command, Mr. Harriman got in the picture. Actually, he worked pretty directly, as I understand it, he worked pretty directly with the President and really was the Secretary of State for Laos, so to speak. When you've got a decisive and capable man taking charge, then the whole situation changed, and the pieces fell into their places.

HACKMAN: I don't have anything specific can your tour of duty at the National War College unless you can think of something particular on your role there or anything you tried to change or tried to bring about?

BROWN: Nothing there, except again to say that I think it gave me a new conception of our military. We have really a very exceptional group of men, first-rate people. I think the military has changed in our country; it changed more radically than most any group I know about. Well, no, the whole country has changed in terms of its interest in the world, but the military have come out of their shell enormously. And I must say, the men that that system throws up to the top are, by and large, the most impressive people; the fellows

I worked with in Laos, the fellows I worked with in Korea, are just top flight guys—most of them, not all of them.

HACKMAN: You were in for a short visit on June 4, 1963, with Vice Admiral Rufus Rose [Rufus E. Rose] to see the President, or at the White House. Can you remember anything specific about this? Any significance to...

BROWN: I don't remember that I ever did. And what did Rose have to do with it?

HACKMAN: I don't know, he...

BROWN: I knew hint when he was down at the Industrial College.

HACKMAN: Right, he, in that capacity, and in your capacity as Deputy Commandant down at the War College.

BROWN: Oh. We just went up and paid a visit with the class.

HACKMAN: I think it was just a ceremonial appearance.

BROWN: Yes, that's right. The President just spoke to us briefly, and we had our pictures taken.

HACKMAN: And then you were back only a week later to receive the Distinguished Civilian Service Award?

BROWN: Well, let me tell that story. That's a very nice story because this is about the President. It took place in the Rose Garden, and everybody, all the recipients, were entitled to bring a certain number of their families. Of course, my wife [Peggy Anne Brown] and three children [Winthrop Jr., Julia, and Anne Brown] were there. And each candidate was presented to the President by his Secretary, and the citation was read by Macy [John W. Macy, Jr.]. Then when the nominee was presented to the President, the President hung the thing around your neck. The trouble was that he was up on a little terrace maybe a couple of feet above the garden, then there was a great row of photographers all around him so that nobody could see him.

I was the last one to be presented, and I was waiting there, and the Secretary leaned over and he said, “What's your daughter's name? The little daughter.” I said, “Anne.” Well, so the Secretary, after the citation was read, the Secretary said, “Mr. President, before I present Ambassador Brown, I would like to ask Anne Brown to come out from behind the photographers’ legs and sit down where she can see what's going on.” So the President smiled. Anne, who was six or seven, came out and, instead of stopping, which she should have, walked up to the President, put out her hand, and dropped him a curtsy. He shook hands with her very gravely. She turned to go. I said, “Now, go back” And her mother called her out, and the President said, “No. Miss Anne will stay right here with me.” So she stood beside him while the ceremony went on.

Then he went around and spoke to all the families and shook hands with the kids and made a very, very nice little speech in which he spoke of the challenge and rewards that come with government service and again was so thoughtful; he said nice things about me, and then he said, “I know about Ambassador Brown because I was on the end of the telegraph line with him all the time. And we also have a very good Ambassador there now.” So he took the trouble to think about Len Unger. And it was as leisurely and relaxed as it could possibly be. Then when you looked at your watch and it was all over, it was only twenty minutes.

He had this capacity of making the people with whom he was feel that they had his attention and enthusiasm. He was totally relaxed, in no hurry, and at the same time not wasting any time about it.

HACKMAN: Well, that's a good note to end on, I think.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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