

**Frederick E. Nolting Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 5/07/1970**  
**Administrative Information**

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**Biographical Note**

Frederick E. Nolting (1911-1989) was the Ambassador to South Vietnam from 1961 to 1963. This interview focuses on the pressures put on the United States embassy in South Vietnam, the United States' treaty with Laos, and the tensions between the United States and South Vietnam leading up to the 1963 coup, among other topics.

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Frederick E. Nolting– JFK #3  
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Third Oral History Interview

with

FREDERICK NOLTING

May 7, 1970

Washington, D.C.

by Dennis O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

[copy preceding page for the heading]

~~TAPE III SIDE B~~

O'BRIEN: I thought we might start with the Saigon view of the various assistant secretarys you worked with in the years you were there; first of all, <sup>McConaughy, and then</sup> Walter McConahey, <sup>Harriman,</sup> and <sup>Roger</sup> Hilsman in that order. Did you have any problem?

NOLTING: Are you going to lead me into personalities?

O'BRIEN: Well, not so much personalities as much as <sup>personalities and</sup> it's <sup>attitudes and</sup> policies.

NOLTING: Attitudes and policies.

O'BRIEN: First of all, with <sup>McConaughy</sup> McConahey, do you feel that your ideas, you and <sup>McConaughy</sup> McConahey and the Embassy in Saigon and the Department in Washington, are pretty much in tune?

NOLTING: Yes, I thought so. I'd known <sup>McConaughy</sup> Walt McConahey for quite a number of years, and I think he was closely in agreement with the instructions which I went <sup>out</sup> up there with, having helped to draw them up, I believe. And for that period, <sup>think</sup> which was rather brief, I believe, before Walter was transferred, and he went as ambassador to... did he go to Japan?

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~~97~~

O'BRIEN: Yeah, or I was thinking South Asia.

NOLTING: And he was succeeded by Averill<sup>e/</sup> Harriman after, I think, only a few months after I had arrived in Saigon. During that period, I felt that things were closely in tune. Nothing developed that I can recall that caused any differences of view.

O'BRIEN: When Harriman comes in, are you dealing<sup>g</sup> with <sup>when</sup> sort of day-to-day and week-to-week problems <sup>come up</sup> with Harriman<sup>^</sup> or are you dealing with someone on his staff?

NOLTING: Well, before Mr. Harriman became assistant<sup>g</sup> secretary for far-eastern<sup>g</sup> affairs, he was (as you know) negotiating the Laotian agreement. That was during the year 1961, and I think it was finally signed by all parties in early '62, if I recall the dates. During that period, we were asked from time to time in Saigon for views about the way the Laotian treaty was being shaped up. More and more, it became apparent that the safeguards with which we had started negotiating that treaty,

safeguards about the <sup>9</sup> ~~...~~ assuring the territorial integrity, neutrality of Laos against possible violations by the communist signatories, or those that were negotiating on the communist side. <sup>9</sup> Those safeguards were being whittled away one by one. And I became somewhat concerned by this because if the treaty as originally envisaged making a real neutral out of Laos didn't come off that way, then it exposed the flank of South Vietnam and made our job that much more difficult. And so, I would comment in this vein from time to time, and the South Vietnamese government likewise became more and more concerned. They had a representative at Geneva, and they were parties to the negotiation. <sup>9</sup> And when it finally shaped up so that practically all of the safeguards were removed, President Diem and his government had grave misgivings as to whether they should sign the agreement. By and large, I agreed with that point of view because I felt that without the safeguards, the treaty would be violated. The Ho Chi Minh trail would be, in effect, opened up



completely to the North Vietnamese for infiltrating South Vietnam. And this would make it very difficult to maintain, to carry out, the policy of the Kennedy Administration vis-a-vis South Vietnam which was to support their independence. So at that point, the difficulties did begin to develop between our mission and Averill Harriman.

~~NOLTING~~

O'BRIEN: How was the secretary. . . .

NOLTING: I might say equally I think they began to develop also between our mission in Thailand, the U.S. mission in Thailand and Averill Harriman and the Geneva delegation for the same reasons.

O'BRIEN: Yes. The Thai position then and the South Vietnamese position are very similar on this.

NOLTING: They were similar on this, yes.

O'BRIEN: On Vietnam. . . .

NOLTING: On Laos.

O'BRIEN: On Laos, rather. Well, what is the response that you're getting from the Secretary and the

assistant secretary for far east at that point?

NOLTING: Mostly, "stick to your own <sup>last</sup> class and let us handle this and don't get concerned about it. You've got enough on your own plate to worry about. Don't worry about this other."

O'BRIEN: They're not willing to really fight that kind of a policy battle up to the Department?

NOLTING: No, it seemed to me <sup>is</sup> consistent the way. . . . I can understand why the original attempt was made to make a real neutral buffer state out of Laos <sup>to</sup> remove it and all of the territory <sup>of</sup> from Laos from the subversive warfare of the rest of the peninsula; namely, Vietnam. But as things shaped up, ~~it became~~ and as negotiations proceeded in Geneva, it became clearer and clearer, I think, that it wasn't going to turn out that way <sup>that</sup> that we were being had in negotiations. And I remember having it out rather hot and heavy with Mr. Harriman on this score on several occasions; <sup>once</sup> at a meeting <sup>at</sup> Bangkok and another time at a

meeting in Manila, <sup>g</sup> it was Baguio in the Philippines.

O'BRIEN: And this is prior to his becoming assistant secretary?

NOLTING: Right.

O'BRIEN: What is his. . . .

NOLTING: He finally came out . . . excuse me.

O'BRIEN: Go ahead.

NOLTING: He finally came out <sup>g</sup> after the treaty had been shaped up to a point that we were willing to sign; the British, French, and the Chinese and the North Vietnamese and the Russians <sup>g</sup>; And the South Vietnamese and the Thais were unwilling to sign. <sup>g</sup> Mr. Harriman came out to Vietnam, to Saigon, and had a long talk with President Diem and rather forcefully told him that he'd better sign it despite President Diem's well-founded misgivings. And this was a rather rugged interview between the two of them.

O'BRIEN: What kind of pressure was put on Diem to <sup>acquiesce?</sup> <sub>act?</sub>

NOLTING: Well, we knew what we were doing, and we were his powerful ally, and therefore, he'd better

sign it. Afterwards, I recall talking to President Diem, who was rather offended by this high-handed treatment from Mr. Harriman. I said to him that I thought he really was in a situation where he had to choose, because it was clear that President Kennedy wanted a negotiated settlement in Laos, that these negotiations which his government had been a party to had been going on for a year, that this seemed to be the best treaty that was possible even though it was, in my opinion as well as his, inadequate and unprotected and possibly and probably unenforceable. Nevertheless, I felt that, in order to maintain the full support of the Kennedy Administration for the effort in South Vietnam, it would be better for him to sign it, and he did.

O'BRIEN: Well, how <sup>does</sup> did Harriman justify the Laotian Geneva accords to you when you have these conversations with him?

NOLTING: There were several rather vivid exchanges that took place that I remember. He justified it,

in the final analysis, on the basis that he had a "fingertips feeling"--that's in quotes--that the Russians would police the communist signatories and make them live up to this. And I remember replying that he'd had experience in Russia and that I had not, but <sup>that</sup> my fingertips told me just the reverse. And then on another occasion, I remember his saying that, in effect, President Kennedy had commissioned him to get a settlement in Laos and he was going to get it. And that was that.

O'BRIEN: Well, what kind of a role. . . .

NOLTING: I did not object to. . . . on the contrary, I certainly did not object to the attempt to get a settlement. What I objected to was the fact that the type of settlement that finally came out seemed <sup>to me</sup> to be one <sup>in</sup> which we would be disadvantaged. Our cause would be disadvantaged <sup>because</sup> because of the long history and the probability <sup>and</sup> the long history of the communist signatories for not living up to this kind of an agreement, and the probability

that they wouldn't do so in this case. And it was the enforcability of it that looked to me very doubtful

O'BRIEN: Well, what kind of a role did these fellows who are basically known as Harriman people-- (William H.) Sullivan and Mike (Michael) Forrestal--play in this?

NOLTING: Well, I think Bill Sullivan was one of Aver<sup>ge</sup>ill Harriman's principal assistants at the Geneva conference. I don't know precisely his role; I was never in Geneva.

O'BRIEN: Does he ever get out to Saigon?

NOLTING: He didn't while. . . I believe he was there on one occasion, but I don't remember it particularly well. I don't think he came with Mr. Harriman on that occasion that I just mentioned when he laid down the law to President Diem. But everybody who was negotiating the Geneva conference on Laos in '61, '62 had their hearts <sup>on</sup> in getting a settlement. They were <sup>held back</sup> ~~held back~~ to get one on paper. And I'm sure, in their view, something that would seal off Laos and make it a neutral country.

But as you remember, immediately after the signing, we withdrew advisors from the Laotian people who were on our side, from the <sup>Meo</sup> ~~Mau~~ tribesmen. We stopped supporting them, and the communists, the North Vietnamese and Chinese, did not do anything to live up to the provision to take out all supporting forces. So we were left at a great disadvantage.

# And the government of Souvanna Phouma, which was supposed to have jurisdiction over the whole of Laos, never, I believe, got a single one of its agents' government people, government officials, into the territory of the Pathet Lao, so that the treaty was a dead letter so far as the communists were concerned. They didn't live up to it, not for one minute. And this was exactly what this government of South Vietnam and the government of Thailand and I, myself, feared would happen, and it did happen. As a consequence, the defense of South Vietnam was made much more difficult.

O'BRIEN: Is there any shift that you can see now ~~that~~

when Harriman does become, in attitudes toward Vietnam, relations between the Embassy and the Department with the White House in Washington? Are there any changes that take place when Harriman comes in as assistant secretary?

NOLTING: Not immediately that I recall, but little by little there were. And so much so that after--I've forgotten how long--but maybe six months or a year, on one occasion having received some instructions different from my original instructions, I asked Mr. Harriman (I believe it was he) whether he had read the original instructions under which we were supposed to be operating. And his reply, as I recall, was roughly that no, he hadn't, but he knew what he was doing. But it seemed to me, at any rate, from out there, that there was never a formal review given to changing any instructions. It just happened little by little with people with a new slant coming in sending me a telegram to do something which was quite contrary to what the original basic instructions had been, including, for



example, instructions to cultivate the opposition to President Diem, to get closer to the opposition. Well, I went back rather strongly on that one, saying that it was I that I knew members of the opposition. I'd seen them; I knew them personally. I'd talked to them. But if you meant, by cultivating them, to give any outward sign that we were interested in their becoming an alternative government to the government that we were supposed to be supporting, that this had enormous consequences internally in Vietnam, that it was interfering in the internal politics of Vietnam which President Kennedy had promised not to do, and through me had made it very clear that we were not going to use our leverage of increased aid to interfere in the internal politics of South Vietnam --meaning who was going to rule the place. This was a very <sup>serious</sup> ~~servious~~ change of instructions, and I questioned it very strongly.

O'BRIEN: In the end, what did you do?

NOLTING: It never came <sup>to</sup> . . . I mean, the matter was

sort of dropped by Washington. Although, I remember later on when Hilsman was assistant secretary having succeeded Harriman getting a similar report, a similar instruction and going back in the same vein. My point of view and our mission's point of view being that President Diem had been elected for the second time in 1961, that when elections came up again for the presidency, the Vietnamese people had the, of course, their own free right to change their President and their government, but they didn't. It seemed to me right and always consistent with my original instructions to work with the duly constituted, elected government of South Vietnam, to create confidence that we were not trying to undermine them. It didn't seem to me consistent to cultivate the opposition in that sense.

O'BRIEN: Well, in your mission there, do you have the essential agreement of most of your people on the so-called country team?

NOLTING: Absolutely.

O'BRIEN: They agreed with this?

NOLTING: There was complete agreement on what we called our country team or task force, as it was generally described. We had several echelons of coordination between the various parts of the mission and the top one, with Harkins and Richardson and myself and the USIA <sup>in</sup> and the <sup>U.S. AID</sup> USA ~~(United States of America)~~ and Joe [Joseph L.] Brent and others, was the top coordinating level in our mission, which I chaired. Below that were their lieutenants <sup>of</sup> in various phases of the mission. And that was tied into the South Vietnamese government through a coordinating committee headed by Ngo Dinh <sup>Nhu</sup> Ngu, the brother of the President.

O'BRIEN: Is there any indication, or do you ever have any indication that any of the people on the country team, or down below in any of the operating units and agencies, of communicating <sup>anything</sup> back to Washington in <sup>the</sup> terms of feedback that might be in opposition to . . . ?

NOLTING: Yes. Yes, from time to time there were reports from various people in our mission, in I would

say probably all branches--military, political, AID, (Agency for International Development), USIA, and so forth--in the form of letters or <sup>informal</sup> ~~in the form of~~ communications, saying that they thought that we were too close to, or perhaps blindly supporting a government which wouldn't succeed. I think there were those. I didn't realize at the time how much of this there was, and I still don't know how much there was. But I did discover later on that a lot of Washington thinking had been changed by this type of sort of informal and unofficial communication. And it's very difficult at this point--and I've thought about this a great deal--to know to what extent it was going on. I do know that the reports which we sent in, which were coordinated reports each week--and these were supplemented, of course, by daily reports--but each week we pulled together a coordinated mission report. And I myself, I remember working on week-ends on this, because we generally sent it off on Mondays, going over all <sup>of</sup> the raw material, practically all of the raw material for this.

And occasionally you'd see a report officially submitted to the mission in Saigon which was at variance with a lot of the other reports. And I would try always to run that down and find out whether or not <sup>g</sup> ~~it~~ this was some person who was more acute than others, who was courageously setting forth a different view. In some cases, we'd send that in as a separate report, saying we're not altogether sure of this because here's a different view on it, ~~But~~ on the whole, we think this is the way things are going. We tried to be as objective as we could and not to bottle up any dissident views.

O'BRIEN: I guess the term "bootleg information"--did you ever pin down any major sources or areas from which it was coming, <sup>g</sup> for example, in-formation <sup>Agency</sup> ~~agencies~~ CIA, AID?

NOLTING: I remember one particularly. This was a man who had been <sup>out</sup> ~~up~~ there a long time in the U.S. AID mission, whose job it was to introduce a better strain of pigs in the Vietnam economy. And he'd been developing hog raising for a

long time, and he was wrapped up in this. He was very good at it. But he sent in reports, I found out, and later talked to the press. And this is <sup>the way</sup> why it came into my mind; it came to my attention, saying that the government had systematically <sup>the</sup> government of South Vietnam had systematically undermined all of his efforts to introduce a better strain of pigs by keeping the price of pork down, and that our mission had supported the government in this. And I remember talking to him getting this sort of hit the fan. There were several press reports on this. It is true that we had tried to get the government to keep down not only the price of pork, but the price <sup>of</sup> or rice and chickens and fish and everything else, to prevent inflation. And I did not realize at the time we were doing this, that it stepped on his pet corn of this improved strain of pigs. And after a talk with him, I think he understood. I understood his point of view. He was looking at it from a more limited objective. And after discussing

all the factors, I think he understood why we had done what we had done, and why the Vietnamese government had done what they'd done. <sup>¶</sup> Actually, we then--they, rather, the South Vietnamese government, adjusted the price of pork so as to enable his program to go ~~farther~~ <sup>forward</sup>. But it's that kind of thing, <sup>^</sup> people obsessed with one aspect of something they really had their heart <sup>on</sup> ~~in~~ doing, and occasionally would get upset by an overall policy that sort of conflicted with <sup>it</sup> ~~them~~.

O'BRIEN: Is it the AID people that seemed to reflect the criticism over lack of general progress?

NOLTING: <sup>of USA, I think,</sup> Yes, <sup>^</sup> CIA quite often. Sometimes in the military when, for example, an advisor to a province chief felt that the province chief was either <sup>e</sup>stupid or corrupt or something, he would cut loose with an indictment of the province chief and how it would <sup>- - 9</sup> ~~and~~ and quite often say that the province chief was being supported by President Diem who, as a consequence, must himself be pretty bad. So you had some of this. <sup>¶</sup> But my overall impression, <sup>^</sup>

in answer to that point, was that on the whole the mission was well-coordinated and that the views were ninety per cent or ninety-nine per cent coordinated views, <sup>and</sup> reflected the consensus.

O'BRIEN: Well, when Hilsman comes along and comes in, is there, by this point, any signs of a deep cleavage between Washington and Saigon over policy toward Diem and toward South Vietnam?

NOLTING: No, I don't. . . . It never occurred to me that there was a deep cleavage. The first time I really felt this was in 1963 when, after taking an ill-fated leave--which was approved, incidentally, by the Department-- I landed up in Washington and found that all hell had broken loose in Saigon and also that I myself had been replaced. And then I went back for six weeks of rather frantic effort to get things back <sup>again</sup> on the tracks. And this was in July --June or July, 1963. In Washington, for the first time, I realized that there was a great deal of opposition to what I had thought had been a successful mission, carrying



out instructions that had been approved throughout the United States government. It came as a great surprise because up to that point, I'd been getting--the mission--<sup>g</sup> I don't say "I" in the personal sense<sup>g</sup> But the mission had been getting<sup>g</sup> regularly, at least once a month, telegrams from the White House and from the State Department and from others saying<sup>g</sup> "well done, you're doing fine, keep it up." And so I was very much surprised to find that the whole thing had been undermined.

O'BRIEN: Yeah. Well, what is the explanation for that change? Is it the self-immolation on the part of the Buddhists that. . . ?

NOLTING: I think <sup>g</sup> that there were <sup>about</sup> three things, Mr. O'Brien. I think<sup>g</sup> number one<sup>g</sup> that the Kennedy Administration and particularly the State Department had gotten very sensitive to the adverse press. I think the White House and President Kennedy himself was sensitive to some of the charges of supporting a Roman Catholic dictatorship and one which was shot through with nepotism<sup>g</sup> as the press

generally reported it to be. I think he was particularly sensitive to those charges. So the press was one factor. ¶ I think there had been people in the State Department all along who didn't like President Diem and who abominated his sister-in-law and his brother. And I think this also was a factor. I think it was an unreasonable factor, but it was one. And those people had come to the fore; <sup>in</sup> ~~the form~~ <sup>ex</sup> namely, Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman, particularly. ¶ I think, finally, the Buddhist uprising gave the push to this and gave the activists their chance to say, "Well, let's make a fresh start here. Let's <sup>u</sup>—as I put it—"jump from the frying pan to the fire." But they thought, of course, that they would improve the situation by perhaps encouraging a different government.

O'BRIEN: Well, going back to the first of those for a moment--the press. What <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ [John Martin] Mecklin's role in all this? Is Mecklin able in any way to—I shouldn't say get to the press, but at least <sup>^</sup> talk to the press and

explain the realities of what's going on in Vietnam?

NOLTING: John Mecklin was an old press man himself, as you know. He was a friend of mine. I knew him well. I think in the final analysis, and I hope I'm not doing him an injustice in this, but when I read his book, I got the same impression and wrote him that I had this impression--that in the final analysis, he tended to agree more with his friends in the press than he did with the official policy that he was supposed to be helping to promote. I think he was divided and torn on this subject. I think he tried to promote the official policy, but I think he was terribly influenced, strongly influenced by Neil Sheehan, David Halberstam, other members of the press. And those two, I believe, lived in his house for quite a while after his wife left. And John found it very difficult to either bring them around or, in fact, not to ~~or not to~~ sort of agree with them. And this, I think, was reflected pretty much in his book. I didn't realize

that until later on. John was a member of the task force. He, so far as I can recall, never brought these views forward officially. But it was quite clear that in trying to bring the press around, he was not effective.

O'BRIEN: Yes. Well, in reading that. . . .

NOLTING: For that matter, neither was I.

O'BRIEN: Right. But in reading that book, what are your impressions of the book that he wrote <sup>of</sup> Mission in Torment? Is it essentially correct?

NOLTING: Many of the facts are essentially correct. The title, I would say. . . . I never felt any torment. On the contrary, I felt that we had a mission on the go that was doing an effective job. And if it was tormented, it was only at the end, as a result of the change of policy in Washington. I also felt that John in his book did not do full credit to the good things that had been accomplished under the Diem <sup>u</sup> government and with the help of the U.S. mission and other foreign missions, including ~~other foreign missio~~ the British mission

under Bob Thompson and others. In other words, I felt that the book reflected--and it surprised me because I didn't know John felt this way--a defeatism from the time, or soon after, he got out there, as if the object was to agree at any cost with the local American journalists--that it was better to have government policy supported by the journalists than to have government policy to be right.

O'BRIEN: Well, passing over to this. . . .

NOLTING: One other comment on that. I remember now, in reading the book, he said that Lodge accomplished one thing of great importance when he got out there, and that was to get the journalists on our side. Well, in my opinion, that was exactly wrong. I'd rather have a good policy with the journalists against it, than a bad policy with the journalists in favor of it.

O'BRIEN: Well, on the other side of this. . . . You were talking about another factor here: <sup>9</sup>people who did not like Diem in Washington. When did you become really aware of that? Well, you said that you'd really become aware of that hostility

when you had come back in July, I believe it was to Washington from your <sup>2</sup> vacation ①

NOLTING: June or July, <sup>yes a</sup> yeah.

O'BRIEN: You mentioned in one of your earlier interviews that you were not contacted while you were in the Mediterranean.

NOLTING: That's right.

O'BRIEN: And you didn't know why. Did you ever get any insight into why not?

NOLTING: Not definitively, but my strong impression is that the people <sup>who</sup> that were agitating for a change in Washington did not want to have this thing calm down. They wanted it to come to a head <sup>a</sup> so that <sup>a</sup> the change of government would become inevitable.

O'BRIEN: Okay. Now. . . .

NOLTING: That may be unfair. But I have a feeling that... ①  
2 this is not the policy throughout the government. This was the people who were writing the daily telegrams to Saigon. And it is still incomprehensible to me that my deputy, Bill [William C.] Trueheart, went that way rather than letting me know what was going on. And

he knew where I was everyday that I was away.

O'BRIEN: Have you had a talk with him since on that matter?

NOLTING: No... well, I did when I got back to Saigon, <sup>yes, I</sup> ~~yeah~~ a very straight talk with him. But I won't go further into that.

O'BRIEN: Okay. Well, who are the people, then, at this point in Washington and in Saigon too, that are against Diem the people that are agitating for a change?

NOLTING: Who are the people... ~~?~~

O'BRIEN: ... that are agitating for a change of government. ~~Uh,~~ you have and some other people have referred to the group as the cabal, in a sense, who are against Diem.

NOLTING: I think that I've probably <sup>already</sup> mentioned the people in Washington who were principally of this ~~kind of~~ thought. I don't know of anyone in Saigon who was of this opinion, except when I got back, I found my deputy had changed his views, possibly as a consequence of reading the signs of the times in Washington.

O'BRIEN: Well, is Hilsman--or rather, Harriman in

your dealings with him at this point, is Harriman his own man, or is he under the influence of anyone else <sup>g</sup> particularly...? <sup>g</sup>

NOLTING: He was very much his own man, and very much with the bit in his teeth.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any... <sup>g</sup>

NOLTING: In fact, <sup>g</sup> I may edit some of this. <sup>g</sup>

O'BRIEN: Sure. Of course, that's your prerogative.

NOLTING: I found on this issue that he was sort of running the State Department and that Secretary of State was either not very interested or wasn't doing much about it. I found it very difficult to call upon him. He said, "Well, in effect, <sup>g</sup> Averill <sup>ex</sup> is doing this."

O'BRIEN: Well, as I understand it, after Trueheart is instructed to make the warning to Diem that the United States would dissociate themselves with the government policy toward the Buddhists <sup>g</sup> continuing, I understand there's a split then that develops in Saigon, in your country team. How did they fall, in a sense?

NOLTING: Well, when I got back to Saigon for the last six weeks of my tenure there, which was early



in July, I found most people saying (most people in my mission saying), in effect, "Frank, <sup>Thank God you're</sup> guard your back because things have really gone awry." On instructions from Washington, Trueheart has been pounding the table with Dien and has gotten things at a pass where it's almost impossible to deal with the government. They're very resentful."

As a matter of fact, I'd gotten a private communication from Nguyen <sup>[Dinh]</sup> Thuan when I arrived in New York, saying, "The President says please come immediately back to Saigon." I did go back within three days. This, of course, was after the news of my withdrawal had been announced and Cabot Lodge's appointment had been announced. So, I was a lame duck. But the mission--certainly the military side, the CIA side, the USOM side, and most people in the political <sup>section</sup> side, I believe, had grave misgivings as to what we were headed into when I got back there, and wanted it, if possible, put back on the track so they could work with their opposite numbers in

the Vietnamese government, <sup>and</sup> so that we'd have the kind of rapport and confidence and understanding we'd had only six weeks before. I immediately went to see President Diem and told him that this <sup>was</sup> what I wanted to do, and he said, well, he would like to, too, but he felt that Washington was changing its policy very fast. He felt that we were using our leverage of increased aid to undermine his government, and he was very much concerned by this.

O'BRIEN: How about Mecklin at this point? Is Mecklin on that side of things, was he continuing...?

NOLTING: I was so very, very busy in trying to pick up the pieces, I don't recall exactly what Mecklin's views or actions were.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about your relations with Diem and ~~Nhu~~ <sup>Nhu</sup> from that point on? Do they still remain fairly good?

NOLTING: Yes. I think mutual confidence continued between Diem and me up until the day I left. But I do recall his asking me whether or not Washington policy was going to change with

the change of ambassadors. I said I'd been assured that it was not, and I had been so assured. And he asked me whether I would specifically again send in an <sup>in</sup>enquiry on this because, he said, "my information <sup>is</sup> on ~~this~~ is somewhat to the contrary." I did so, and I got a report, a telegram, back saying, "You can tell him from the highest authority that we have no intention of changing our policy." I took that telegram, and I remember going to his office and translating it for him. And he rather sadly shook his head and said, "I believe you, but I don't believe the message that you have received."

O'BRIEN: Well, as I understand it, Diem issues a conciliatory statement towards <sup>g</sup>the Buddhists just shortly before your departure. Did he have any reservations about that?

NOLTING: I think he had no reservations whatsoever about wanting to conciliate the Buddhists. I think he had grave reservations as to whether or not this political plot could be

conciliated<sup>g</sup> that is to say<sup>h</sup> whether any agreement reached would stand up. I know I pushed him very hard to make all the conciliatory gestures and agreements that were possible<sup>h</sup> and he did make a statement<sup>h</sup> which he gave to Maggie [Marguerite] Higgins<sup>h</sup> who was out there at the time, which said that his policy of conciliation<sup>g</sup> fair and equal treatment with the Buddhists<sup>h</sup> with<sup>was g</sup> irreversible or some such word. And I think he was sincere in this.

¶ The trouble was that each time he made such a gesture or came to any agreement, then their demands went up. And their demands were essentially that the government be overthrown or resign. And it was almost impossible for a government to conciliate a group who was out for the overthrow of that government. It was impossible<sup>h</sup> and I think he realized this. We kept hoping<sup>h</sup> (and I think here I made a mistake. I should have been firmer with Washington, saying, "Look, if you press this to the ultimate, then you're asking this man to write his own resignation as President.

And you can't do that. He won't do it and shouldn't be asked to do it." Instead, I said, "Well, let's keep on trying to conciliate this." And he did up until the time I left.

O'BRIEN: You were talking. . . .

NOLTING: Perhaps he didn't do it skillfully. Perhaps he didn't do it well enough or fast enough. I think some of his own advisers felt that there were times when it was possible to either come to an agreement that would stick or put the Buddhist agitators in such a bad light that they couldn't afford to breach it. Maybe the timing and the substance of his efforts in this direction weren't good enough. But I think he was sincere in trying to do this.

O'BRIEN: You were talking yesterday about the plan. There was a plan to conciliate the differences between the Viet Cong (I assume <sup>that</sup> it was the Viet Cong) and the South Vietnamese government. When does that. . . . Is it just with the Viet Cong, or is it with North Vietnam?

What is the extent of those negotiations?

NOLTING: There was always the possibility--and I think Ngo Dinh <sup>Nhu</sup> ~~Ngũ~~ felt this quite strongly--of weaning off a number of Viet Cong political leaders and military cadres away from the rebellion and into a broadened government, which Diem would head; in other words, getting major unit and group defections. It was for this reason that he saw quite a number of Viet Cong political leaders in his office. This was, at <sup>the</sup> times, misinterpreted as being almost a treasonable thing. I am, myself, convinced that <sup>Nhu</sup> ~~Ngũ~~ never had any idea of selling out to the Viet Cong. On the contrary, he was trying to get them <sup>for</sup> units of the Viet Cong <sup>to</sup> sell out, in effect, to the government. But he was prepared--and this never came to a head. I don't know what the *quid pro quo* would have been <sup>for</sup> but it was being explored by the South Vietnamese government. Now <sup>whether</sup> it would have worked or not, I don't know.

O'BRIEN: Well, when you report this to Washington, what's

the reaction? And first of all, who are you reporting it to, in individuals?

NOLTING: As I recall, I reported it through the normal channels, which is the State Department channels--sometimes in top secret telegrams, because if this had leaked out, it would have queered the pitch all around. The reaction, so far as I can remember, was not to interfere with it, let it go ahead so long as we were convinced that there wasn't a sell-out in the other direction in the offing here.

O'BRIEN: And that's coming from the Secretary? Is it coming from Harriman?

NOLTING: It's awful hard to tell. All State Department telegrams were signed by Rusk, who drafted them with a question of guesswork. One can quite often tell.

O'BRIEN: Is there any evidence that that was ever kicked up to the White House?

NOLTING: I don't know.

O'BRIEN: Well, passing over to the time that you do come back. And that was a rather long series well, not a long series, but two weeks of

meetings which, as I understand, take place there in late August and early September. When do you first become aware of that <sup>g</sup> now ~~that~~ <sup>g</sup> rather famous telegram that goes out?

NOLTING: I remember exactly. I became aware on the day I got back to Washington, which was, I believe, a Monday or a Tuesday around the twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth of August. I had spent the week-end <sup>g</sup> ~~it~~ <sup>g</sup> which happened to be my birthday week-end <sup>g</sup> in Virginia with my family and came back up to Washington and saw that telegram the morning I got there. And I was astonished to read it <sup>g</sup> so, incidentally, was Bob McNamara, who immediately called me and asked me <sup>g</sup> if I had read it. And I said I <sup>had</sup> just read it. And he immediately asked for <sup>g</sup> and got <sup>g</sup> a chance to go over it with the President in what was sort of a rump session of the National Security Council <sup>g</sup> at which I was present.

O'BRIEN: Did anyone else make individual contact with you before that meeting in regard to that



telegram, that you recall?

NOLTING: I believe Hilsman showed it to me, or at least it was in his office, I believe, that I read it.

O'BRIEN: What was his . . . . [Interruption] What was Hilsman's response when you both were looking at this telegram? Did you get any insight into what was making Hilsman take the position that he was, the policy that he was?

NOLTING: Well, I think it was just the fact that they'd gone down this road so far, and that there had been an overture from the military junta out there, led by General [Duong Van] Minh, Van "Big" Minh, as to whether or not, if they mounted a coupe, the United States would continue to support Vietnam. And rather suddenly, I think, without complete government coordination in Washington, the answer went back, "Tell him yes." And now why did they do this? For the various reasons that I've cited. Some people had the bit in their teeth in Washington. They thought that this would be a quick way to bring the

Vietnam struggle to a <sup>were</sup> successful conclusion. They were fed up with Diem; they were tired of the criticism of the press, of supporting this government, particularly in the Buddhist crisis. I remember Rusk saying to me, when I asked him, "Why this change?" saying, "We cannot stand any more burnings." And I said, "Well, do you think the government of South Vietnam is responsible for these burnings?" Well, in effect, he implied that that didn't make any difference, that public opinion was overwhelming and therefore, we had to go in <sup>this a</sup> that direction, which I consider <sup>ed</sup> to be very shortsighted.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever have any evidence, or did you ever have any reason to suspect that there was any talk of coups or any encouragement of coups before this on the part of either civilians and military in Vietnam or people who may have come <sup>out from</sup> up in Washington and had contact with the Vietnamese military prior to. . . ?

NOLTING: I never knew of any. In retrospect, I

wouldn't be surprised but some swashbuckling colonel at some point or other, or somebody, hadn't spoken to a Vietnamese general in the evening or something, saying, "Could you fellows handle this any better?" and of course the general would say yes. When I was out there, our standing instructions--and I carried them out frequently--were whenever we got such an overture from anybody, we would say we were not out there to change governments. That was up to the Vietnamese people in their regular election process. And while we were there to help South Vietnam, we were going to do it through their duly elected constitutional government. And this was a standard reply.

O'BRIEN: Is there any indication that General Taylor ever carried on these kind of conversations with anyone?

NOLTING: No indication, so far as I know. Do you have any?

O'BRIEN: Oh, just a rumor. But it has to be put into the category of a Saigon rumor.

NOLTING: I would be very suspicious myself of that.  
I don't think Max Taylor was of that mind.

O'BRIEN: I would consider it unlikely, too.

NOLTING: I know he's a very disciplined person.

O'BRIEN: Well, carrying on <sup>to those</sup> with this series of meetings that take place afterwards. I think I have a list of those. Maybe it's not necessary to refer to them specifically. But what happens in those meetings initially, let's say the first one that takes place after the telegram? I understand there's a movement to call it back, rescind the telegram.

NOLTING: Well, there was considerable argument as to whether it had been wise, premature, and so forth. And essentially, in my view, most people felt that it had been unwise and that it had been premature. But most people also assumed that it would be almost impossible to call it back. The signal had already been given. And it was assumed, also (and I'm not sure whether this assumption was correct), that if the generals had been told this, the government probably knew it. And

therefore, the bridge of confidence that we had struggled so long and hard to build had been broken. And that the new ambassador, no matter what he did, could probably not restore it. And so it was a very difficult thing for the President, despite some of us who had tried to convince him to do this, to find a way to climb back from the consequences of that telegram. At one point further down the road in a couple of weeks time, it seemed as if the generals had given up themselves the idea. And there was a famous telegram back from Lodge which implied, in effect, that they had completely weakened on this and had abandoned the idea. That turned out to be incorrect. They were just biding their time. They were waiting for more assurances and more indications from the United States that they weren't putting their neck in the noose. And so, as you know, it finally came off on the first of November-- the coup.

O'BRIEN: Well, in those meetings, I understand that you and Harriman do have a conflict. <sup>NOLTING: Yes. O'BRIEN.</sup> What's the substance of this?

NOLTING: Whether or not it was wise for the United States to do this. And I maintained that it was very unwise. It would result in a political vacuum, the result of which would be disastrous for us and certainly wipe out the nine years of relatively successful support that we'd given that country, without the use of American combat forces. <sup>¶</sup> And furthermore, I argued that it was, besides being unwise, that it was unjust and that it was a direct negation of what President Kennedy had promised President Diem through me, <sup>g</sup>namely, that we would not do this. This was way back when he asked for and received our additional aid. He made a point of saying that this does not mean that you are ever going to use this leverage to upset the legitimate elected government. I was instructed to say, "No, we will never do that." So I was indignant, <sup>^</sup>

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not only because I felt that the consequences of the policy would be bad, but that it would be a negation of what we had specifically promised, one President to the other. This argument, I must say, was one that caused several people to get very mad indeed, because it was, in a sense, imp<sup>u</sup>ning their good faith and integrity.

O'BRIEN: What . . . may I switch this?

~~TAPE-III SIDE II~~

Recording: April

- THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF UNITED STATES COMMITMENT IN VIETNAM

By

Frederick E. Nolting, Former Ambassador to South Vietnam

April 2, 1968

Senator Spong, I want to thank you very much for your generous introduction. It's a great pleasure and privilege for me to be introduced by you whose career in the United States Senate has already taken on significance for our state and for our country and I know promises great things for both in the future. I thank you very much indeed.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have so much on my heart and mind to say tonight that I hardly know where to begin. When a man comes back home after a long absence - back to his own country and to his own well-loved native state, he is drawn by many associations and for many reasons to share his thoughts and his experience in all frankness with those he feels close to. I want to do that this evening. I cannot do otherwise with an audience like this of my fellow Virginians. I thank you for the privilege of being here, Dr. Lippard. I have been looking forward to it a great deal. As it so happens, I come home to a changed situation - a drastically changed situation in regard to the Viet Nam problem, as Senator Spong has just mentioned, and in regard to the American political scene - a situation transformed 48 hours ago by President Johnson's dramatic announcement. One of the minor casualties of that announcement was my prepared speech. But neither you nor I, I think, cares too much about the speech - it's our country and its future that we care about. We cannot see clearly at this stage where this announcement of the President's will lead. But at least it seems to me it has



given a new dimension to the problem of Viet Nam and maybe the possibility of an avenue towards its solution. Frankly, for the past <sup>4 a half</sup> four years I have been pessimistic about the success of U. S. policy in Viet Nam as it has been carried on in those years. I did not want to say this and have not said it publicly, I think, up to now, for fear of undermining what chance there was of success in that policy. But I have felt that errors committed <sup>nearly five</sup> ~~some four~~ years ago, in the last months of the Kennedy administration - errors which were inherited by President Johnson and, I think, compounded during his administration - were so great as to be practically unredeemable. To show that I am not speaking entirely from hindsight, I will read you a letter. This letter <sup>to Pres. Johnson</sup> is dated February 25, 1964.

The President  
 The White House  
 Washington 25, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

I am sorry I have been unable to get an appointment to see you, for I have wanted for several months to talk with you about Viet Nam and related matters. I believe you and I have seen the issues in Viet Nam in much the same light from the time of your visit there in May 1961 - at least, I have that impression from talks we have had in the past. I know, therefore, how heavily this problem must now weigh on your mind, as indeed it does on mine also; and I earnestly hope that, despite certain irrevocable errors that I think have been made, a way can yet be found to fulfill our national interests there with honor.

I take the liberty of sending this letter, Mr. President, because I feel an obligation as well as a desire to tell you frankly and directly about my future course of action, which is likely to be interpreted in the press and elsewhere as being related to my tour of duty as ambassador in Viet Nam.

I have today sent to the Secretary of State a request to be granted retirement from the Foreign Service, in order to accept an exceptional offer in

private business. That my decision has been influenced by my strong disapproval of certain actions which were taken last fall in relation to Viet Nam, with predictable adverse consequences, I do not deny. Nor do I deny that I have been uncomfortable in my association with the Department of State since returning from Viet Nam six months ago.

Under these circumstances, it seems sensible for me to accept a very attractive position in private business. As a private citizen, I shall continue to do my best to contribute to our country's success.

I solicit your understanding, Mr. President, and I wish for you, as you know, personal happiness and all success in looking after the affairs of our nation.

Sincerely and respectfully yours,

Frederick E. Nolting

For <sup>nearly 5</sup> ~~many~~ years now, with deepening foreboding, I have seen, as you have, the problem of Viet Nam grow and transform itself from a relatively minor concern of the United States to the raging central affliction of our times - poisoning the spirit, the confidence, and the unity of our people. I have been sick at heart - the more so because I myself participated and shared in the long series of events that led to this "bloody impasse." I must tell you at the outset that I have no magic formulas to propose. There are none, I think. The choices before our nation are hard, painful choices - much harder than they had any need to be. Yet we must somehow find a national consensus, based on the best judgment we can bring to bear, and that right quickly before events overtake us again. Your chairman, Dr. Lippard, has asked me to speak on the origins of American involvement in Viet Nam, but he was kind enough not to limit me to that aspect of the matter. Past history helps to illuminate the future if we are wise enough to draw lessons from it, but you have had a great deal of background in this seminar and the anxious eyes of our nation are fixed on the present and the

future - not on the past. I shall limit myself to a sketch of the history of United States Involvement in Viet Nam - putting aside Innumerable pages of material. This will be incomplete and over-simplified. It will, no doubt, omit many things of importance, but I would like to save some time to discuss with you the central, immediate questions - for these questions cannot wait - not even until elections.

Where to pick up the continuous thread of history in Indo-China is difficult to decide. I shall pick it up at the close of World War II - after the Japanese surrender and the return of the French - but with the important proviso that we do not assume that the history of the Vietnamese people began then. Actually, Vietnamese recorded history goes back some 2,000 years, and if I had to give the thrust of that history in one sentence it would be 2,000 years of struggle against Chinese domination.

America's Involvement in Viet Nam began in the aftermath of World War II. America's obsession with Viet Nam began almost twenty years later - with the overthrow of the Diem government and the subsequent introduction of U. S. combat forces. Between the two there lies a long period of time and an enormous difference of policy.

In 1946-1947, as the opposition of the Vietminh to the return of French rule began to intensify, the United States in spite of its traditional anti-colonialism was sympathetic to France. There were two main reasons for this - which I cite without evaluation. France was a key factor in the recovery of Western Europe and the loss of Indo-China, it was feared, would so weaken her centrist government as to lead to a political upheaval and possibly a communist take-over in France itself. The other reason was the belief that a Vietminh victory would amount to communization of Indo-China. Ho Chi Minh was known to be a life-long agitator and revolutionary, trained in Leninist ideology and tactics in

Moscow. In nearby Indonesia, Sukarno was regarded by the United States in those days as an indigenous nationalist. Ho Chi Minh definitely was not.

At the same time the United States urged France to support a non-communist nationalist counterforce to the Vietminh. By 1949, when the quasi-independent government of Bao Dai was established, another and more compelling reason was added for U. S. support of the anti-communist forces in Indo-China - of which about three-quarters were native Indo-Chinese. This was Mao Tse-tung's stunning victory in China. General mobilization was decreed in Vietminh territory at that time and in February 1950 Vo Nguyen Giap stated "The covert war has ended and open warfare has begun." Moscow recognized Ho Chi Minh's government on February 1, 1950, and Communist China and Yugoslavia followed suit. Ho Chi Minh proclaimed in a broadcast, "Henceforth we definitely belong to the powerful anti-imperialist bloc of eight hundred million men." Chinese aid to the Vietminh - food, arms and ammunition, military advisors and military training both in North Viet Nam and China itself - began in March 1950. For its part, the United States decided to send material aid to France and its Vietnamese allies, beginning with the very modest sums of \$15 million for military aid and \$25 million for economic assistance.

On June 25, 1950, the North Koreans struck in force across the 32nd parallel and the Korean War began. For two years this limited but bloody war, involving Chinese as well as North Korean forces, served to divert American attention from Indo-China where the Vietminh forces steadily strengthened. Whether planned or not, this was an example of the kind of reciprocal action for which the Communists are past masters.

After the Korean War, U. S. aid to the French and the Associated States of Indo-China increased rapidly, until in 1954 we were paying 78% of the total cost of the war. The United States, however, had no part in the policies

or conduct of the war at that stage - a fact which caused considerable friction between French and American representatives in Indo-China.

The rest of this sad chapter up to the convening of the Geneva Conference in 1954, the Vietminh victory at Dien Bien Phu, and the withdrawal of France from Indo-China, is perhaps better known to you, for it is well-publicized now.

There are three points, however, which I think deserve special attention. The first is that after eight years of warfare the armies of France and the Associated States were never defeated in any over-all military sense. The political will of France to continue the struggle simply gave out and France, under Premier Mendes-France, got out as best she could. Actually, the provisions of the Geneva Accords of 1954 were somewhat more favorable to the non-communist side than one might have expected under the circumstances. It is interesting to note that Ho Chi Minh did not want to settle for a divided Viet Nam, even temporarily, but was persuaded to do so by Russia and China, among others.

The second fact of importance is that the United States, when faced with a decision in 1954 of whether or not to intervene with combat forces, decided against doing so, despite strong voices in the Eisenhower administration who thought that we should. I am happy to say that the Honorable Walter S. Robertson is with us tonight - and I do hope that after my remarks on this period, which he knows so well, he will straighten us out about it from firsthand experience.

The third point is that even then the United States was of two minds about this matter. There were "doves" and there were "hawks" then, and people in between. There was no strong national consensus among the American people and U. S. action, while generally in support of France and the Associated States, was in that period finally ineffectual.

The second chapter starts after the withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Corps and the partitioning of Indo-China, when all the world expected South Viet Nam to stagger and to fall quickly into the arms of Hanoi. This period begins with what has been called "the miracle of Diem." Incidentally, let me say that the pronunciation of President Diem's name is "Ziem" even though it starts with a D. I have found quite often that after a remark about this period I was accused of hisping, or people didn't understand whom I meant. I mean the former president of Viet Nam, Ngo Dinh Diem, spelled Diem. This period begins with what has been called "the miracle of Diem." It ends in 1963 with the overthrow and assassination of President Diem. The record is one of a remarkable recovery by South Viet Nam, based on a do-it-yourself philosophy and encouraged and assisted by the United States. It is, I think, a record of which both South Vietnam and America can be proud - except for the last sudden fatal months in 1963. It is a record nearly blotted out by more recent events and, I think, by deliberate intent - for reasons which will become clearer later on.

I sometimes think of the period of 1954 to the present in terms of a classic Greek drama. The first act is the story of the gradual triumph of relatively good men and good ideas over relatively bad men and bad ideas. The second act depicts the act of hubris, when our country, setting its judgment and its power above that of the people and government it was helping, encouraged a revolution against its ally. The third and present act unfolds the dreadful consequences of that act of hubris. The fourth act is yet to be revealed. It will be revealed, I think, either in greater tragedy or in the regaining of America's unity, in the strengthening of her moral integrity, and in the regeneration of her leadership.

You will recall that the Geneva Accords of 1954 provided among other things for the cessation of hostilities, the independence and neutral status of Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos, and the temporary division of Viet Nam at

the 17th parallel pending a vote on unification. The armed forces of both sides were to be withdrawn to their respective territories and neither side was to be reinforced from outside. Provision was also made for an exchange of civilians, at their choice. Neither the government of South Viet Nam nor the United States signed the Accords but the United States agreed not to violate them, and South Viet Nam, under Ngo Dinh Diem, tacitly accepted them with one exception, the provision on unification.

Both halves of Viet Nam at that time were beset by great difficulties and faced Herculean tasks of reconstruction and readjustment. To the surprise of most observers, progress towards order and economic stability was faster in the South than in the North, due in part to more abundant food supplies and despite the absorption of 900,000 refugees from the North. It is noteworthy that Hanoi did not press at that time for unification as provided in the Geneva Accords. Ho Chi Minh had his hands full in coping with internal problems, including a violent peasants revolt, and was presumably as unsure of the outcome of the referendum as was President Diem. In any event, there ensued a period of competition of a relatively peaceful sort between Hanoi and Saigon, as each strove by different means to bring some order and a measure of economic viability into their shattered countries. The miracle of Diem consisted of the fact that having formed a government under conditions of wild disorder in the South, in a country which had not known independence for four generations, he was able to inspire the respect necessary to cope with the problems confronting him. I knew this man well, after the American press had largely turned against him. To me the secret of his success was his moral integrity. I wish there were one like him in Viet Nam now.

From 1955 to 1960, South Viet Nam, with American aid of about \$150 million a year, accomplished the following. Rice production rose from 2.8 million metric tons to 4.6 million metric tons, rubber production rose from 66,000 metric tons to over 79,000. Diversification of crops was encouraged, re-

sulting in large increases in jute, kapok, copra, tea, coffee, fruit, vegetables. By 1961, 80 agriculture extension agents were working in 32 provinces, 574 L-H clubs (the Vietnamese version of our own L-H clubs) with a membership of 20,681 rural boys and girls were active in 2,330 villages. New lands were opened for re-settlement. By 1961 over 200,000 people had taken up new lands, each family receiving five hectares, about 12 acres, of which one hectare had been cleared by the government - the rest they cleared themselves. Nearly one million refugees from the North had been re-settled in one way or another and enabled to become contributing members of society. I have visited a number of these villages, often in the company of President Diem. To get out from Saigon and see this progress in the countryside was always a heartening experience.

The commercial catch of fish under government help rose from about 100,000 tons in 1955 to 250,000 tons in 1961. The government's farm credit program loaned over 3 billion piastres to over one million farm families. A national agriculture college was established with a student body of 300. 97 district farmers associations were serving 778 villages and 292 farm cooperatives were established with a membership of 110,000 and a paid-in capital of over 50 billion piastres.

I don't want to bore you with statistics. I cite them because I daresay you saw little or nothing about these accomplishments in the American press. I remember giving these facts and figures and others like them to members of the press corps in Saigon. No articles appeared on them to my knowledge. Most of the reporters there were more interested in the bloody side of the struggle, and in criticizing the government's shortcomings.

This period also marked the beginning of an industrial base in a country which had had until then almost no industry whatever. 51 manufacturing firms were established in South Viet Nam from 1955-1961. The largest plants were



In textiles which attracted 560 million piastres of investments. New factories reduced the imports of refined sugar from 25,000 metric tons in 1954 to zero in 1961. By manufacturing many of the things required and formerly imported, South Viet Nam saved \$35 to \$40 million annually in foreign exchange.

In transportation and communications, by 1956, the entire railroad line was operating for the first time in 12 years. Three major highways were completed and others were under construction. 14½ million cubic meters of infill was dredged from canals, restoring the water transport system in the delta area. Electric power generation doubled.

In health measures, 3,500 hamlet health stations were established; training facilities for health workers were developed; the number of doctors graduating from medical schools increased rapidly; facilities were developed to train 120 professional nurses annually; and 100 assistant nurses. By 1962, small but well equipped surgical wings were added to 25 of the 40 provincial hospitals in South Viet Nam. A malaria eradication program was established, dramatically reducing the incidence of malaria cases.

In education, the number of students, teachers, and classrooms were more than doubled in 5 years. Two new universities were established - one in Hue and one in Dalat. Four new technical vocational schools were opened. A government information program and library facilities were established in most of the 41 provinces and in all the major cities.

These social and economic programs were largely directed toward the hamlets - the small villages where the farmers lived surrounded by their fields. This is where the government put most emphasis and where its greatest strength lay. In retrospect, one might wish that equal attention had been paid to the cities where the political climate was more volatile. I could cite many other evidences of economic and social progress, but I should mention also the military and political sides.

A native army of 350,000 men was raised, equipped, trained, deployed. A civil guard for the protection of the peasants in the provinces was similarly formed - all this with American equipment and training. Police for the cities, and rural police forces, were established, equipped and trained. These were major, difficult accomplishments. I cannot begin to do justice to those involved in these few sentences.

In 1955 South Viet Nam drew up, ratified, and put into effect a constitution and a system of free national elections. This was a brand new concept of government to the Vietnamese people. That it did not work perfectly was no surprise. The surprise was that it worked as well as it did. Their constitution, modeled on that of the United States, provided for an elected president and vice president, an elected legislature, a cabinet of responsible ministers, and a supreme court. Ngo Dinh Diem was elected president in 1955 and re-elected in 1961. Elections for the National Assembly were held regularly until October 1963. It is worth remembering that the roots of self-government in Viet Nam were planted more firmly under President Diem than ever before or since. And all this was done while the most vigorous efforts were underway to knit together a torn, confused, heterogeneous, and devastated country. This was "the miracle of Diem."

Next we come to what I term "the period of renewed aggression." This began in 1959. It is still continuing, but in a different form. The aggression started slowly, covertly, subtly. Alarmed by the progress in the South and having gotten a firm grip on the North, Ho Chi Minh decided that Viet Nam should be reunited, by force if necessary. He had a legal cover for this - the Geneva Accords of 1954. He also had ready tools - the Vietminh organizers, armed cadres, and sympathizers who were left behind in the South after the Accords.

The first objective of the aggression was to undermine the government of the South, to set back or if possible to destroy, what had been so painfully built up by the Diem government over the past years. The instruments were slander, propoganda, incitement of local grievances, promises, threats - working up to terror, destruction, kidnappings, and murders - reinforced at each stage by directions, supplies and trained agents from the North.

Here I must explain several terms. What is the difference between the Vietminh and the Viet Cong? I am sure you know. Vietminh is the term Ho Chi Minh used for his Independence movement starting way back in 1946. It means roughly "Vietnamese nationalists." You can see why President Diem did not want to leave President Ho Chi Minh in possession of this term. Diem, too, was a nationalist and so were his followers, and so they began to call the terrorists in the South "Viet Cong," which means Vietnamese communists. Behind this distinction in terms lies a distinction in organization and perhaps in aims, although less so now than formerly, I think. I refer to the difference between the National Liberation Front in the South and the government in Hanoi, and to the Viet Cong military organization in the South as distinct from North Viet Nam's regular army units infiltrated into the South. The National Liberation Front was publicly proclaimed in 1960 as the political spearhead of the Viet Cong organization. It seems to have had two major purposes: to consolidate and direct the Viet Cong terrorists and guerrillas and to coordinate with Hanoi. The Viet Cong leaders in the South at first had some difficulties with Hanoi, and vice versa. Some southern Viet Cong did not relish the prospect of being swallowed up by Hanoi, and most did not like taking orders from Hanoi. This reflected the widespread Vietnamese factionalism and jealousy. I saw considerable evidences of these differences when I was there, but it was clear nevertheless, even seven years ago, that the Viet Cong were dependent upon Hanoi's help to keep going and couldn't

have sustained their subversive activities without it. I think it is probably too late now to count on or to exploit differences of aims between the two.

A personal reminiscence may cast some light upon the degree of control exercised by Hanoi vis-a-vis the Viet Cong some years ago. A friend of mine, an Indian on the International Control Commission, told me this story in 1961 in Saigon. As a member of the commission he went to Hanoi shortly after an attempt had been made on my life by Viet Cong agents in Saigon. He saw Pham Van Dong, the North Vietnamese Prime Minister, and berated him for allowing or ordering such a thing. The Prime Minister, according to my friend, said he was sorry. It was a stupid thing to do and he would try to see to it that it didn't happen again. This account has always puzzled me. Did Pham Van Dong mean that it was stupid to directly provoke the United States by such an act? Or did he mean that Hanoi didn't have close control over the Viet Cong terrorists? Or was he trying to placate the Indian Chairman of the International Control Commission? I don't know, but in any event I felt more offended than reassured by this message.

Now I come to the period of vivid personal recollections of Viet Nam - the most exciting job I ever had and the most gratifying - except for the last three months. With my family, working hard, believing in the rightness of our purpose and with an outstanding team of colleagues - these were years, not of a "Mission in Torment" (the title of a book about that era), but of a mission on the go.

President Kennedy, you remember, came into office in January, 1961. Southeast Asia was one of his graver problems. Laos and South Viet Nam were weakening under increased communist insurgency. He and his government decided on a negotiated settlement in Laos and at the same time a substantial increase in American support to the government and people of South Vietnam. This

must have seemed rather strange to the strategists in Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi, who, despite their differences, tended to look upon the whole of Indo-China as one strategic area. They saw their opportunity and did not fail to take advantage of it. The treaty on Laos, negotiated by Averill Harriman, signed in Geneva in 1962 and never lived up to by the communist signatories, promptly turned the Ho Chi Minh trail into the "Harriman Memorial Highway." (I did not coin the phrase.) The treaty on Laos gave immunity to the North Vietnamese to take control of the northern provinces of Laos and to infiltrate South Vietnam while tying the hands of our side. At best the Laotian settlement can be regarded, I think, as one of the poorer alternatives in an admittedly difficult and awkward situation.

Meanwhile, the Viet Cong attempt to undermine progress in South Vietnam and to paralyze its government was making alarming headway. One of the figures I remember from my briefings for my Vietnam assignment was the figure 2,400. This was reportedly the number of South Vietnamese government officials, non-military, assassinated or kidnapped by the Viet Cong in 1960, the year before I got there - minor officials, for the most part, who were carrying on the work of the Diem government, the agriculture extension agents, road engineers, dredge foremen, district chiefs, school teachers, doctors and nurses, anti-malaria teams, and others. Twenty-four hundred of them killed or kidnapped in one year. Was this a popular uprising against an unpopular government as some would have us believe? Or was it a planned, deliberate strategy of aggression against a constitutional free government? From all the evidence I had, and it was considerable, I have no hesitation in saying it was certainly the latter.

In May 1961, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson arrived in Saigon. He was accompanied by his wife and a group of officials from Washington, includ-

ing members of the Kennedy family. President Kennedy had requested Mr. Johnson to go to Vietnam to survey the situation first-hand. The new administration in Washington was facing important decisions. I was then the new ambassador to Saigon. My wife, my family, and I had arrived 48 hours before. Vice President and Mrs. Johnson were guests of President Ngo Dinh Diem. No such high American official had been in South Vietnam since Vice President Nixon's trip in 1957. Mr. Johnson's visit consisted of four whirlwind days of conferences with President Diem and his advisers, inspection trips in and around Saigon, receptions, public appearances, handshakings, dinners, and more conferences. As a participant, I was impressed by the Vice President's drive and energy, by President Diem's calm determination and force of character, and above all by the enormous differences of approach to political leadership between the two men. ~~The~~ <sup>to deserve</sup> one occidental and the other oriental, the one forceful and the other reserved, the one seeking popular approval and the other seeking <sup>to deserve</sup> respect, the one democratic in our sense, the other paternalistic in his attitude towards his people, in the good Mandarin tradition. Yet there was an evident rapport between them.

At the farewell dinner, Mr. Johnson proposed a glowing toast to the Vietnamese president. "To the George Washington of Vietnam," he said, and we all drank a toast in warm champagne. This was the beginning of my tour of duty in Vietnam.

From the shambles of occupation, division, and war, a new society was being built. But now again it was under attack. Would it be capable of bearing the responsibilities of self-government, while at the same time fighting off a renewed and vicious subversive attack? Could the two countries, South Vietnam and America - so disparate in size, strength, outlook, and ways of doing things - find a formula for working more closely together in their common interest?

What was that common interest? These were the central questions we pondered and discussed seven years ago.

That was in May of 1961 - the mid-way point between the French withdrawal from Indo-China and today. President Kennedy, you remember, had been inaugurated in January. President Diem had been re-elected in April. Less than three years later, they were both dead.

The United States and the government of South Vietnam quickly arrived at an understanding. There were three agreed principles underlying increased U. S. aid to South Vietnam in 1961. One, the South Vietnamese, through their elected government, undertook to prosecute their struggle against the Viet Cong more intensively in all respects - economic, social and political - behind a strengthened military shield. Two, the U. S. undertook to help by increased material aid and by advice and training. The introduction of U. S. combat forces, however, was definitely ruled out. President Diem did not want them, and President Kennedy did not want to send them. Three, there would be no interference by the United States in the internal affairs of South Vietnam - no attempt to usurp the powers of the South Vietnamese government, nor to take control of the conduct of the struggle. Both parties agreed that it had to be a Vietnamese victory if it was to endure.

These principles formed the basis of a partnership of good faith directed toward a common end, the defense of the right of the South Vietnamese people to determine their own future without coercion, force or terror. They rested on a fact which is as sound today as it was then - that indigenous nationalism has to be the mainspring of resistance to the communists.

South Vietnam's appeal for more aid was answered by the United States under President Kennedy for the following main reasons. The South Vietnamese people under President Diem had shown courage, perseverance and progress

for six years. As a people they seemed worthy of support in their determination to remain free. They appeared to be the best bet for making a stand against the southward thrust of Asian communism. South Vietnam was more accessible than Laos and relatively well-governed. The South Vietnamese were anti-Chinese as well as anti-communist. They held the key to the rice bowl of Asia, the lower Mekong Delta. They were by treaty under the protection of SEATO.

An agreement was worked out between President Diem and myself following General Maxwell Taylor's visit to Vietnam and was promptly approved by President Kennedy. It provided vigorous new programs of action to protect the Vietnamese people and to win them solidly to the government's side - without enlarging the area of conflict, without inviting outside interference, without undercutting the essential spirit of Vietnamese nationalism, and without the use of American combat forces. To make the arrangement work in practice, it was necessary to establish a high degree of mutual confidence between the members of our mission in Saigon and the members of the Vietnamese government.

My instructions, with which I thoroughly agreed, laid heavy emphasis on building a bridge of confidence strong enough to carry the load of advice and aid which we were giving. Since, as was right and proper, we could not command, we had to rely on persuasion and mutual confidence. We had to be prepared for some disappointments and frustrations, for occasional misunderstandings, for patient negotiation, and for keeping our American influence "under a bushel." In order not to give credence to the Viet Cong propaganda that the Diem government were puppets of the Americans. We had to be prepared to recognize on occasion that American prescriptions were not always the best remedies in Vietnam. Anyone who has had the experience of trying by cable to persuade Washington that a plan approved by the National Security Council has some flaws in it will know how hard this is.



By and large this program of help and advice worked well for two years. The testimony of the enemy is more eloquent than what I can say. These are quotations from Wilfred Burchett, the Australian journalist, who spent a great deal of time with both the Hanoi government and the Viet Cong. According to Burchett, Ho Chi Minh said: "1962 was definitely Diem's year." Another quotation, according to Burchett, was from the Viet Cong: "We could not have imagined that the United States would be so stupid as to pull the rug from under Diem."

Confidence was established at all levels of our mission with their Vietnamese opposite numbers, with gratifying results. This applied to civilian as well as military activities, intelligence collection and analysis, police training, the treatment of prisoners, "the Open Arms policy," land distribution, the communications network, and last but not least, the placement of the best available men for the innumerable jobs that had to be done in the countryside.

I would like to take this occasion to express my deep admiration for the Americans I worked with, military and civilian, for their accomplishments during this period. The vast majority understood their difficult and delicate advisory roles and carried them out to the benefit of our country. It is a mark of their accomplishments that in 1963, when I left Vietnam, the government had re-established effective control in 75% of the country as against 25% two years earlier. The cost in American lives over a period of eight years was 98 men killed.

When I went to say goodbye to my friend President Diem in August of 1963, he looked at me earnestly and asked, "Does your departure mean that the United States government has changed its policy from what you and I agreed two and one-half years ago?" I replied, "Mr. President, I have been assured on highest authority from Washington that it does not. You can rely on

that" - and I showed him the telegram signed by Secretary Rusk referring to "highest authority," which meant the President. Diem thought a moment and said, "Mr. Ambassador, I believe you but I am sorry to say I do not believe the message you have received." I said, "Mr. President, you must believe it. Otherwise, all that we have accomplished will be destroyed. You and I know that confidence and mutual respect is the sole basis for successful cooperation between our two countries."

When I left Saigon on August 15, 1963, I knew I had not convinced Diem that American policy would remain the same. As it turned out, he was right. Two months and fifteen days later President Diem was overthrown and assassinated, on the first of November, 1963. This was done, not by the Viet Cong, but by a group of Vietnamese generals encouraged by the U. S. government. The thing I blame myself most for in twenty-two years of government service is my failure to persuade the State Department and President Kennedy that this would be a tragedy for Vietnam and for the United States. I had at that time been relieved as ambassador and was back in Washington on another job. But nevertheless I should have been able to make our government see what would happen.

The Vietnamese generals who overthrew President Diem still rule in Saigon. Their new constitution and civilian clothes do not hide <sup>their origins,</sup> ~~this fact~~. In Washington some of those who encouraged the generals and promised them support still make policy on Vietnam.

What was the explanation of this sudden disastrous change in American policy? Why did the Kennedy administration turn on its proven ally and connive in his overthrow? President Kennedy was warned against this action. Among those who warned him was Vice President Lyndon Johnson. It is indeed ironic that President Johnson is now suffering the consequences of that act. It is even more ironic that he has been under attack by members of the Kennedy administration

who favored it. And it is incredible, to me at least, that he retains among his principal advisors some of those who engineered it.

The reasons for this change in U. S. policy? First, the press. American press reporting from Saigon in 1963 and earlier was generally, in my opinion, inaccurate, prejudiced, superficial, and misleading. There were some exceptions to this, but the overwhelming weight of public information on Vietnam was prejudiced and slanted - in some cases towards the editorial line of the reporter's paper. This had a profound effect on American public opinion. It also had a profound effect on Vietnamese opinion, since American press articles were played back to South Vietnam in Vietnamese by the Voice of America.

Second, in the State Department and ~~even~~ in the White House staff there was a small group who had been against Diem for years. They had been squelched and silenced for awhile by President Kennedy's earlier forthright decisions but they remained basically unconvinced.

Third, with American public opinion already prejudiced against the Diem government and with certain elements in the State Department working for a change in U. S. policy, there came in mid-1963 the Buddhist crisis. A sudden series of violent events in Vietnam shocked and confused the world. Whether or not, or to what extent, Viet Cong strategists were behind the Buddhist agitation, I do not know. While I was there we never got conclusive evidence, although the parallel between the Buddhist objectives as they developed and the tactical aims of the Viet Cong were striking. This much, however, is clear. A clever and inhumane political plot came through to the American public as a genuine revolt against religious persecution, exactly as the Buddhist agitators had intended.

I said then and repeat now that during my two and a half years of work and observation throughout South Vietnam I saw no evidence whatsoever of

religious persecution on the part of the Diem government. Soon after my recall from Vietnam in August of 1963, I had a brief revealing talk with the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk. Pointing out that he himself had stated a few months before that he was encouraged by the progress made in Vietnam, I asked him why the State Department had turned so sharply against the Diem government. Mr. Rusk's reply was, "We cannot stand any more burnings." Behind this laconic statement there lay a dismal lack of understanding and judgment. This was the atmosphere, then, in which vital decisions were being made in Washington in the fall of 1963. "We cannot stand any more burnings." It is worth noting that these burnings were not the last protest suicides, either in Vietnam or in America.

In those hectic days American public opinion was understandably confused. But our policy makers in Washington are supposed to be more farsighted. For them to yield to popular misconceptions and encourage a coup d'etat was in my judgment unjust to an honorable ally and irresponsible to the American people.

I see, Mr. Chairman, that I am going over my time; I will try to summarize very quickly from that point on what happened in South Viet Nam. The overthrow of the government that had existed in South Vietnam for nine years left a political vacuum into which the Viet Cong came storming back. ~~The~~ government was paralyzed. The province chiefs, the district chiefs, the village chiefs, all of whom depended on the constitutional government, no longer knew what to do. The military junta which succeeded the Diem government quarreled among themselves and jockeyed for position and power. In the period of less than three years there were nine different governments. You remember this period - a revolving succession of generals and governments. To make matters worse, our own government embraced each new faction that came into power in Saigon. ~~Finally,~~ By late '64, the year after President Diem had been overthrown, the situation became so bad that President Johnson was faced with the alternative of having South Vietnam

go down the drain or sending in U. S. combat forces. He decided to take the latter fateful step. <sup>- the evacuation of Diem and the introduction of U. S. combat forces</sup> These two events were, in my judgment, the turning point, of the whole affair.

I must say in all frankness that the decision, whether to send in combat forces or not, was a very, very difficult one. In retrospect one can think of a lot of other things that could have been done rather than this involvement in a ground war in Asia - which was the very thing that all previous U. S. administrations since 1946 had avoided, with the exception of Korea. Yet, I am sure there is not a person in this room who does not respect the bravery, the devotion to duty, of our soldiers, sailors, air force, marines in Vietnam, not only those who are there now but those who have been there over the past years. Nothing that any of us says or does could have the intent of weakening their resolve and their outstanding devotion to duty. They saved Saigon - American forces did - in 1965, and they saved it again in 1968 at the time of the TET offensive. But the trouble is Americans, or any other foreigners, can't pacify the villages and the districts and the provinces of South Vietnam. This has to be done by the South Vietnamese themselves.

This concludes my summary of the historical development of U. S. involvement. I am sorry I did not have time to go more fully into the last three or four years, but I think this is well known - the political vacuum, the increase in Viet Cong control in the countryside, the inefficiencies of the governments, the introduction of U. S. combat forces, and the continued buildup of the forces on both sides and the intensity of the war.

Let me now try if I may, Mr. Chairman, very briefly to summarize my thinking on this matter, for whatever it may be worth and perhaps as an introduction to questions.

I do not believe now, nor have I ever believed, that a military victory in South Vietnam or against North Vietnam will achieve in itself the pacification, stability, or long term independence of South Vietnam nor the permanent containment of communism in the threatened East Asian countries. I do recognize that the thrust of the communist movement, however much certain communist countries may differ among themselves, is continuous and implacable, and I do not expect it to abate soon. I expect this threat to continue in Southeast Asia - under various forms - and it will be just as implacable as it has been over the last fifteen or twenty years. I see, however, little evidence of a will among the South Vietnamese people to support their present government and its policies sufficiently to achieve the real victory, namely, the pacification, the restoration of law and order, and the rebuilding of a stable and viable society in South Vietnam. I'm afraid the Viet Cong cancer has gone very far indeed, spread by the destruction of the war and, in a certain sense, by the very presence of one foreign soldier for every 25 South Vietnamese men, women, and children.

My hope for the success of our policy in Viet Nam since the revolution in 1963 has diminished steadily with each failure of Vietnamese leadership and each American military escalation. I have no illusions about the evils and the dangers to our country of communist aims and methods. I have no doubts about who started the war in Vietnam and who ought to win it. I saw it start, and I have no moral scruples about killing those who are out to kill you. I have no illusions about the shock to our friends and allies in the far East from a change of course in Vietnam nor about the shock to our own pride. I recognize the difficulties of finding a turning place on the road of military escalation which does not risk, even more than now, the lives of Americans fighting in Vietnam.

I have no confidence in the bona fides of our enemies and their backers, and I certainly do not share the thought that the Soviet Union will lend

us a willing hand to get out of our difficulties - not even to the extent that we lent them one to get out of Cuba. On the contrary, it has always seemed clear to me that the principal aim of the USSR is to catch up with America by any means, and whatever she can do to bleed us white, while bleeding herself little, contributes to the fulfilling of that aim. Neither can we expect much help from our European allies, however much they would like to see us extricate ourselves. No, we got ourselves into this predicament and it is up to us to find a way out.

Opinions may - and do - differ on where we went wrong. I have given you my view - we went wrong when the Kennedy administration pulled the rug on the Diem government three months before President Kennedy died. And this comes from one who admired President Kennedy for many qualities, among them his courage to admit mistakes. But in my judgment the errors committed in Vietnam have overwhelmed the ideal - the accumulated mistakes have turned a noble effort into a near disaster. It is time, I think, to reassess, to regroup, and to recover our unity and our strength for tests that are surely to come.

President Johnson's announcement 48 hours ago opened a new possibility - the possibility of a working consensus in our country on this issue. It to me was an act of real statesmanship. His renunciation of an intention to run again multiplied many times the weight of his peace offer, and put it up much more squarely to the other side. His call for national unity was to me fundamental, right, and a sine qua non to a solution in Vietnam. Holding to his basic belief that the U. S. cannot and will not allow communist aggression to go unchecked where we can effectively prevent it, he did not, I am glad to say, weaken on that fundamental principle. Recognizing the unacceptable danger of waiting in disunity and national paralysis until after elections, he gave a new dimension, it seems to me, and a new flexibility to the whole problem, and greatly enhanced his ability to deal with it. President Johnson has never blamed his predecessor

for the cruel dilemma he inherited in Vietnam in November, 1963, upon succeeding to the presidency, although he was one of the few in the Kennedy administration who opposed the fatal error in Vietnam in 1963. Yet, having said that, I think that his introduction and buildup of U. S. combat forces, as it turned out, compounded that error. Nevertheless, the fact that he did not put the responsibility on anybody else, even in the face of severe political attack by the late president's brother and closest adviser, shows considerable forbearance. I am not making a political speech on anybody's behalf but this has bearing, it seems to me, on the future of Vietnam.

The de-escalation announcement leaves many question marks, of course. Will Hanoi respond? If not, what about our 550,000 troops - their safety, their morale, their ability to carry on? If Hanoi does respond, what position will we take in negotiations? This is, of course, a crucial question. Will the South Vietnamese army, government and people shoulder more of the responsibility or will they slump as the result of this development? These and many other questions remain to be answered. But surely a new possibility has been opened by the President - the chance to achieve a national working consensus so desperately needed. This seems to me to be a time for care and forbearance in political debate and public judgment. If as President Johnson evidently sincerely hopes, our nation can find a measure of unity now, we may be able at last to retrieve some of the errors of the past five years. Thank you.