

Roger Hilsman Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 08/14/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: Roger Hilsman

Interviewer: Dennis J. O'Brien

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Biographical Note

Hilsman was the Director of the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 1961–1963, and Assistant Undersecretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, 1963–1964. In this interview Hilsman discusses his initial interactions with John F. Kennedy [JFK]; Hilsman's appointment to the Department of State during the Kennedy Administration; Foreign Service officers and "hot-seat" jobs; issues with Dean Rusk as Secretary of State; reorganizing the Bureau of Intelligence and Research; the flow of information between the State Department and the White House; staffing the State Department; the use of satellite intelligence; John A. McCone; working with and around Robert F. Kennedy [RFK]; JFK, RFK, and Vietnam; Edward G. Lansdale; Maxwell D. Taylor; the connection between Vietnam and Laos; U.S. action in Laos; the Buddhist crisis in Vietnam; the impact of WWII on Hilsman and JFK's generation; and the 1963 coup in Vietnam, among other issues.

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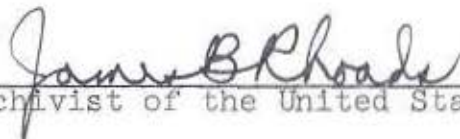
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Roger Hilsman



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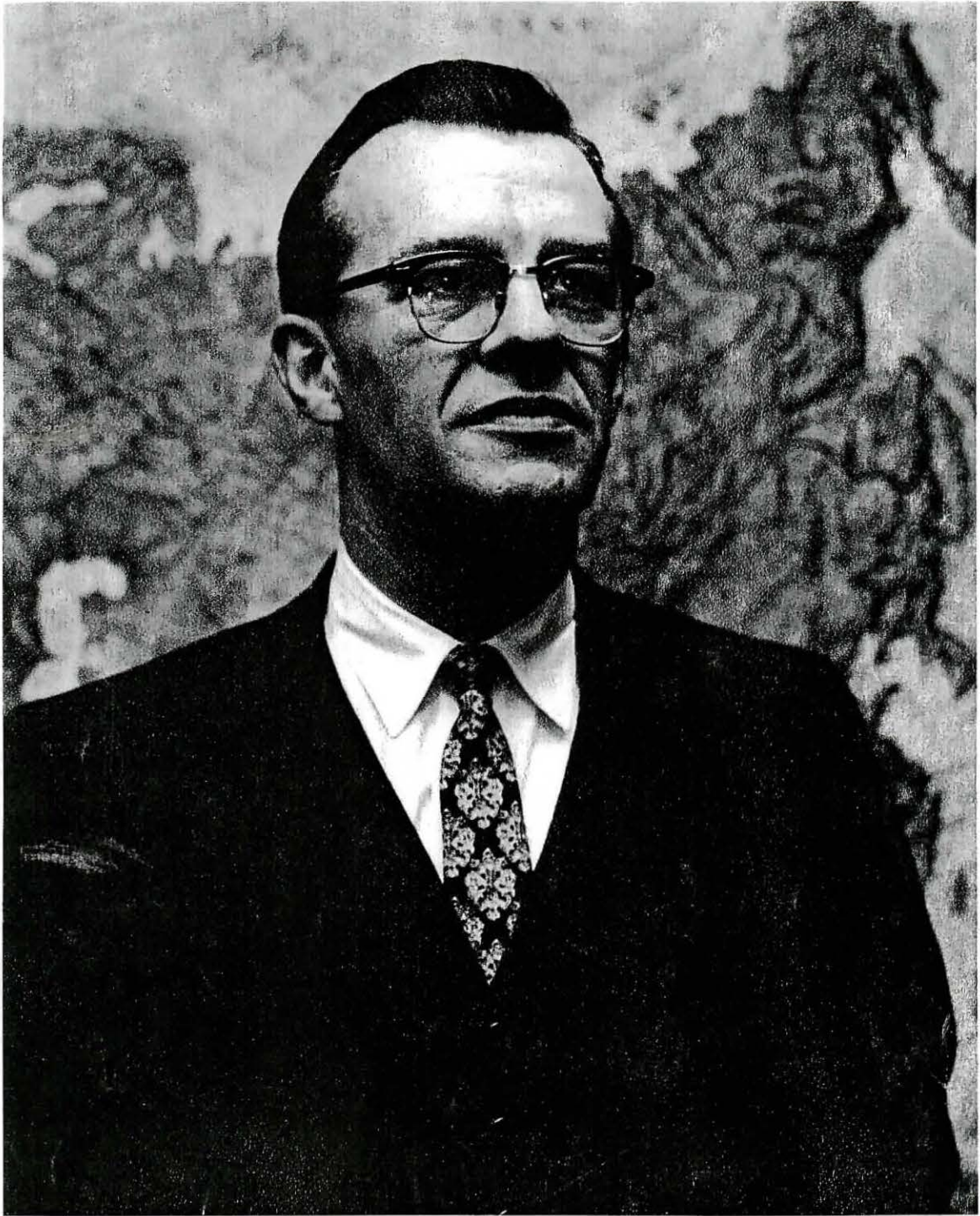
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Oral History Interview

with

ROGER HILSMAN, Jr.

August 14, 1970

Hamburg Cove, Lyme, Connecticut

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: I think one thing that you didn't cover in your book that would be, I think, rather important is--well, let's take the basic question: When did you first meet John Kennedy?

HILSMAN: Well, what happened was--it's probably fairly typical of relationships with people like myself to Kennedy--that one day an aide appeared, and said, "The Senator is going to make a speech; he read that article you wrote and was just wondering if you would be willing to let us try out a few of his ideas on you." And so the aide tried out a few ideas on me. A couple of weeks later, he dropped back again. He'd been talking to other people like [Henry A.] Kissinger and others and wanted to check another couple of ideas. Well, this went on for, oh, you know, a few months. Every couple of months the same aide or another one would appear. Finally, it got to be, "The Senator was going to make a speech and wondered if you would mind putting down your ideas about what ought to be in it." It got to be a closer and closer relationship. And then, finally, the aide said, "The Senator is very grateful for everything you've been doing"--by this time I was writing memos with input ideas--"and would like to meet you." So they set up an appointment, and I came over and chatted with him for about a half an hour. Then, it got to be more intimate.

About this time [Hubert H.] Humphrey--I've telescoped a year and a half, maybe,--hired himself a foreign policy advisor. So Kennedy thought he ought to have one, and they offered me the job. But I had just accepted a Rockefeller [Foundation] grant and didn't really want it. So I said no, that I would be perfectly willing to do anything to help any time, any place, but I had this grant, and it was going to give me some leave. Harris Wofford finally took that job. But by then, the Senator would phone, or an aide would come by you know, and so on.

It was entirely a professional relationship; it was never a social relationship. But by the time the Kennedy Administration started, he knew who I was. We were not close or anything like that. He knew where

I was, and he knew my name a lot better than my face. I think what really then happened was I went into the State Department, as you know, as head of Intelligence, and then our relationship got closer and closer and closer because I would go to NSC [National Security Council] meetings. And then, I think, after the Bay of Pigs, when he came to distrust [Dean] Rusk, then it really got quite intimate, our relationship.

O'BRIEN: Well, how does that appointment come about? When do you first realize that you're in line for something in the State Department?

HILSMAN: Well, as I reconstruct it, they set up the talent hunt group, and everybody connected with Kennedy sat down and put in names. Then the talent hunt people tried to match names and jobs. So my name was put in by all of the staff, you know, all of the people writing speeches, as far as I can reconstruct it, [Theodore C.] Sorensen and all the rest. And you know, Kennedy looks over the list and says great, you know, and checks names like that. So as far as I know, everybody connected with it put my name in. And my name also was put in by others, that he tapped, like [Chester] Bowles. The talent hunt asked people, and they put in names, but basically, I. . . . You know, people casually saying, "The talent hunt asked me for names and I put yours in." I was aware that guys like [Henry M.] Scoop Jackson had put my name in, that Chester Bowles had. You know, a wide variety of people had put it in. But principally, it was the Kennedy staff and Kennedy himself.

As I understand it--and here there are probably others who would know the answers to these questions, like Adam Yarmolinsky, better than I--as I understand it, my name was down for two jobs: One was Assistant Secretary of ISA in the Pentagon, the International Security Affairs; and the other was the INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research] job. And I think that, as I understand it, I really was pretty much headed for the ISA job, although I personally preferred the INR job. And then--do you remember the sequence about Paul Nitze?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

HILSMAN: He was scheduled for the [McGeorge Bundy] Mac Bundy job, but he was uneasy about it. And what he really wanted--uneasy about being that close to the White House, you see, and about his capacity to work directly with the President, --and he wanted to be Deputy Secretary of Defense. So he turned down the Mac Bundy job, what later became the Mac Bundy job, and hoped to be Deputy Secretary. But [Robert S.] McNamara looked at it, and it didn't gel with him. So they offered Nitze the ISA job in Defense, and that steered me to INR.

O'BRIEN: Who told you about it? Who was the contact, the person who asked if you wanted the INR job; can you recall? Was it Rusk?

HILSMAN: No, First it was the talent hunt people and then it was Chester Bowles.

O'BRIEN: How far back does your association with Bowles go?

HILSMAN: It doesn't go back very far. It goes like this: [Thomas L.] Tom Hughes worked for Chester Bowles when he was Governor.

When Bowles got defeated for the second term, Tom went to Capitol Hill and worked for Hubert Humphrey. I was at the Library of Congress, you know, specifically for defense and foreign policy, and I got to know Tom there. He was helping Hubert Humphrey write speeches. And that's where I got to know Tom. It's the same way I got to know Ted Sorensen, you see, just in a business way. But Tom and I got to be very close friends. And then when Chet came to Washington, in 1958, Tom switched and went with Chet as his AA [administrative assistant], and that's when I got to know Chet, then as a Congressman.

Then I began helping. . . . You see, I was helping a lot of people in those days, it was my job to help congressmen, anybody who asked, you see. Some you did more enthusiastically than others, of course. But I was helping Scoop Jackson; I was helping Hubert Humphrey; I was helping Jack Kennedy, Chet Bowles, all of these people. I was serving as an advisor and helping them in foreign policy and defense policy.

O'BRIEN: Was there any resistance to that appointment, either on the Hill or in the Department?

HILSMAN: To my appointment?

O'BRIEN: Yes, that you know of.

HILSMAN: Rusk. But Rusk resisted all the Kennedy appointments--mildly. There's an amusing incident, which I tell in the book, of a telephone conversation. It became clear to all of us that basically Rusk--you know, he apparently himself felt too young for the job or something, I don't know. But he certainly had the same kind of doubts about all of us on the grounds of youth and also, probably, because we were Kennedy people. And I suppose Rusk would have been content to have just taken all career Foreign Service officers--everybody except himself.

O'BRIEN: Now there's a real problem, isn't there, as far as top level jobs for Foreign Service people in 1960, as I understand it? Did you find that . . .

HILSMAN: What do you mean? I don't understand the question.

O'BRIEN: Well, in a sense, with the Wristonization and everything that took place in the fifties, that there's a scarcity of jobs at the upper levels . . . for Foreign Service officers.

HILSMAN: Well, let me talk about that in a minute. To finish up your other question, I know of no opposition on Capitol Hill. In fact, quite the opposite, because I was strong there, you see. I knew most of these fellows. So as far as I know, none at all. And also,

I had a lot going for me politically. You see, here I am, a West Point graduate, wounded in the war, you know, all of this military record, which protects me from the right. In fact, guys like [Thomas J.] Dodd and [Karl E.] Mundt thought I was great. On the other hand, my intellectual activities made me welcome to the left. So I had no problems with Capitol Hill at all, unlike, say, Walt Rostow, who had very severe problems. And it's ironic in the end, you know, that he's the great hawk.

Now, going back to your State Department question: When we came into the State Department--first of all, let me give you my own biases to start off with.

O'BRIEN: Okay, good.

HILSMAN: These are spelled out in the, I guess, second to last chapter of To Move a Nation. Some of these are spelled out. I don't think that a Foreign Service officer, no matter how capable, can adequately do a "hot-seat" Washington job. Now, let me illustrate. I have a very high regard for Marshall Green. If you have any doubts about this, notice that I brought him back from Hong Kong and made him my deputy. I think he's one of the most able Foreign Service officers in this field of Asia. But I was very disappointed to see him made Assistant Secretary because, you see, unless he resigns as a career officer when he takes that job, he simply is not going to be able to perform it. Not because of lack of ability, but because if he behaves in a way that permits him to be used in the next administration as an ambassador, he will not have done that job adequately. That's a "hot-seat" job. In that job you've got to kick the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]; you've got to tread on their toes; you've got to make them toe the mark: You've got to fight with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You have to do hard, political things. You have to get out in Congress, and you've got to make some enemies. You've got to deal with the press. You've got to be a public figure if you're going to be an effective assistant secretary.

Now, no Foreign Service officer. . . . I'll tell you what happens. The Foreign Service officers who do that job wreck their careers. They must resign or retire at the end of their session. The best that they can do is what happened to [Charles E.] Chip Bohlen, i.e. Chip goes on ice and sits in Manila. This foremost Sovietologist we have sits in Manila for four years,--or more than that, I guess. For eight years he's on ice, and it's a miserable time for him. But that's the only exception. The rest of them, the George Kennans and everyone else, simply ruin their futures as Foreign Service officers.

So now, against that background, I would say that what you had when we came in were a bunch of officers, of senior Foreign Service officers--in other words, what I'm saying is I don't think you can have a Foreign Service officer in a "hot-seat" job in Washington. Now, what are the "hot-seat" jobs: INR. If you're going to have control over CIA, you've got to have a guy in INR who does not wish to go on to the next administration. Witness Hugh Cumming: with Hugh Cumming in INR the CIA got so it was running the foreign policy of the United States. Part of it was Hugh Cumming's fault. INR is a hot-seat job. All the regional assistant secretaries except Europe: Europe is a nothing. The Secretary of State handles the important European

problems--Soviet Union, Britain, France, Germany--and the rest of it is a nothing. But those four jobs, FE [Far East], Middle East, Africa, Latin America. . . . The Economic job [Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs], well, he ought to be somebody with some political moxie. The former Alexis Johnson job [Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs] is reserved for the Foreign Service and fair enough. It's an internal thing. Administration [Deputy Under Secretary for Administration] can be a Foreign Service officer. But certainly the two under secretaries, four of the fire regional assistant secretaries, INR--all of those ought to be political appointments.

O'BRIEN: Well, getting into the intelligence part of it . . .

HILSMAN: My impression, you see, was that there just simply was nobody available in the Foreign Service to do this kind of job because there wasn't anybody who was willing to step over and be a political figure.

O'BRIEN: Well . . .

HILSMAN: Rusk would probably differ with me.

O'BRIEN: Yes. He probably would argue that the morale of the Foreign Service was so completely decimated that they needed to fill those jobs.

HILSMAN: Well, as it turned out, the jobs that Foreign Service officers really want are ambassadorships. And it turns out that I think Kennedy had a higher percentage of career ambassadors, when it was all over, than [Dwight D.] Eisenhower did. If a young man has got, you know, a stomach for power and wants to do these things, he doesn't stay in the Foreign Service; he gets out and does something else. I know a half a dozen who in their twenties realize the nature of the Foreign Service, and now they're running for Congress or something like this. They've resigned and are up on Capitol Hill working with senators, and they'll come back in high appointive office someday.

O'BRIEN: Well, in the book, of course, one of your major theses is that Rusk really doesn't take charge, even with the rhetoric of it and that he has got the backing of the President. Is this a factor in the growth of things like ISA, for example, which had tremendous growth in the 1960's? What happens in CIA in some of the comparable regional operations in regional bureaus? Is there a growth there as well?

HILSMAN: Well, I don't know that you can ascribe the growth of ISA to Rusk. I think it is probably much more complicated than that. Rusk is a very difficult man to work for. Everybody find it so, not just me. You know, they compare notes and moan. No guidance. You would go to Rusk and say, "Look, this is coming up. It's going to be serious. How do you want me to play it?" He would say, "Well, I want to be Secretary of State for a while. You just do what you think is right."

And so I'd go back and work out what I thought was best. Then there'd be a meeting scheduled with the President. And about an hour before the meeting, I'd schedule a meeting with Rusk. And I'd go up there, and I'd say, "Well, here's what we're going to recommend." We'd talk about it. He'd ask very intelligent questions, probing questions. But then, time after time after time, we would leave for the White House, go down in his elevator, get in his car, and go over, and I still wouldn't know how he was going to vote.

Now, that's policy, you see. When you talk about the growth of ISA, that's something else again. That's McNamara's feeling that in. . . . You know, it's all sorts of problems. It's the fact that a lot of academics have been moved into the military field, into the strategy field. These guys have got ideas; they reach him. He wants to get command of the weapons system, so he uses ISA to put people in all sorts of things.

Second of all, there's a high foreign policy content to it. McNamara's got a thirst for power. He likes to reach out. He tried to reach into foreign policy all the time, and he built up a staff to do that. But at the same time, for a quite different set of reasons, CIA is being cut back in power. Now, one reason is that they've overreached and overextended themselves in the Eisenhower Administration because of the two John F., Allen W. Dulles brothers. So there isn't any place to go but down for CIA, you see. Then, they make a number of mistakes; the Bay of Pigs and so on and so forth. And so we succeed in cutting them back in power.

O'BRIEN: You reorganized INR?

HILSMAN: Right.

O'BRIEN: Just how much do the geographic bureaus use some of the things that you do there in regard to some of the interpretations of policy as well as the policy oriented research? Do you find the geographic bureaus paying a hell of a lot of attention to it?

HILSMAN: Well, when I came in there, INR was seven hundred and fifty people. We were spending a lot of time and energy on these country studies, which were just freshman introductory courses on the atlases of the countries. Forty percent of its budget was paid for by CIA and so on and so forth. Kennedy had indicated that he thought there ought to be some place in the State Department that was doing something like the academic community had been doing for him, and this looked like a good place. That gave me whatever mandate I wanted. He didn't have any great ideas; he just said he thought this would be a damn good--you know, he'd used the academic community when he was Senator, and he thought this was a good place to make that contact. And not only INR, but through INR the academic community. Well, that was the sole extent of his idea. The rest of it I just worked, you know, and used that mandate.

Well, the first thing I did was to get rid of all those stupid functions like biographic intelligence and country surveys and all

that stuff. For two reasons: One, it was just junk; you know, it was donkey work. And the second one was it was paid for by the CIA, and I didn't want CIA to have a 40 percent club--40 percent of my budget--over my head. I wanted to be free of them so I could fight them, you know, and get them out of some things that they shouldn't be doing and so on and so forth. So I got rid of that. And then I told INR I want this stuff policy-oriented. I wanted ideas, interpretations. If it's controversial, I don't give a damn, just as long as it's sound.

Well, the White House staff was crying for ideas and crying for everything else. Kennedy was a reader. And I used my friendship on the White House staff to get things to him that I thought would interest him. I knew what he liked, I knew how he liked it packaged, we packaged the stuff that way. We made it cogent, punchy, sharp, to the point, relevant, you know, and I worked like hell as an editor in trying to get INR to do the thing the way it should be done. Of course, I had Tom Hughes with me, and he knew the President, too. So Tom and I reshaped the way they packaged things.

By the way, when we started, no, the geographic bureaus didn't pay a bit of attention to INR except, oh, some of the Sovietologist stuff. The Sovietologists are all a club, anyway. It doesn't matter where they are, they're a club. The Sovietologist team is a team, it doesn't matter where they're stationed. You know, whether they're in Policy Planning or where they are, they're a team. But except for that, no, INR wasn't paid attention to at all.

But you know, everytime I got one of our papers to the President, I made damn sure that that word got out, and people learned about it in the town, the President was reading this. And then we repackaged it. We came in there, and there was this printed form. "This is an intelligence report. It has nothing to do with policy," was on the thing. I just threw that out. And it was, "Memo. From: Roger Hilsman. To: Rusk. Memo. From: Hilsman. To: Kennedy," you see, or something like that. And then we mimeographed it or xeroxed it in three hundred copies, you see. A reader had the feeling that you were looking over the shoulder of the Secretary of State, that was the reader's feeling. And the answer was that as soon as it got around to the town that Kennedy was reading our memos, everybody in town began to read our memos. Every geographic bureau read our memos, and the Pentagon read them, and the CIA read them, and everybody else read them. But that's just the way Washington works. The point is that we made it relevant. We made our papers relevant, and then we let them get feedback. And then it got to be such that, you know, if you wanted to be in, you had to see what INR was doing.

O'BRIEN: Well, what is your pipeline to the White House now? You mentioned some friends in the White House. Who were the people you'd go through?

HILSMAN: Well, first of all, you know, you're working with the fact that I know the President, I know what he needs, I know his style, I know the town, I know my business, and I know foreign policy. And I'm not a career man, you know.

I want to have influence on policy. I don't want to just, you know, be a timeserver. So I've got a product that is useful, I know Mac Bundy well. I know Walt Rostow. I know Ted Sorensen. I know Arthur Schlesinger. And the ones that I didn't know very well, I quickly learned. You know, they learned about me. [Kenneth P.] Ken O'Donnell and all the rest of them, you see. Ralph Dungan,--I knew Dungan. And I knew what their businesses were, you see, and so on and so forth. And I knew what their problems were.

So when Dungan is doing something in Latin America, for example, and I have a paper that I know will help him, I'd just jot a little note: "Dear Ralph, You might be interested in this," and send it over in the U.S. mail. Well, what's happening is that Dungan is saying, "Oh boy, great. Mr. President, you know what I've been telling you about that thing down there? Now, this supports what I've been trying to say. And here is some evidence." Dungan, he's smart, too, he's not any dope. So when the President reads it, Dungan calls me up and says, "You might be interested to know and your fellow who wrote that paper might be interested to know that the President thought it was great." Now, you know, you get that back to the guy who wrote it, and, boy, you talk about morale, their morale just went sky-high. I mean, "The President of the United States is reading things I wrote and taking the advice!"

O'BRIEN: Well, now what happens when Rusk discovered a lot of this bootleg material going over there? Does he attempt to channel it through the executive secretariat?

HILSMAN: It's not bootleg. Basically, originally, this is a memo to Rusk. And it's only a copy of a memo to Rusk that I'm sending to the White House. Rusk never once attempted or said anything or indicated in any way that he wasn't happy with this arrangement.

And by the way, you know, it isn't very long until Mac Bundy was calling you and saying, "The President would like you to do a study of, to write an analysis of," et cetera, et cetera. And then, of course, I'd let Rusk know that Mac at the White House called, and wants me to do this study or that study. And it isn't long until the President. . . . For example, I tell the story of that Congo thing. But this is Rusk and [George W.] Ball meeting in a rump session because they're unhappy about the way the Congo was going. And it was a meeting without Adlai Stevenson and Harlan Cleveland, et cetera, because they think it's--and without [G. Mennen] Soapy Williams--because they think it's, going badly. And it's the President who says to Rusk and Ball, "Get Hilsman and his group to do it." So we become an alternative Policy Planning Staff.

Now, the only people who were unhappy about this are the Pentagon and the CIA. They want exclusive rights of any piece of paper that has any strategic or military interpretation to be theirs. And the CIA wants anything that smacks at all of intelligence interpretation to be theirs. They complained a little bit one day to me at a USIB [United States Intelligence Board] meeting, And so I just very candidly said, "For Christ's sake, who do you think you are kidding? You guys are putting

foreign policy papers into the White House all the time, and if you want documentation, I'll call up Mac Bundy and get it for you. The Pentagon is putting in papers that deal with foreign policy issues exclusively to the White House all the time. You're not kidding me one iota. But I'm willing to play totally fair with you guys if you'll play fair with me. I will give you a copy of every paper I write that goes to the White House, and I want the same treatment. In other words, I don't care what field you try to make your own, because they all interlock anyway. But let's play fair with each other. I will undertake to make sure that you know and see a copy of everything that I send the President. And I would like the same courtesy."

I played honest with them. In [John A.] McClone's day they didn't play honest with me in that they did get out sort of a private thing for the President, which they tried like hell to keep anybody from seeing who wasn't too important.

O'BRIEN: This was the morning briefing, wasn't it?

HILSMAN: Yeah. It's such low level stuff, anyway, it didn't matter very much. I managed to get to see it, and it was hardly worth it.

O'BRIEN: But you had your own briefing paper, too, that you sent over to the President.

HILSMAN: No, not a regular. . . . What we did was we had a number of forms and things. One of the things that I had the guys do was similiar to this. It was what we called an Intelligence Note. But I just said that I wanted a one page or a page and a half, no more, note within six hours of any event. Anything that happens in the world, I want an INR interpretation of three hundred words or less within six hours on the street. Now, my reason for this was that if it had a foreign policy bent to it, you see, he who gets the first interpretation out commands the field. So I wanted to do this. And that I distributed to everybody. I never tried to do keep it exclusive. I distributed it all over.

O'BRIEN: You know, you were mentioning--not only in this conversation, but in the book--you mentioned a number of CIA operations were embarrassing to the United States. You specified the attempt to bribe the Singapore intelligence people as well as the Bay of Pigs. I suppose one of the others would be the Free Khmer thing in Cambodia.

HILSMAN: I don't remember this.

O'BRIEN: The Free Khmer thing.

HILSMAN: Well, that had happened in the Eisenhower Administration. I never could get--I think the extent of this was that they gave these people a radio in exchange for information. There wasn't much more to it than that.

O'BRIEN: Well, what other things? You know, realizing that this has a type of legal, binding agreement, of course, for security reasons and everything, what else was involved? What other things at that point do you feel was embarrassing to the United States?

HILSMAN: Oh, there're lots of crazy little things like, oh, someone like [John K.] Galbraith being outraged that they might try to subvert some clerks in the foreign office. You know, stupid business. What the hell; what are you going to find in the Indian foreign offices worth the embarrassment? Oh, just odd things like the sugar ship down in Latin America, contaminating the sugar, which we succeeded in saving. That is, we were able to get the sugar confiscated that they'd contaminated and stop it, you know. But, you know this.

O'BRIEN: No, I don't. I don't know that.

HILSMAN: Well, I've forgotten the details. I think you'll find a reasonably accurate account in [Thomas B.] Ross and [David] Wise [The Invisible Government]. But it was a shipment of Cuban sugar that was going to the Soviet Union. And the CIA--late in the Eisenhower Administration, I believe--contaminated some sacks of it with stuff that would make you nauseated. And what we did was we succeeded in getting that ship impounded in an intermediate port and getting the contaminated sacks out,--bought it up. It cost us money, but we succeeded in preventing them from doing what they set out to do. You know, all sorts of little, stupid things like this.

Some of them were fairly knotty in that they were difficult to unwind. The student business, for example. This had been done in the [Joseph R.] McCarthy period when the State Department didn't have any money. The Youth organizations were being subsidized, and it seemed only. . . . You know, our students couldn't go to the meetings without some sort of help. The State Department should have supplied the money, but Congress wouldn't give it to them. So the CIA was pushed into it. Well, once you've started, it's awfully hard to crank it down. So we tried to take a number of steps to crank things like this down. But it had to be done slowly.

The Singapore thing was typical, where they did this without any consultation with the State Department at all. So I was fighting a battle to try to develop principles so that they couldn't do anything that would be potentially embarrassing without getting advance permission.

O'BRIEN: Well, what comes to mind, as late as the 1960's, at least in the Kennedy Administration, they were supporting--I can't remember the Polish general's name--but were supporting a group of expatriate Poles in France. Did you attempt to wind that down at all?

HILSMAN: Well, I don't recall the specific thing. But there were these things all over the world, you know. Were we in the height of the Cold War, maybe it would have made some sense. For example, one of the Japanese parties was getting some money in the Cold War. One of the

French parties was getting some money in the Cold War. One of the Italian parties was getting some money in the Cold War. It had started when they had come to us, come to the Americans, at a time in a crucial election, let's say, and pointed to the fact that the communists were just putting up posters and, you know, had radio time, and they were spending a great deal of money, which obviously was coming from the Soviet Union. And then, could we help, you know, and the CIA helped. But then, once started, it's very hard to stop.

O'BRIEN: True.

HILSMAN: The recipient feels aggrieved, and he leaks it, you know, if you stop it. Yes, we tried to crank these down all over the world and with success in every case, but some more than others. Sometimes we had to settle for half a loaf

O'BRIEN: Well, you mentioned, too, in the book something that's very difficult to get any information on at all, and that is this

HILSMAN: Right.

O'BRIEN: How deeply can you go into that and sort of explain the framework of it and the way that it worked?

HILSMAN: Well, it's just liaison, that's all, it's simple liaison. They're all liaison officers.

O'BRIEN: And vice versa?

HILSMAN:

O'BRIEN: Is there a domestic--are there domestic ramifications of this? For example, does the United States use, let's say, the MI-5 people instead of the 6 people for domestic intelligence, let's say, on Americans in Britain and vice versa? Is there this kind of an exchange?

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HILSMAN: I don't know. I would think that in the case of the [Julius and Ethel] Rosenbergs or something like that, yes, very much so.

O'BRIEN: Okay. [Interruption]

You had some very definite views on the size of intelligence organizations and the CIA abroad interfering with the State Department as well. When you come in in 1961, are there enough qualified people, can you find enough qualified people, and are there enough qualified people to staff all the intelligence agencies that are there? I mean very soon DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] springs up. You've got NSA, you've got CIA. Are there enough qualified people to, you know, staff the jobs for the areas, as estimators, all these kinds of things?

HILSMAN: I don't know. I suppose the best way to answer that is. . . .
Actually, you know, DIA doesn't get into foreign policy very much.

They pretty well stick to the military side of the question. They don't really get too deeply into foreign policy. So they're not really in the market for this sort of person. I had the impression that CIA was well staffed with able people--very able people.

I had trouble getting. . . . I had budgetary trouble, you know, getting enough money and slots and so on and so forth. And I, crazily enough, had a very hard time getting somebody whom I thought was really competent to head up the Latin America thing. But I was looking for a real hotshot, you know. I got one in Africa; I got [Robert C.] Bob Good, who, you know, was just the kind of guy I wanted. He had a PhD in international politics, a deep knowledge of Africa, a free man, politically active, sharp, Kennedy-type, you know, and willing to stick his neck out, willing to write the kind of thing we wanted. I just could forget about Africa because I had this guy. And anytime I needed anything on Africa, why, he did it. And anytime he needed my political muscle, you know, he could count on me. So we worked as a team.

Then for Far East I got Allen Whiting, the same kind. He was one of the three or four top guys in the country on China. Sharp, could get a job anywhere, anytime in this field. When he finally left the State Department, he must have had offers from fifteen universities. So the Far East, was settled. Europe, not too important, but I got myself a good Foreign Service officer to take care of that one. In the Middle East, I finally got a guy. But Latin America, I finally got John Plank. Then I left to go to Far East, so I never knew how he worked out. But Latin America is just a shortage. But hell, Columbia [University] has been in the market for a Latin American political scientist of the same type for about five years, and they can't locate one that they're happy with.

O'BRIEN: So that's basically just a problem with Latin America, isn't it? There are very few people around. . . .

HILSMAN: Take China. Doak Barnett has left to go to Brookings. [Institution], full-time research with all sorts of perks [perquisites]. And you know, I find that there are four or

five--I'm on the search committee for his replacement--guys like Allen Whiting, Doak Barnett, a few like this, three or four, and then there's a big gap. Then there're a lot of young ones coming up, just getting their PhD's, just out.

O'BRIEN: Well, in the book you mentioned the [United States] Foreign Intelligence Board. You really don't go into much of a discussion as to how it functions . . .

HILSMAN: The United States Intelligence Board?

O'BRIEN: . . . or any of the problems that you faced up here. What are some of the major problems that come up? Are they any major divisions between, let's say . . .

HILSMAN: In the USIB?

O'BRIEN: Yes. Dulles, McCone, and people like yourself--and later DIA, when it comes on, and NSA?

HILSMAN: Well, there are the National Intelligence Estimates, that's really the major business of USIB. The other major function of USIB is an allocation and establishment of priorities. But all of the covert activities of CIA, which were giving us most trouble, are not USIB matters. They don't come before USIB; they come before the special group. They go up the other channel.

And before my day, Allen Dulles had very cleverly arranged matters so that my predecessor was not even aware; he had no authority over matters going to the special group. It was handled by the Under Secretary of State and a special group of staff men who worked for him. One of the battles I fought was to get that group under me, rather than under the Under Secretary. And I succeeded, that group was transferred to me. So therefore, the staff work for special group covert activities came through me to the Under Secretary, rather than bypassing me, which had happened in Cumming's day. So I then acquired authority over that and was able to influence and cut down CIA after having made that power fight. But USIB had no jurisdiction over those matters.

Now, in terms of allocation of priorities, research priorities, our intelligence priorities there are relatively few things. Sometimes the--oh, in the early days, satellites, for example. There was some battles over whether the next shot would be directed toward Soviet missiles or something like that, with the different services competing for different priorities. The Navy was real gungho to get a mapping. The world map, the shape of the earth, was off a few miles or something like that. It was terribly important for submarines, very important. So there's a few things like that which are only substantive battles and end up in a compromise.

The National Intelligence Estimates, of course, are where the real frays take place. And this is very much along service lines. For example, the annual missile--or the semi-annual missile estimate--was always

a battle and always broke predictably with the Air Force saying the Soviets have got the maximum that anybody could possibly think that they could have. The Navy was saying they've got the absolute minimum, the Army was saying they don't have any, the Air Force was saying they've got a lot; and the CIA is somewhere in the middle. And the State Department was somewhere in the middle.

O'BRIEN: When do you first start getting really active in sort of satellite intelligence and things like this?

HILSMAN: Well, I don't know that I am free to talk about this. I'll tell you that--let's say that you could figure it out just by looking, you know, at the headlines. You know, if you can orbit a man, you can orbit a camera; and if you can orbit a man and recover a man, you can orbit a camera and recover a camera. In fact, you'd probably do it a little sooner.

But basically,--I don't think it's not classified--let's take the missile gap. It's now in the public press, everything I'm going to say. McNamara, some people think, had some brilliant insight in the early spring of '61 that the missile gap wasn't so. Actually he discovered what was perfectly obvious; that is, that the Air Force said there are three hundred and the Navy said there were ten Soviet missiles in the spring of '61. And he said, "Why, at least get closer together than that so we can make some plans." That's all he said. He had no insight or evidence.

In June of '61, that's the way it was. With the evidence we had, reasonable men, without being too absurd, could argue that the Soviets had as few as ten or as many as three hundred. And the evidence was, you know. . . . Nobody could prove that you were wrong. Everybody was agreed that it was within those figures somewhere, you see, but nobody knew anymore than that.

Now, the reason for this is that the Soviets went for broke. They skipped the Titan and Atlas stage, and they went from, essentially, intermediate missiles to a huge behemoth. You see, now, they wanted that behemoth to double in brass. It was the vehicle that gave them the capacity to orbit these great weights. They could put two men in space and all that long before we could. They also thought it was going to be their working ICBM. [Intercontinental Ballistic Missile].

They started to deploy this missile around Plesetsk, in the North, and it just was too big. It could be fired from a Cape Kennedy type base but not as a workable ICBM in a silo off in Plesetsk.

The trouble is Plesetsk is cloud covered about three hundred and sixty-five days or three hundred and sixty-four days a year. It's just that part of the world up near the Arctic Circle. So the U-2's before May 1st, '60 were not able to get very much. They were able to get enough to know that the Soviets had begun deployment, but not enough to pick up the fact that it failed, that it wasn't workable. So the U-2, before May 1st, 1960, picks up that they're deployed, and if you just take a straight line projection and you get three hundred missiles. What we didn't know was that there'd been a mistake; that it was too big.

Well, from the public press you know that the June 1961 NIE still has that range, ten to three hundred, missiles, with different services taking different positions. In September, suddenly, the September estimate says no. They've got about a hundred, maybe less. So there is no missile gap. Well, that discovery was made in late summer of '61, you see.

Now, in October or early November--I've forgotten which--we go public on this by Roswell Gilpatric's speech. When was that, October?

O'BRIEN: Right, it was October, I believe, '61, in Hot Springs.

HILSMAN: Yes. Well, now, you know, the Soviets are perfectly capable of figuring out what the intelligence breakthrough was. You know, it doesn't take much: it was two plus two equals four. It was obviously satellites.

O'BRIEN: So they knew it? Or obviously. . . .

HILSMAN: Well, they had to know it. By this time they had. . . . They may not have known that we knew it, you see, and that was the important thing about the Roswell Gilpatric speech. We deliberately said to the Soviets, "Look, we know. There ain't no missile gap."

O'BRIEN: Well, when Dulles goes, and McCone comes in, in the book you mentioned that you and Ball had some real objections to McCone's letter of instructions to himself and that Rusk didn't fight the battle.

HILSMAN: Well, we fought it for him to a certain extent.

O'BRIEN: To my knowledge, that letter of instructions has never really been published. What was McCone at this point saying?

HILSMAN: Well, you see, everybody thought McCone was going to be a bad guy. And basically he turned out to be a pretty good guy; that is, he was on the wrong side of some issues, but he never. . . . You know, here is a guy who has successfully sunk the test ban treaty in the Eisenhower Administration, who really, against his own President, Eisenhower, as AEC [Atomic Energy Commission] Commissioner, had coordinated with Scoop Jackson, a Democrat, and had sunk a number of things that Eisenhower wanted to do. A real alley fighter, you know. A very rich man, a very militant, anti-communist, Republican, you know. A shipbuilder and all the rest of it. So we thought, everybody thought on both Capitol Hill and in the administration, we were in for trouble.

I was furious at Rusk for not having consulted me when the President consulted him about the appointment. Ball was furious at Rusk for the same reason: that Rusk had been consulted by the President but had not shared this, which is very typical of Rusk. But I was furious at him because we had been fighting to save him and save the Department from the CIA, and here he was not even--you know, no loyalty downwards, again. We were going

on the line for him every day, and he doesn't even give us the courtesy of consulting us. So we were furious at Rusk.

Then this letter comes along, and it seemed to confirm our worst fears because there was language in that letter that was giving McCone authority over almost everything. So we went to Rusk, and Rusk weasled and waffled and so on and so forth and so on. It sort of made us look like the villains rather than. . . . But anyway, we did get the language toned down somewhat.

And then it became--the only thing is, you see, we were just trying to head off trouble, Ball and I were. But then it turns out that McCone is not pressing as hard as we thought. It turns out, also, that I saved McCone a lot of trouble a couple of times. He had some misconceptions, and I argued him out of them. He later realized that I had made him strengthen his relationship with his own agency.

At a USIB meeting, one time, he was going to abandon the policy of the text being his, and let the text be CIA, and he, as Director, would take a footnote. I said, "This is a terrible mistake. You're the Director of intelligence, and the text ought to be yours," which I, you know, thought was right. Of course, it would have been advantageous to me if we would have done what he said, but I thought it was wrong and a bad precedent. And he was grateful for this.

So we worked out a very good relationship, McCone and I. And it turned out that he wasn't making the great bid for domination as we thought. He did a few things. The Cuban missile crisis he tried to manipulate to his advantage.

O'BRIEN: Well, does McCone ever really get control of the Agency, or is the Agency. . . .

HILSMAN: I don't know the answer to that.

O'BRIEN: Do you have any insights into it at all?

HILSMAN: I would say he was pretty much in control, yes.

O'BRIEN: At that point, has there developed a kind of bureaucratic momentum as the State Department. . . .

HILSMAN: Oh, sure, but I think he got control over the things that he was interested in and competent in. He wasn't very. . . . I think the reason that our fears didn't materialize on the substantive side--this is the National Intelligence Estimates and so on and so forth, which Dulles was into up to his ears, and Dulles was. . . . You see, Dulles was using the NIE's as policy statements, then using his chiefs of mission to implement it, that is his contacts with foreign chiefs of state to implement it. And I think the reason McCone didn't use this position in that way was because he was neither interested nor very competent in the substance of foreign policy. So therefore, he didn't make the effort. He didn't have the knowledge and didn't make the effort.

O'BRIEN: Whereas Dulles really was a very competent guy?

HILSMAN: Sure. Allen Dulles was de facto Secretary of State.

O'BRIEN: Well, you mentioned you were involved in the special group, doing the staff work for this special group. Now, we're talking about the special group which oversees all activities.

HILSMAN: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever get involved in the special group CI [Counterinsurgency] or in the . . .

HILSMAN: Yes, it's basically the same thing, it's the same people.

O'BRIEN: Subcommittees, though, as I understand it, of certain groups, weren't they?

HILSMAN: Well, basically it's the same people. It's Bundy and [Maxwell D.] Taylor and the Director of CIA and the Under Secretary of State and [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy, basically--and the Deputy Secretary of Defense.

O'BRIEN: What about Bobby Kennedy? When do you really first come across him and become acquainted with Bobby Kennedy?

HILSMAN: Well, I can't remember. I can't remember the first time. I think in the campaign, you know, in '59 and '60, I think we know each other, but there's no direct business. You know, there's nothing direct. It's peripheral in the sense that I'm working with some of JFK's staff on a speech and Bobby's around, you know. But I don't have any direct business with him. So as a consequence, I just know him, that's all, but nothing intimate, and nothing where we're really doing anything more than nodding to each other, saying hello.

When he gets to be Attorney General and after the Bay of Pigs, when he decides that he's not going to let anyone do his brother in, so he's going to get involved in this stuff, then I begin to see him fairly regularly. He's reading our stuff, too. He invites me to lunch a couple of times, once just the two of us--and always with something substantive in mind, Vietnam or something else--and once with his staff, where he wanted me to talk to his staff about some problems of foreign policy that he thought they ought to know about. That's all, you know. . . . I suppose, really, that's all from. . . . I mean, I really began to have influence in the White House after the Bay of Pigs, you know. And I think they have a very strong feeling that that mistake wouldn't have been made if INR had been involved, you know, and so on.

HILSMAN: So by January of '62 or early spring, '62, we're fairly close, you know. But then I got fed up with Rusk and et cetera, et cetera, and Yale had offered me this beautiful--well, Arnold Wolfers' chair, and I finally said the hell with it. Now, in fact, things had been changing under my feet, and I didn't yet realize it. That is, the Thanksgiving Day Massacre occurs, and this is really going to mean that from there on out I find myself working with the President, that the President's my boss, not Rusk. I don't have to go through Rusk anymore. But I don't know this yet. I don't know that that's the meaning of the Thanksgiving Day Massacre yet.

So I resigned to take the Yale job. And I decided to do this sometime in December, I guess, of '61. And I go tell McCone, go tell Rusk. And interestingly enough, I think it was McCone who screamed to the President and said, "Look, you can't lose him." Maybe not, maybe MacBundy. But I know McCone made a pitch to the President. But who brought it to the attention of the President first, I don't know, maybe it was Mac.

Then the President sends for me after this episode, and he explains to me that he's unhappy with Rusk, but there isn't much he can do about it except to do what he's doing, that is, to act as his own Secretary of State, and that's what he's going to do; and he needs me, and would I stay. So I said sure--after I waited forty-eight hours. I didn't want to make it that easy for him. But anyway, he then sent me to Vietnam on a special mission.

O'BRIEN: This was in December or . . .

HILSMAN: December. Well, I leave in January, you see, because the meeting with the President is January 12th, as I recall. And anyway, I leave sometime after he asked me to go to Vietnam. And we've done a lot of work on guerrilla warfare. I go out there, and I discover R.K.G. Thompson. I discover that he's thought along parallel lines, and that by taking his ideas and our ideas and putting them together, I think we've got something. So I come back and the President--I give this briefing to the President. And he sends me all over Washington giving the same thing to everybody, and one of them was Bobby.

So I go out to Hickory Hill, and Bobby and I spend about two or three hours. And when I got through, he put his arm around me, you know, and he said, "Great stuff." He says, "Terrific." And from that time on, I think, we both regarded each other as--there was a personal intimacy here that developed after that.

O'BRIEN: Well, now this is something that . . .

HILSMAN: Before that I always thought of Bobby as sort of one of the enemy, you know. He was a guy we had to watch. But after that--and I think maybe he changed. He had changed, too.

O'BRIEN: Now, this is something that bothered me a little bit. Okay, Bobby Kennedy talked to you about counterinsurgency and R.K.G. Thompson, strategic hamlets and this sort of warfare, which might be called political warfare. And on the other hand, he's a great admirer of Max Taylor, who . . .

HILSMAN: This bothered a lot of people.

O'BRIEN: . . . is not, in my way of thinking, a guy who thinks in terms of political warfare. He is more of the conventional army type guy. How can you explain that?

HILSMAN: Well, Averell Harriman has also addressed himself to this question. And Averell Harriman says that Bobby may. . . .

BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I

HILSMAN: During the first six months of the Kennedy Administration I felt Bobby Kennedy was a guy we had to maneuver around. And then, after the Bay of Pigs, he began to change. By the episode I told you of, early '62, from the hawk position, he'd arrived at the same point I had, you see; that is, you couldn't deal with Vietnam by military measures. You had to deal with it politically. His capacity for growth was very great indeed.

And just to go on with Bobby, during the rest of the Kennedy Administration, he grew, and he grew, and he grew. And then, to my amazement, we both end up in New York, you know. And I'm not too concerned with domestic problems. I'm in foreign policy. I'm generally sympathetic with civil rights and all this, but I'm not really in it very much. But after living in New York for a year or so my students began to reach me about, you know, the real problems of the ghettos and the blacks, that. . . . And you know, I see Bobby, and I discover he's learning faster than I am. He sought out Black panthers and had great, long, four-hour conversations, some of them quite violent confrontations. But he's learning. It's painful, but he's learning. And you know, by the time this guy is killed, I really had begun to think that if he's going to be President, he's going to be a bigger one and a better one than Jack was.

O'BRIEN: He had the capacity . . .

HILSMAN: For growth.

O'BRIEN: . . . for listening to people, didn't he?

HILSMAN: Yea. Oh, he doesn't just listen, he argues and fights. He was a much more intense person than Jack was. There was more anguish here. There was more difficulty and tension.

O'BRIEN: Well, one of the basic problems, then, in these early stages, is the understanding of guerrilla warfare and what's going on in places like Vietnam and Laos.

HILSMAN: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Do you think Bobby Kennedy has a grasp of it in 1961?

HILSMAN: I don't think anybody had a grasp of it in 1961-62. I think we begin to understand in '62 and. . . Well, let's take Jack. Jack Kennedy had three stages in his policy towards Southeast Asia. The one thing that really impressed him with Eisenhower, that session with Eisenhower, was that Eisenhower said, "You're probably going to have to send troops to Southeast Asia. And if you do, I will stand beside you as you make the announcement on TV cameras." Now, this was very impressive to Jack Kennedy. And for the first three or four months he was very hawkish, indeed, on Laos. It was Laos, that was the issue as far as Southeast Asia goes. And you remember the famous TV conference with the three maps.

Well, the Bay of Pigs--this is where [James B.] Scotty Reston was so wrong. Reston says that a result of the Bay of Pigs Kennedy sent advisers to Vietnam to show his manhood. That's nonsense.

As a result of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy decided to reject the recommendation of sending troops. He did send advisers, for two reasons: one, as a token to keep the military quiet; and the other one was to carry out the Thompson-Hilsman counterinsurgency ideas. phase one is that up to the Bay of Pigs he's a hawk.

Phase two of Jack Kennedy's policy towards Vietnam is, "All right, let's give counterinsurgency a try." Now, counterinsurgency means to him don't use military measures. Don't chase the Viet Cong, you see. And don't send American troops, because Americans with white faces will--well, white and black American faces will. They'll drive the peasants into the arms of the communists. What counterinsurgency means is: Persuade the Vietnamese that they must do it, "it's their war" (quote, unquote); protect the peasants; win the peasants, through land reform, et cetera; arm the peasants; don't chase Viet Cong; don't use military measures.

All right, from Bay of Pigs. . . . Well, from the fall of '61 up to my visit these ideas began to germinate. From the time I come back, our policy is to persuade [Ngo Dinh] Diem on counterinsurgency. That's early spring '62 until the beginnings of the Buddhist's crisis. Now, what happens then is that we finally persuade Diem to adopt the R.K.G. Thompson-Hilsman counterinsurgency ideas.

O'BRIEN: And [Ngo Dinh] Nhu.

HILSMAN: Now, wait a minute. We persuade him to sign on, and he signs the piece of paper in early '62. In early '63, I go on another visit. [Michael V.] Mike Forrestal and I are sent out there in January of '63. And we discover--well, I don't know that we discovered it--we confirmed that it's a fraud, a sham. The American military are still chasing Viet Cong and advising the Vietnamese to chase Viet Cong. They're not adopting the program the President has recommended, our own military are not. Diem has turned the strategic hamlet program over to Nhu, who's taken the title,

the name of it, and nothing else. And in fact, what Diem signed, what we persuaded him to, had not been adopted. It has not been implemented, and it is a fraud.

Then comes the Buddhist crisis, right on the heels of our return. We returned--again, it was January of '63. We returned in January and said it's a fraud, it's not working, it's a failure. The American military are not carrying out your instructions. The ambassador is not. He doesn't know what he's doing. In fact, we recommend a change in ambassadors. Brother Nhu has captured the program. It's a fraud, it's a sham, it's not working. Then comes the Buddhist crisis right on the heels of it. Then JFK makes me Assistant Secretary when the Buddhist crisis arrives.

And sometime in mid-spring '63, Kennedy goes into phase three, which is, "The Vietnamese can't do it; they haven't got the capacity. They probably won't succeed." Then what do we do? And then he starts saying to me over and over again, "Remember Laos." And privately and publicly. . . . Well, he says things to me, at least, that are, in effect, saying, keep it down, no more advisers, we're going downhill. We've reached the peak. From now on, we're going to cut the advisers back. If the Vietnamese win it, okay, great. But if they don't, we're going to go to Geneva and do what we did with Laos. So he's going in the exact opposite direction that [Lyndon B.] Johnson went, you see. And he's convinced--well, he's not convinced, but he's very skeptical that the Vietnamese are going to be able to make it. So he's now beginning to think in terms of Laos '62, you see. And when he dies, there's no question that when the crisis came in late '64, early '65, he would have gone to Geneva.

O'BRIEN: So Kenny O'Donnell is right on it?

HILSMAN: Oh, absolutely. Did you see my letter to the [New York] Times.

O'BRIEN: I haven't, no.

HILSMAN: Oh, absolutely right.

O'BRIEN: Now, this is not an attempt to put pressure on Diem in October 1963 to . . .

HILSMAN: No, he's decided that it's. . . . Now, let me finish up with Bobby. Now, Bobby had said publicly--this is where we were all wrong, every one of us, myself included. Bobby has said publicly that some of our assumptions in the early sixties about Vietnam were just wrong. Now what he meant by that--we've talked about it many times--what he meant by that was we were wrong in that we thought it would be possible to have social and political reform in Vietnam more easily than in fact it turned out to be. In other words, our three pronged policy is to protect the people; don't chase Viet Cong, just use your troops to protect the people. Then, behind that screen, you have social and political reform, land reform--and very deep reform--education, everything. And then

the sea of the people in which Mao [Tse-tung] says the guerrillas swim like fish will have dried up. And if necessary, you can then arm the people, but it probably won't be necessary.

Now, the point is that we were all grossly misinformed about the convolutions, the thickness, the obstacles, that Vietnamese culture represents. I think to accomplish point two was just a much, more difficult task that we realized in recommending it. A highly convoluted society.

O'BRIEN: Let's go back to a guy like [Edward G.] Lansdale. What do you see of Lansdale in this period? Do you have any contact with him at all?

HILSMAN: Yes, we go in there thinking that Lansdale has got the picture because he'd been so helpful with. . . . You see, one of the things is that everytime you look at one of these things that were successful, like against the Hukbalahaps. . . . Or in Malaya, the British did what we did in Vietnam for two years, and they were worse off than they started. Then they started, essentially, the strategic hamlet program, and then they began to make it.

And you know, [Ramon] Magsaysay, his lawyer program, for example. Later, Magsaysay said that the thing that was most successful was simply the lawyers. He'd made a big publicity binge, that all you've got to do is walk into any post office in any village in the Philippines and send a collect telegram to me, Magsaysay, and within twenty-four hours I will have a team of lawyers there to take care of your grievance. And as Magsaysay says, if they'd really challenged him on it, he didn't have that many lawyers. But a few people did do this, and he went down there--you know, peasants who had land problems--he got the lawyers to them within twenty-four hours. And the word got around, and they began to believe him. He wasn't able to accomplish the social reforms, but they believed that he would. And that defeated the Hukbalahaps. He said that alone defeated the Huks.

Well, because Lansdale had been associated with that, we figured that he was with it, you see. So we recommended him for jobs. I even put his name on a list for ambassadors once. The Pentagon continuously vetoed this. The other generals just didn't like this guy. They thought of him as. . . . Their attitude towards him is the way admirals think of [Hymen] Rickover, an eight ball, an odd ball. Later, I came to feel that he didn't really understand the problems the way I had thought he had. He's a guy who takes great delight in manipulating personalities. He's very much of a CIA type. But he had no influence.

O'BRIEN: None whatsoever?

HILSMAN: None of any great significance. Maybe that original memo that he had prepared in the Eisenhower Administration might have influenced Kennedy in the beginning, but he had none after that.

O'BRIEN: Well, on the other hand, the military people you have there

apparently have no understanding at all . . .

HILSMAN: None.

O'BRIEN: Well, how does the President . . . The President, apparently . . . You're explaining this to me, that they don't have an understanding of what's going on, that they're not carrying on the strategic hamlet program. What's his reaction to the military? Is he willing to fight the battle with the Pentagon, to change people, to institute policies that might be worth . . .

HILSMAN: Well, he probably had a very realistic view of this, that his ability to manipulate the military is limited. I remember when the question of the replacement of [Paul D.] Harkins' predecessor--I've forgotten who he was now.

O'BRIEN: [Lionel C.] McGarr, wasn't it?

HILSMAN: McGarr, yes. And Kennedy said to Mike Forrestal and me one day, "Okay, don't try to get me in the position where I have to appoint some young colonel to command the whole thing, you know, reach down thirty ranks below the top." He said, "I can't do it. The military would crucify me." And we had names of guys who had guerrilla warfare experience, like [William P.] Yarborough, and William R. Peers. And he said, "I can't do it, I just can't do it. So don't even try. Don't force me. Don't try to push me." And here, again, this is probably the biggest mistake Kennedy made about Vietnam. This was the period when Max Taylor was having influence, and Harkins was Max Taylor's nominee. And it was before any of us realized that. . . . You know, we never did finish the Max Taylor point.

O'BRIEN: I want to come back to that.

HILSMAN: We got off that. But the three points I was going to make was: (a) he was a charming guy, and you can like a guy without liking his ideas; (b) they changed, the Kennedys changed, you see, and Bobby changed especially; (c) you know, you can get to a position with a fellow where you don't believe what he says about Vietnam, but he's still got something to say about massive retaliation versus flexible response that's useful, you see. In other words, you can begin to discriminate in your advice. And of course, Jack Kennedy just--he thought Walt Rostow was laughable on Asia and Vietnam. He called him the "Air Marshal" behind his back because he was always advocating bombing. But Jack Kennedy would never pay any attention to anything Walt Rostow said on Asia. But Walt Rostow had some things to say about Europe and economics that Kennedy should have listened to.

O'BRIEN: Yeah.

HILSMAN: So you can discriminate is what I mean. I think in the end Bobby came to discriminate with Max. He thought he was a charming guy and his views on Vietnam were for the birds, but he had some interesting things to say about other matters.

O'BRIEN: Well, Taylor is a little bit of an alley fighter, too, isn't he?

HILSMAN: I think he's a smoothie. You know, he's a real smooth character.

O'BRIEN: Yeah. But yet, you know, he has objections against people like Thompson and Lansdale, doesn't he? Did he ever reflect this to you?

HILSMAN: Oh, I think, yeah, but. . . . Well, he's what I call a smoothie.

O'BRIEN: Well, going back to the Taylor-Rostow report, in the language of that somewhere is a. . . . Do you recall at least the feeling that Vietnam--this is 1961, the end of 1961--that things in Vietnam are going badly and the chances are against saving South Vietnam without the massive intervention of U.S. troops?

HILSMAN: Oh, yeah, there was a recommendation for troops, combat troops, American combat forces.

O'BRIEN: How much? How many?

HILSMAN: It started with ten thousand, and it would go up. And that was a recommendation. . . . And that's what guys like Reston just missed completely, is that Kennedy rejected the Taylor-Rostow recommendation. He gave them a few advisers, but there were some already.

O'BRIEN: Is there a relationship, at that point, in the thinking of people on Vietnam with Laos; somehow that intervention of troops in Laos; somehow that intervention of troops in Laos might--or intervention of troops in Vietnam at that point might effect the political settlement of Laos?

HILSMAN: Oh, yeah. Certainly guys like Harriman and myself and Jack Kennedy.

O'BRIEN: This is where the objection comes from?

HILSMAN: Part of it, part of it. And part of it is the nature of the war, the struggle. It's a political struggle, not a military struggle. That it's a nationalistic struggle. That it's a struggle for the right to define what Vietnam shall be like. That it's not a simple communist aggression; it's much more complicated than that. And the use of Americans will insure the victory to the other side.

O'BRIEN: Well, at what point do you realize that the political settlement of Laos in Geneva. . . . Well, this whole business of the use of Laos in terms of infiltration into South Vietnam, when do you

really become aware of that?

HILSMAN: Oh, I would say that we were not only aware of it all the time, immediately, but none of us ever really believed that that clause in the Geneva Agreement of '62 was of any use at all except as a propaganda point.

O'BRIEN: I see.

HILSMAN: Because we knew that the Soviets had forced it down the North Vietnamese's throats. And we knew that as the North Vietnamese--Harriman teased them in Paris later. He said, "How can we trust you, you violated that." They said, "That was forced upon us by the Soviets, and if we agree to something ourselves and are not forced to it, we will abide by it. We won't abide by something that the Soviets forced down our throats." Nobody believed that they would not use Laos. It's just that the only reason for putting the clause in was just simply as propaganda.

O'BRIEN: Well, the question comes up very soon--as, I understand afterwards, immediately--in terms of interdicting those things, and by use of covert methods as well as overt methods . . .

HILSMAN: Well, basically . . .

O'BRIEN: When do they start? When do the covert methods of interdiction begin in Laos? Do they begin in the Kennedy Administration in '63?

HILSMAN: As far as any bombings of the trails go, of any type, Harriman stated this--and I totally agreed with it and implemented it. Harriman said, "We are going to be absolutely pure, absolutely pure. We're going to let them take all the onus. We're going to be absolutely clean. And the reason we're going to be clean is because when the break comes between the three factions, we want it to come not between the neutralists and the right, as it happened before, so that the neutralists and the communists are lined up against the right, but between the neutralists and the other side. We want to make the communists wreck themselves, hang themselves, give them rope." So we were absolutely pure, absolutely pure.

The only thing I permitted, as Assistant Secretary, to happen over Laos, until the day I left office in March of '64, was high level reconnaissance, that is, the U-2. The only thing I permitted was the U-2. Bu. I never permitted even low level reconnaissance, much less any bombing.

O'BRIEN: How about the use of Montagnards to, you know, interdict some of the supply lines like . . .

HILSMAN: They're not capable of interdicting supply lines, in the first place. You know, they're not capable of it. And while I was Assistant Secretary--Where is the map?--there were. . . . And you know, this was perfectly legitimate. There was nothing subterraneous

about it, there was nothing illegal or covert about it. [Interruption]

Now, my policy was to try to relocate and to try to get them to move to another part of Laos. Here, mainly. You see, I used to call this the Hilsman Triangle because I--stupidly, they'd never done anything about organizing the people who lived in there. And here, it's obvious--the road running here and twenty miles--the Meos obviously could interdict there. So I urged them to develop the peoples there and transfer these Meos from here to here, you see. Same outfit. But they got into two or three fire fights, and in retaliation, they may have ambushed--they ambushed a convoy once or something like. The point I'm trying to make is: (a) There was nothing covert in either of these operations; and (b) there was no policy of using the Meo. In fact, the policy was the other way around and not for any--my basic reason for this was to help the Meo.

I think one of the most brutal, cynical, stupid moves we have made is to arm the Meo. The results--you know, it sounds good when they report all this intelligence and all this stuff, but what's it's done is it destroyed the Meo people, you know. That's what we've done. You see, I was a guerrilla leader in World War II, and I worked with people like this. I was with the Karens and the Kachins in Burma. So I knew what I was doing. I knew what was going to happen and what they were doing. They were destroying the Meo people. They should have left them alone. The communists wouldn't have bothered them if we hadn't armed them.

O'BRIEN: Well, getting back to the military side of things in Vietnam, are you one of the people that argued for a kind of direct management of the war, not through CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific] but a direct reporting to Washington? As I understand, this issue comes up in the Administration, making MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] more independent of CINCPAC.

HILSMAN: Not in anything I had to do with, no. My major policy was to get MACV out of the business, that Americans couldn't do anything but advise Diem. This is what I finally come to.

O'BRIEN: And this is by 1963, wasn't it?

HILSMAN: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Well, one of the things in this whole business of Vietnam and the developments that take place there, one of the things that I don't think emerges, really, in the book is what you were suggesting here about Diem and about the social fabric of Vietnam, that you really didn't understand it, at that point, understand how difficult it was.

HILSMAN: Yes, I think so. And the interesting part about this is that when the Buddhist crisis hit, I got the CIA, INR, and all the academic community to try to get something on this, and there

wasn't anybody who really knew anything. Nobody. And the crazy part of it is even Diem didn't, you know. And probably the truth of the matter is even the Buddhists didn't, themselves, realize how much political power they had until they began to exercise it. You know, I think the truth of the matter, if you really put it out, was that nobody in the world, including the Vietnamese, really had the knowledge that would permit the kind of social engineering we were undertaking. Nobody could make any predictions about it. Really, this was a very fundamental kind of change that we were proposing. And I'm a lot more humble about this than I was then.

O'BRIEN: Well, even from the time you've written the book you've . . .

HILSMAN: Yes, that's right. That's true because it's a When I wrote the book, I still believed that if we could find a Vietnamese to be prime minister who understood what we were talking about when we talked counterinsurgency that it still would work. Now, I suppose that I would cling to the idea that if--the Philippine culture isn't all that different. That's convoluted too. I think I would still believe that if a Magsaysay had appeared as late as '64, you know, it might have worked. Certainly, [Norodom] Sihanouk pulled it off. Magsaysay pulled it off. So, you know, I would still take the theoretical position that it was possible, you know. It's just that I--since I've written the book. . . .

There came a point somewhere, where you just simply had to abandon it. We had done too many things. In other words, after five hundred thousand Americans go rampaging around the country for a certain length of time, killing people right and left, and you bomb and defoliate, there comes a point when even a Magsaysay couldn't win it. When that side is so discredited by the destructiveness of the American effort that it's hopeless. . . . Somewhere that point was reached. You know, there was a lag between when I realized it and when it happened. It happened sometime before I realized it. But clearly, it happened.

O'BRIEN: Well, is there a syndrome in Washington in the beginning of the Kennedy Administration?

HILSMAN: Is there a what?

O'BRIEN: A syndrome in a sense that's tied up with this idea of nation-building and the idea that societies can be manipulated.

HILSMAN: Well, there's a syndrome certainly here, you know, of the men of the sixties, people like myself, products of World War II. I remember Chester Barnard once--well, many years ago--I was going to put this in print. But he was giving a little talk at Princeton, and he said he was intrigued at one stage in his life by how young the men who ran the American Revolution were. The oldest man was [George] Washington, and he only was, what, forty-three. And he was the oldest by far of the whole

group. And how they got the experience, you know, to do this at so young an age--and, of course, it's the plantation system. The plantation system is everything: the blacksmith's shop, carriage makers, it's all one economic unit. And because it is feudal and family run, the sixteen-year-old boy is a sort of a deputy administrator of a whole economic complex, a very large scale operation, you see. And by the time he's twenty-one or twenty-two he's had enormous experience.

Well, I think **Barnard** made the additional point that in a mild way this happened to the men of my generation because--you know, I was a battalion commander at the age of twenty-five, commanded several hundred men. A PT boat is a very small thing, but you are the boss, you know. You get a hell of a lot of experience when you're very young in handling men and dealing with interacting matters, you know. You see, I was responsible, for example, for feeding these guys, finding them a place to sleep, fighting them, doing everything, you know.

Well, we were activists. We thought the world could be changed. We thought one man could make a difference. You know, this is the Kennedy thesis. We believed that the individual effort could change the world; that one man's efforts did make a difference. Pragmatic, idealistic, activist. This was an interventionist administration. The whole Alianza, the Alliance for Progress, is saying a revolution is inevitable in Latin America. If you don't do it peacefully, you'll end up with blood. So therefore the premise of the Alianza is there must be a revolution.

Now, I do not repudiate these ideas. I think that we were overly optimistic in some areas. I think that the problems were bigger than we thought. But I don't think it changed. . . . I mean, I don't reject--I don't go into some neo-isolationism like the New Leftist you see. A lot of the New Left kids are essentially isolationist. They're rejecting the world. They're saying, "Oh, we can't do anything about it. We've got to withdraw, we've got to pull out." But it's a very small planet, and it's a nuclear age. If we don't head off the Manchurias and the Ethiopias, you'll end up with a World War III, and it'll be a pretty messy affair. So I don't reject the idea. I think that some of our. . . . I think we're probably a little too gungho in some areas, a little too interventionist. In that sense, I'd be a lot more, you know, reluctant.

But I don't think we were unsophisticated. After all, look what we did in Laos, in Indonesia. Basically, that was played the way it should have been played. We ended up negotiating a neutralized Laos. We ended up not intervening, or, to the extent that we intervened, it was a good intervention. The same is true in Indonesia. I think the Kennedy policy in Indonesia was absolutely right. Johnson was wrong, but he lucked out.

And in Vietnam, you see, if Kennedy had lived, it would look quite different from the way it looks today, because we would have, you know--let's face it. . . . the way it would have ended up would have been like Laos, with a negotiated settlement and a coalition government.

O'BRIEN: Let's go into that, the one big thing in 1963, which is the coup. When do you first find talk of a coup, either on the Vietnamese side or the . . .

HILSMAN: 1954.

O'BRIEN: 1954, okay.

HILSMAN: And every week . . .

O'BRIEN: And every week afterwards?

HILSMAN: Every week from '54 [Laughter] to . . .

O'BRIEN: Well, when do you . . . Well, let's put it this way: From where you're sitting, do you see any evidence that people in the Agency, people in the military, or even people like yourself are suggesting to the military that it's time to simply get rid of Diem or Nhu, either one?

HILSMAN: Oh, well, Nhu is constant through the Eisenhower Administration and on through ours. Nhu was correctly identified as the baleful influence from the beginning.

Let me make two statements about the Diem coup. I have so much on record here I don't think there's much more to be said. But the two statements are: We never did anything that wasn't done in the full view of TV cameras. All of the important moves in the Diem coup were taken by Kennedy in front of a TV camera, everything we did. We never manipulated any coup, we never planned any coup. To the extent that we brought about a coup, it was by Kennedy's public statements to [Walter] Cronkite and that other one, you see. That's the extent of it.

Now, the additional things that contributed to a coup, interestingly enough, were unplanned, and they were taken by [Henry C.] Lodge. In retrospect, I now realize that Lodge's firing of [John H.] Richardson, who was Nhu's great friend, had a significance. But it happened to be not taken for that reason, you see. Richardson was fired not in order to bring about a coup, but because Lodge no longer trusted him, you see. But I think it was influential, in retrospect. In other words, I think a couple of things like this happened. Lodge's personal policy of making Diem come to him, I think, had an influence. But it was not taken to bring about a coup, you see. So all I'm saying is we . . . I went to bed the night of the coup totally unaware that a coup . . . If you want any proof that we were unwitting about the details of any kind, coup plotting was constant, always. There were three or four reports a week of coup plotting.

We were perfectly aware that our public opposition to Diem's Buddhist policy would encourage the plotters. And we told Diem, when we had [Frederick E.] Nolting go into Diem before they beat up the pagodas. Nolting said to Diem, under instructions, "Look, we hear rumors that you're going to beat up the pagodas." He didn't use those words, but that's the gist of it. "We want you to know, as we know you know, that if you do this, we cannot keep silent. We will have to protest publicly. We'll have to do -

things. We'll have to cut off aid. We'll have to do this. We cannot avoid doing this. We're a democracy. Our people will be outraged. We'll have to do it. So if you beat up the pagodas, we will have to take a public opposition against you. This will encourage the coup plotters, and there may be a coup." Mr. Diem says, "I know, I'm not going to do it. I wouldn't allow it."

Now, as far as I'm concerned, our actions were dictated by Diem. He made the decisions, we didn't. We were forced to do what we did. He knew it, and he knew that if he did certain things, like beat up the pagodas, we'd have to do it. So as far as I'm concerned. . . .

Now, if you want proof--that's what I was going to say--that we were unwitting as to the details of the plot, our friend, Admiral--CINCPAC. . .

O'BRIEN: [Harry D.] Felt?

HILSMAN: Who?

O'BRIEN: Felt.

HILSMAN: Felt, Don Felt, had this habit of, you know, getting in an airplane and going and visiting people--virtually unannounced. And he arrived in Saigon the day of the coup. Of course, it was always customary for Felt to pay a courtesy call on the President. And what nobody ever knew was whether that call would be ten minutes or five hours. Diem had this habit of keeping visitors sometimes, five and six hours, as we all know. I've had it myself. I've been six hours sitting there listening to him, you know. It was his form of entertainment.

Now, at eleven o'clock on the morning of the coup--the coup is scheduled for one, we later discovered--Don Felt makes his farewell call on Diem. Now, would the United States of America have permitted Don Felt to call on Diem, to be in Saigon and call on Diem, at eleven o'clock with a coup scheduled two hours later? I mean, what would have happened if the goddam coup had--had the attack occurred at one o'clock with Don Felt and Ambassador Nolting in Diem's office, you know? So we didn't know.

O'BRIEN: But going back . . .

HILSMAN: I want to make one more statement.

O'BRIEN: I'm sorry.

HILSMAN: This is in the book, but I want to add to it. At the time when the decision was made to cut off some aid and to some things, nasty things, about this, Mike asked me, Mike Forrestall, "What do you think is going to happen?" And I said, "There's a 40 percent chance"--which is what we really wanted--"that Diem will pull up his socks, send Nhu to Paris, and fall into line. Forty percent chance. There is a 40 percent chance that Diem will do nothing and the generals will move. There is a 20 percent chance that nothing will happen at all."

Now, going back to my statement that we were wrong about our assumptions, I will now revise that statement. If I had it to do over again, I would have answered Mike that there's a 20 percent chance that Diem will pull up his socks, there's a 20 percent chance there'll be a coup, and there's a 60 percent chance that nothing will happen at all. I mean, now that I know more about the Vietnamese culture, I think that it would have been more accurate to say that there's a 60 percent chance that nothing will happen at all.

O'BRIEN: Then these original contacts were made before the telegram of August 24th by [Tran Thien] Khien and [Le Van] Kim were made-- were initiated on that end rather than initiated on our end.

HILSMAN: The Vietnamese generals came to us in August, this is the August business, you see. The Vietnamese generals came to us and said, "We have information that Nhu is plotting our assassination and is in contact with the North", and so on and so forth. "The guy's smoking opium", which he was, "and we're scared. We may have to move. What will you do if we have to move?"

Now, our answer to this one was our standard answer when this question is asked all over the world all the time. And our standard answer is that we don't intervene, that we will examine any new government on its own merits. That is, this in terms of either an election or a coup or anything else, you see. That's our standard reply. Now, we replied more than that in this case. We replied that much, but we also said, "Well, if there is trouble, we will certainly support an anti-communist group." This was Rusk's idea, by the way. He said, "Supposing there's an anti-communist but anti-Diem group who controls the Hue area, and an anti-communist pro-Diem group that controls the South, we'll support both." Now that was the additional comment made. There were a lot of us who sort of hoped something would happen in August. Nothing did happen. And really, there were a lot of people in November who thought nothing was going to happen at all, though it was just like August all over again.

O'BRIEN: But there are some rather significant things that are done to encourage the military, aren't there? For example, doesn't the CIA furnish the plans to the Special Forces camps?

HILSMAN: What plans?

O'BRIEN: Or at least the diagrams and some of the things that the Special Forces camps had--Nhu's Special Forces organization--to the Vietnamese military?

HILSMAN: Well, not to my knowledge. Of course, I'm very skeptical of this because the CIA was pro-Diem, basically. So that doesn't jibe.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about the contacts of these guys like [Spera?] and Conein, people like this?

HILSMAN: Well, there's that character, whose name I've forgotten now--I guess it's one of those names you mentioned, Conein--who's been in Vietnam for something like fifteen years. Coein was a contact, and the source of the information we did have about the coup plotting. We did not have advance knowledge of the coup, the date, or anything more than the fact that the generals were plotting. When the coup begins, Conein showed up at the headquarters, and they let him stay. And he calls up the embassy and tells us what's going on. But that's after the fact.

O'BRIEN: That's after?

HILSMAN: Sure. Well, again, I repeat, you know, if we had had any ideas that there was a coup scheduled for the first of November, we sure as hell wouldn't have let Don Felt go to Vietnam, much less go into Diem's office. Supposing Diem had any inkling of a coup, Don Felt and the ambassador walk into his office, and he pulls out a gun and says, "Sit down, Admiral and Ambassador." What are you going to do then? That's crazy. We had no idea. We knew there was coup plotting. There were those in the American Government who thought that maybe a coup would come off. There were those in the American Government that were convinced that it wouldn't. But nobody had any ideas about the details at all, or the day or anything like that.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about Lodge's role in this whole thing?

HILSMAN: Well, as I say, I think it turns out that some of the things that we did encouraged the coup, some we intended as pressure on Diem, although we knew it would encourage a coup. Some we did not so intend but they had that effect.

O'BRIEN: You really wanted to get rid of Nhu, this was the main . . .

HILSMAN: That's right. Let's put it this way: My position was that something had to give. We could not go on like this. We either had to get out of Vietnam, which is what Bobby suggested we do, withdraw completely; or Diem had to get rid of Nhu, or a coup by somebody who would do something. Something had to give, as far as I was concerned. And I thought that we could not sit still and be the puppets of Diem's anti-Buddhist policies, you know. To make the United States of America be an instrument for this, to me, was unacceptable. So I felt that we had to do something.

Now what we did was what I--we did do what I advocated, which was: President Kennedy made public statements saying that we couldn't support this; that if we were going to support the Vietnamese government, there would have to be changes in policy and personnel. By that we meant, as a minimum, they had to adopt a pro-Buddhist rather than a anti-Buddhist policy. They had to get rid of Nhu, send him to Paris or something. Now that was our minimum.

I was prepared to face up to a coup d'etat. [Interruption]
Kennedy made his two statements in front of TV and basically in favor of a change of policy and personnel. We endorsed Lodge's policy of making Diem come to him. That is, there was a big debate in the government as to whether we send Lodge in to see Diem or we make Diem come to Lodge. And, Lodge really took a very strong stand that Diem ought to come to him, and we reluctantly endorsed it. I really would have been perfectly willing to have Lodge go to Diem. But we reluctantly approved this. We cut off the funds to the Special Forces. As a matter of fact, this was probably of no effect whatsoever. But the commodity imports, you know, the tobacco, rice, milk, canned milk. . . . It turns out that this has got a three month fuse on it; that is, you do something and it is not felt for three months. We did something, but the Vietnamese probably never even knew we did it because it never had any effect. So that was a nothing.

The cutting off of the Special Forces money, the public statement about policy and personnel were the things that we did that may have had some impact. Now, in addition to that, the statement to the generals that, yes, you know, if it's an anti-communist government, we'll continue to support it. That's the three things that we did that had an influence.

Now, I think there were a couple of things that were done that we did not do for these reasons that had an even bigger influence. One was the firing of Richardson. You see, I think that was terribly important in Vietnamese context. We did not realize that at the time. But I think in the Vietnamese cultural context, the Vietnamese probably knew that Richardson was a supporter of Nhu. This probably was the most significant thing that was done, but we didn't know that.

O'BRIEN: Well, Nhu, in fact, does make contact with the North Vietnamese, doesn't he . . .

HILSMAN: I don't know.

O'BRIEN: . . . during those months?

HILSMAN: I don't know, and it's irrelevant.

O'BRIEN: There's no possibility for a settlement at all at this stage?

HILSMAN: Not with Nhu, no. I don't think--it's irrelevant, and that isn't scaring anybody.

O'BRIEN: Is there any fear of that in Washington that the . . .

HILSMAN: Not among serious people.

O'BRIEN: . . . United States was going to be left hanging in that situation. Did you ever attempt to put any pressure on Nhu through the Papacy, you know?

HILLSMAN: Well, I think that the Papal representative was active. I don't know too much about what he did. But the Vatican was very worried about Diem's policies because they saw it quite correctly as highly dangerous to the Catholic community. That is, this anti-Buddhist thing was going to bring about a reaction, a massacre. So they were very opposed to Diem and Nhu. Interestingly enough--I hinted at this in the book--Lodge, who has got a lot of connections with the Vatican, as we now know, pays a call to the Pope on one of his visits and, you know, does a number of things like this and gets a Papal assurance that they are not displeased. Lodge is afraid of the Catholic reaction in this country, and he gets a Papal statement, letter, or something that will defuse that if the American Catholics raise hell.

O'BRIEN: Going back to the original telegram of the 24th and the meeting of the 24th, in the book you say that . . .

HILLSMAN: That was an abortion, you know, nothing happened.

O'BRIEN: Nothing happened as a result. But are there any deep conflicts that are set off in Washington . . .

HILLSMAN: Sure.

O'BRIEN: . . . as a result of that? Let's take Taylor, for example.

HILLSMAN: Oh, not as a result of that. I think that there are deep conflicts in Washington which that just simply aggravated. Interestingly enough, there's a lot of mythology about this. Don Felt, you know, called and pushed for this decision. That made Taylor mad as hell, that Don Felt had gone. . . . Taylor then goes behind the back door and sends a telegram to Harkins! which sort of almost dictates Harkins' response, you know. That's dirty pool. And Kennedy takes Taylor into his Oval Office, into the woodshed, you know, and administers a verbal spanking. And that's probably when both Bobby and Jack, you know, begin to see Taylor in a quite different light. But, you know, outside of that. . . .

You know, basically, the August 24th telegram is not what it's reported to be. It was cleared with every-body. The only two people who didn't get a personal crack at it were McCone and McNamara. They were both on vacation, and their deputies decided, you know. . . . Their deputies had every right to send it to them on vacation, but both of their deputies decided that they were acting the way their bosses would want them to act. Both of their bosses did two things: First of all, they bleated about it; Then, in the next NSC meeting on Monday, Kennedy said, "Okay, nothing has happened, no measure has been taken. We've still got plenty of time to stop it. Do you want to stop it?" And both of them said no. So in the end, it was largely leaked to the press after the fact.

O'BRIEN: When does Bundy first come in to this? Does Bundy know about Saturday?

HILSMAN: Oh, sure. So does Rusk. Rusk helps draft it. So does Kennedy.

O'BRIEN: And he has no reservations at all?

HILSMAN: He didn't say anything.

O'BRIEN: Did Taylor ever come to you with any . . .

HILSMAN: He signed it.

O'BRIEN: . . . reservations at all?

HILSMAN: Maybe after the fact but. . . . After the fact he has let people say, "Well, I thought that. . . . Yes, it's true that I signed the cable, or I released the cable. But I thought that the President had already made up his mind. There wasn't anything I could do." This is a lot of nonsense, you know.

O'BRIEN: Why all this after the fact stuff that occurred?

HILSMAN: Everybody is in Washington, it's a political process; they're looking at their own constituencies, trying to protect their base. After the Cuban missile crisis, for example, McCone is busy all over Capitol Hill saying, "Oh, I said that I didn't trust those communists. I said there were going to be missiles in Cuba." That's politics.

O'BRIEN: Well, carrying this on and assessing the results of the coup, how do you look at the results of the coup in relation to ongoing events in Vietnam?

HILSMAN: Well, this goes back to our earlier conversation in which I. . . . I would say that if Kennedy had lived, we would have made a very, very strong pitch for a true strategic hamlet program. And if, you know--I mean, God, I don't know the answer to that question. We would have made a really strong pitch for a true strategic hamlet type program, win the people, social reform and all that. Now, if maybe one or another of these fellows--I, at the time, said that [Duons Van / Big Minh won't last, that he's the [Muhammad / Naguib, of Vietnam, and there'll be a [Gamal Abdel / Nasser. And if we're lucky, the second coup will be the Nasser rather than the third or fourth. So I was hoping that when Big Minh passed from the scene, which I knew he would because he was a Naguib, that we would get a Magsaysay type. Anyway, we would have made a strong pitch for it, a really strong pitch for a counterinsurgency program, and, you know, you're as capable of judging what would have happened as I am.

As it happened, though, Kennedy was killed, and Johnson was listening to the hawks. He wouldn't listen to us. He wouldn't adopt a policy of a political solution. But anyway, if Kennedy had lived we would have pushed hard for a strategic hamlet program. If it had worked, everybody would have been happy. If it hadn't worked, we would have gone to Geneva

and negotiated a Laos type agreement. There would have been a lot of Americans alive today that aren't and a hell of a lot of Vietnamese.

O'BRIEN: Is this a pretty good time to break?

HILSMAN: I think so.

May 5, 2000

Charles U. Daly
The Kennedy Library
Columbia Point
Boston MA 02125

Dear Chuck,

At the Kennedy administration reunion last fall, I promised to write a memorandum for the record about the instructions President Kennedy gave me on Vietnam when he appointed me as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. I am sorry it has taken me so long to get around to this.

I would be grateful if you would see that this letter gets filed in the proper place for the benefit of scholars.

The Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, W. Averell Harriman, was promoted to Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs very early in 1963, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk called me to his office to tell me that the President was nominating me to be his replacement. Almost immediately afterwards, I got a call to go to the White House to see the President.

When I arrived in the Oval Office, the President was seated in his rocking chair. He motioned me to a seat on the couch and proceeded to tell me the following story.

In 1951, when Kennedy was a young and very junior Congressman, he had visited Vietnam, and the political counselor, Edmund A. Gullion, briefed him. Gullion and he became good friends and later Gullion, who was also a Catholic, was an usher at Kennedy's wedding. Kennedy told me that he had a very high opinion of Gullion's knowledge of Vietnam. When Kennedy became President, he appointed Gullion ambassador to Ghana.

Kennedy said that like most of the Catholic members of Congress, he thought that Ngo Dinh Diem was the best hope to keep South Vietnam independent. He had met Diem when he was in exile in the United States living with the Maryknoll fathers and had been impressed with him.

Diem's convictions ran very deep. Diem's family had been converted to Catholicism in the 17th century. During some anti-French and anti-Catholic troubles in the late 19th century, over one hundred of the Diem clan took refuge in a Catholic church, and the mob burned it down around them, killing everyone inside. In Diem's own lifetime, the Communists murdered Diem's revered older brother, Ngo Dinh Khoi.

When Diem became premier, he accomplished what no one thought was possible, defeating two powerful religious sects, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, stamping out a notorious gangster sect, and unseating the absentee emperor, Bao Dai. In 1955 he became president. He instituted a land reform program, improved agriculture, established an effective anti-malaria program, and improved the educational system.

But as time went on, Diem's regime became more dictatorial, and his popularity faded. He abolished elections for village headmen, an ancient tradition, in favor of direct appointments. He distrusted southerners and appointed a large number of ex-northerners to high government posts. Most appointees were also Catholic, although the population of Vietnam was 90 percent Buddhist. Many people resented this. There was also wide resentment of the power of Diem's brothers, Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc of Hué, and Ngo Dinh Can, who ruled central Vietnam with an iron hand. But the most resentment was of Diem's third brother, the arrogant and supercilious Ngo Dinh Nhu and his acid-tongued, flamboyant, termagant of a wife, the beautiful and vicious Madame Nhu. For example, after some Buddhist priests immolated themselves in towering flames of gasoline, she said that she delighted in "Buddhist barbecues."

There was an attempt to assassinate Diem, and a major coup attempt by the elite corps of parachutists, revealing that the disaffection with Diem had spread to the very center of the anti-Communist elements of society.

Kennedy went on to say that at some point Gullion told him about all this and that Gullion had become convinced that Diem simply could not succeed in keeping South Vietnam independent. There was too much discontent with him and his

family, and Diem was impervious to any advice.


Kennedy told me that what Gullion had to say shook his belief that Diem and the South could prevail. Still, Kennedy said, the United States should do all it could to help — with political support, economic aid, and military equipment. But, he said, if Diem and South Vietnam could not win with this help, the United States should withdraw. What the United States should *not* do, Kennedy said, was to send American troops to fight in Vietnam or to widen the war by bombing North Vietnam.

My job as Assistant Secretary, Kennedy said, was to do everything possible to help the Vietnamese win, but to see that the United States did not get dragged into the war. I should make sure that the United States said or did nothing to increase our commitment. I should also make sure that if the time came that South Vietnam could no longer do the job by itself the United States should have arrangements in place so that it could withdraw.

Most of the Kennedy aides were present on one or the other occasions after the Bay of Pigs when Kennedy said, as he did several times, “The American people are clearly not willing to send troops against a Communist regime in Cuba 90 miles from our coast. How can I ask to send troops against a Communist regime 9 thousand miles from our coast?”

The point is that Kennedy said the same thing to me as instructions in very emphatic terms and direct terms when I assumed the post of Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs and became his action officer on Vietnam.

Sincerely,



Roger Hillsman