

McGeorge Bundy, Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 2/22/1971
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Bundy was Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (1961-1966). In this interview, Bundy and Moss discuss documents from the National Security Files relating to Vietnam and Laos. These documents are listed in the footnotes of this interview, along with their specific folder locations in the Kennedy Library.

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Oral History Interview

Of

McGeorge Bundy

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McGeorge Bundy—JFK#3

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Third of Four Oral History Interviews

with

McGeorge Bundy¹

February 22, 1971
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: The date is 22nd of February, 1971, and the place is the National Archives, Washington, D.C. I'll turn this on and begin by asking you about the meeting on the 28th of January² which seems to be, from the papers, the first formal consideration of the Vietnam situation. The primary topic of discussion seems to be the Lansdale report [Edward G. Lansdale], in which Lansdale advises something like the Thompson [Robert K.G. Thompson] experience in Malaya or the Magsaysay [Ramon Magsaysay] experience with the Huks in the Philippines. I wonder if you recall anything

¹ This interview was the first in several experiments with a form of oral history interviewing not previously used by the oral history program of the John F. Kennedy Library. The method used was for the interviewer to review the National Security Files for significant or intriguing documents regarding the American involvement in Vietnam and to ask Mr. Bundy to comment on them after reading over them, one at a time. The footnotes below identify the documents so used and their box and file location. The following format is used for this identification:

Folder Title/Box Number

Document Description, according to Kennedy Library standard format

² Vietnam Vol. I, Jan-Mar 1961/Box 193

01/30/61 WH TS(...) 4pp

W.W. Rostow memo to McG. Bundy: "Meeting Saturday Morning, January 28, in the President's Office, on Vietnam"



[-28-]

more of the circumstances of that meeting than is reflected there in the papers, particularly the consideration of implementing the counterinsurgency program that had been prepared, as I understand it, by MAAG [Military Advisory Assistance Group] Saigon and forwarded to CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific] and on up to the Eisenhower Administration [Dwight D. Eisenhower], and was really a holdover.

BUNDY: I really can't add anything to what's in this memorandum from Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] to me, and it's even uncertain in my own mind as to just who was in that meeting. The papers here don't make it totally clear. So I don't think I can help you.

MOSS: Well, let me ask this then. You said you didn't know earlier—off the tape, you said you did not know the origin of the Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] appointment to Saigon. Do you know anything about the question of whether, how seriously Lansdale was considered for the appointment? Hilsman [Roger Hilsman] in his book says that the President [John F. Kennedy] wanted Lansdale

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but that the people in the Pentagon, otherwise undefined, said no and that McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] bought the Pentagon view and that therefore the Lansdale idea was shot down.

BUNDY: I think it's probably right that the Pentagon was cool about Lansdale and probably right that the President was at least interested in the appointment, and that is at least reflected to some degree, I think, in the Rostow memorandum here. But as I said also off the tape, I had only an indirect relation to most of the problems of ambassadorial appointments because the way the White House was organized, the actual—the responsible staff officer through most of President Kennedy's time certainly was Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan]. Whether he was, right here at the beginning of the administration—I think so.

MOSS: All right, let me ask the question in a little different context then. Later on, particularly from Hilsman and from Rostow as well, there are insistent bits of advice to the President that he

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get Lansdale out there in Saigon in some capacity or other. Were you privy to any of this?

BUNDY: Well, it's certainly true that the people who were—people like Rostow

and I think Hilsman, who had a high opinion of Lansdale and a relatively low opinion of the more traditional military and diplomatic people, were eager to have him in the act out there. He had a big reputation deriving from his relation to Magsaysay. And so there was a continuous push-pull of that sort.

MOSS: Well, the thing I'm trying to get at is how the President really felt about this.

BUNDY: I *think* he was relatively sympathetic to Lansdale. Lansdale was temperamentally somewhat his kind of person. I don't think, on the other hand, that he felt so strongly about it that he wanted to push it against strong opposition from either the military or the diplomatic bureaucracy. Where the two Secretaries were on Lansdale, I really can't tell you.

MOSS: Okay. In the Nolting appointment, there was great

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emphasis on a restoration of confidence and trust in Saigon-Washington relationships that has later come to be thought of as perhaps being overdone. That Nolting, going out there, bent over backwards to accommodate Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] and that this caused us problems later on.

BUNDY: Well, it's possible. I don't have an expert view on it.

MOSS: Okay. Let me shift to another subject then and ask you about the Vietnam task force. The papers are not clear as to just what task force is what. While there seems to be a Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] task force that was set up at McNamara's direction in the latter part of April to produce a paper on what we ought to do in Vietnam—it became something called the Program for Action for Vietnam—there was also a task force set up by NSAM-52 on 11 May, 1961, and this seems to be headed later on by Sterling Cottrell of State; but there is also in the file there a notice of an agenda of a task force meeting on the 20th of March. Now it's rather hard to sort these things out and

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figure out what the continuity amongst them was.

BUNDY: Well, I think that's right, and I think that what you find is that there were.... If we could sort out all the papers, we would discover that there were different forces, different task forces in different assignments. My own recollection is that the primary focus of these early months was in fact Laos, and that there certainly were task forces—there was at least one and maybe more on Laos and that Vietnam, while important, was nevertheless a secondary concern in President

Kennedy's mind and therefore in the staff processes of the first six months of '61. I think if you can sort out the Laos task forces you'd probably find the various groups that worked on Vietnam falling in behind them.

MOSS: But all the same, there seems to be a regular progression with regard to policy, arising first out of this counterinsurgency program that was a holdover from the Eisenhower group; two, the Gilpatric-produced program for Action in Vietnam, followed by the Staley Special Financial Group [Eugene A. Staley] that

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came up with a Joint Action Program that overlapped the military somewhat, and that this was at least after May, more or less under the oversight of Cottrell's group.

BUNDY: Mmm-hum.

MOSS: Now Hilsman in his book says that initially this was a Defense Department-oriented thing but that Rusk [Dean Rusk] got it back.

BUNDY: That may be right. I don't have any strong view on it.

MOSS: You don't have anything on it one way or the other. Let me ask you about the Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] trip, because this fits into the development as well, and particularly what the role of Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] was on that trip. I'm rather curious about that because although he went, there's not much reflection of why or what he did or what he brought back, in contrast to Johnson's role which seems to be fairly clear.

BUNDY: I don't recall any input from Steve Smith, but that doesn't mean that there wasn't one. I just don't know.

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MOSS: In the Program for Action for Vietnam—it was submitted by the Gilpatric task force on 27 April³ and went through several revisions until finally it went out as instructions to Nolting, which he received—let's see, he presented his credentials on the 10th of May—some of the proposals in the Program for Action were incorporated in the message to Nolting, but some were not. Do you recall anything of considering what should be and what should not and why?

BUNDY: No.

³ Vietnam Vol. I, Apr 1961/Box 193

04/26/61 Defense TS(...) 24pp

Task Force Report: "A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam"

MOSS: Okay. Let me turn around another way on this, and that is that this program for Action and the Staley mission and so on led to a gradual increase in the Military Advisory Assistance Group, and that this caused some international problems, particularly with respect to the International Control Commission, putting the Canadians and the Indians in a difficult position and us in a difficult one justifying the thing in the light of the ICC restrictions on force levels in Vietnam. There seems to be a our lot of going back and forth on this—just what our rationale ought

[-35-]

to be for the thing. How strong were the pressures for the increase in MAAG? Do you recall the President's position on this? It seems to have gone right ahead, but I have little feel for where the direction was coming from, whether it was pressures from below that were simply forcing this and justification having to be found or whether it was a policy thing from the top.

BUNDY: I seem to recall, and this is not something I can be that categorical about, but I seem to recall that there was general agreement that there needed to be an increase and that there was no disagreement at any level among those concerned with the problem at that time.

MOSS: The situation—keeping our closer allies, particularly the British and French, informed seems to have been difficult. We did not want to be fully candid with them. In fact, our increases were going up at a faster rate than we were letting on to them. I remember one item in there from Bruce [David K.E. Bruce] in London saying that he thought we ought to be

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rather more candid with the British on it.⁴ Do you recall a worry over this situation?

BUNDY: No. I don't myself believe that there was any major misleading of the British—the British, particularly—with whom we were close on Southeast Asia at the time, but there may have been delays in informing them. It doesn't seem to me there was any major issue at that point.

MOSS: On the other hand, we very definitely wanted to keep the Indians in the dark.⁵

⁴ Vietnam Vol. I(a), Jun 1961/Box 193
06/08/61 State S(...) 1p Embtel 5006 (London)
Report of British Foreign Office comment on U.S. plans for MAAG augmentation

⁵ See, inter alia,
Vietnam, Vol. I(a), Jul 1961
07/01/61 State S(...) 2pp Depcirtel 3
Report of notice to Indian Government of planned augmentation of MAAG by 100 men

BUNDY: Well, I don't recall that.

MOSS: Uh-huh. Would you have any idea as to the potential for a problem here, of an embarrassment, if we were caught at it with the Indians?

BUNDY: No, because I really don't recollect this in any way, but my own impression would be that there wasn't that much of a problem, given the fact that there was so much violation of the original Geneva accords going on on the other side, and that probably was much more a question of not rubbing it in the face of the Indians than of misleading them.

[-37-]

MOSS: Mmm-hmmm. There are one or two points in the papers where the nicety of the international law point is raised as to whether or not violation of a treaty by one side automatically relieves the other side of responsibility, and this seems to have been given rather short shrift in the papers, but nonetheless it's a point that was raised I think by either the Canadians or the British Foreign Office at one point. How seriously was that kind of thing really taken?

BUNDY: Well, I think the feeling was quite fundamentally that there really was a systematic and energetic effort, masterminded from North Vietnam, and that therefore there was not a difficulty of intervention at all. I think....

MOSS: One of the attempts to substantiate this, of course, was the Jordan report, known as the White Paper in the State Department, A Threat to the Peace.⁶

07/27/61 CIA S(...) 4pp
Office of Current Intelligence memo: "Indian Role in Vietnam"

Vietnam Vol. I(c), 10/1-15/61/Box 194
10/05/61 State S(...) 1p Deptel 389 (Saigon)
Policy on handling MAAG increase

Vietnam Vol. I(c), 10/16-31/61/Box 194
10/18/61 State S(...) 3pp Deptel 1347 (New Delhi)
Suggestions for talks with Indian officials re Vietnam

Vietnam Vol. VI, March 1962/ Box 196
03/20/62 State S(...) 2pp Deptel 1119 (Saigon)
Reports talk with Canadian Counsellor re ICC/Vietnam

⁶ Vietnam – Jordan Report: "A Threat to the Peace" / Box 202

N.B.: Two documents, a draft of the report dated 10/8/61, and the State Department publication of the report, dated 12/61, are in this folder.

BUNDY: It's not a very good paper.

MOSS: Well, that was my question. The evidence in the thing seems to be fairly flimsy. What was the White House reaction to this lack of good evidence?

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BUNDY: Oh well, I think the difficult.... The White House didn't mind it or pay enough attention to that paper, and that would be as much my responsibility as anyone else's, but there just wasn't any substantive doubt inside the government—you're not talking, of course, about a paper four years later....

MOSS: No, no, no. This is an earlier one. It came out in, I think, December of 1961.

BUNDY: Oh well, then I can't recite on that. I didn't pay much attention to that one.

MOSS: No.

BUNDY: But I don't think there was ever any—you know, there's a double problem: what do you think is happening and can you prove it.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: And they're two very different ones.

MOSS: Right. And I notice that there were difficulties in latching on to very substantive evidence.

BUNDY: Mmm-hmm.

MOSS: They felt very much supported, for instance, with the kidnapping and death of Colonel Nam [Hoang Thuy Nam].

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That occurred in the summer, and I think his body was discovered sometime in the early fall, and they used this as input.⁷ The whole question of attempting to get the ICC to act, and the report, of course, came out in the following summer—July, I

⁷ Vietnam Vol. I(c), 10/16-31/61/ Box 194
10/18/61 State C(...) 2pp Embtel 507 (Saigon)
Reports recovery of body of Col. Hoang Thuy Nam

believe it was, June or July of 1962—on the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] subversion attempts, but the whole effort to get input, to get the ICC to act, seems to have been based on this Jordan report. And I wondered how uneasy everybody felt about it, because of its lack of substance.

BUNDY: Well, as I say, I really don't recall the Jordan report. There was a general difficulty between what you were convinced was going on and what you could prove in documents, throughout this period.

MOSS: I think the hard question, then, is why were people convinced that it was going on?

BUNDY: Well, I think the—you know, the matter of which knowledgeable person about the shape of events out there you talked to—whether it was journalistic or intelligence or diplomatic or military—there just—

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and I still don't have any doubt on that point. There's a real difficulty in demonstrating it, because, of course, the people doing it went to very great lengths to conceal what they were doing.

MOSS: You have Diem, in the fall of 1961, feeling that the way things are developing in Laos is opening his flank. He's bothered by the whole neutrality business, and he suddenly does an about-face on the request for U.S. troops.⁸ Let's see, have you run out of documents there? [Interruption] On that memo from Rostow to the President,⁹ it seems to be the first time I notice a concern with alternatives to Diem. I'm tracing in effect the origins of the whole coup business.

BUNDY: I would think there was no relation. This is simply an element. There was constant worry about Diem's survival, and this is a reference to that. I don't see anything else in it.

MOSS: Because there's the argument that the whole question of alternatives began to gain a momentum, particularly later on. Could you tell earlier....?

[-41-]

⁸ Vietnam Vol. I(c), 10/1-15/61/ Box 194
10/01/61 State S(...) 2pp Embtel 421 (Saigon)

Report of discussion between Diem, Felt [Harry D. Felt], McGarr [Lionel C. McGarr], and Nolting on 9/30/61

⁹ Vietnam Vol. I, May 1961/Box 193
05/10/61 WH S(...) 2pp

W.W. Rostow memo to JFK: "The Vietnam NSC Paper"

BUNDY: But not in '61.

MOSS: Okay. And at some point in there, I believe there is a study or a paper that Sterling Cottrell—yes, the Special Report of the Task Force on Vietnam-Laos Problem.¹⁰ Excuse me, that's in the next one, I believe, 19 June '61. [Pause] The question I have is that this seems to be something that Sterling Cottrell ginned-up himself, or with the help of some of his own people, and it goes rather hard on the Laos problem.

BUNDY: Yes, I see that it does.

MOSS: He recommends breaking off the Geneva talks on grounds and blaming the Communists and going all out to save southern Laos. I was wondering how wide the distribution of this thing was and how seriously it was considered.

BUNDY: Well, it seems to be number 29 of 35 copies which gives you some—it's a draft, also, I notice, so I doubt if it ever became a formal task force report.

MOSS: You don't think it ever got out of the task force.

BUNDY: I don't want to say that.

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MOSS: Well, obviously it did because it's in the NSC [National Security Council] files.

BUNDY: But I don't know where it went to. It's very interesting just to take a quick look at it. It reflects a view of how tough to be in Laos that may well have been the view of—certainly was the view of whoever drafted it, but I don't recall it ever became the President's view.

MOSS: Were there others who were pushing this line at this time?

BUNDY: I don't recall.

MOSS: You don't recall.

BUNDY: I would think so. I would think that there would have been a lot of people who felt that you couldn't negotiate in Laos without these kinds

¹⁰ Vietnam Vol. I(a), Jun 1961/Box 193

06/19/61 State S(...) 9pp

Draft report of the Task Force on Vietnam on the question of a Laos settlement and its implications for Vietnam

of risks.

MOSS: Well, there's the indication that Harriman [William Averell Harriman] particularly, at Geneva, being more or less on his own in negotiating the Laos thing, played his hunches on the whole thing, particularly with respect to the Soviet Union helping us out and enforcing the neutrality of Laos. And Harriman has come under severe criticism from different quarters

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afterwards. I know the Ho Chi Minh trail is sometimes referred to as the Averell Harriman Memorial Highway.

BUNDY: Well, I would say on that, that I'm pretty sure that what Harriman did is what President Kennedy wanted done. Now, there isn't doubt but what, in accepting that settlement, the United States was—the government was well aware that it was most improbable that it would mean the end of North Vietnamese use of eastern Laos for transport to South Vietnam. So I—it is true that that risk was taken by the President, but it is not true that Governor Harriman exceeded his instructions, in my judgment.

MOSS: Oh yes, I think you're quite right on the fact that he did not exceed his instructions. I think what I'm after is the question of how good the judgment was on the whole position.

BUNDY: Well, I think—you know, this would take us into review of the whole temper of the Laos negotiations, and these files are not a good way to refresh myself on that.

[-44-]

MOSS: Right. Okay. I believe in the file you're getting on towards July, is that correct?

BUNDY: I've come to the end of June, yes.

MOSS: All right. You'll be coming up very shortly on a Contingency Information Program¹¹ that seems to be an effort to do a public relations job on what we are about to do or what we may intend to do in Vietnam. Do you see that there? Okay. Now this thing—in the light of all that has gone on since, I think it's worth asking the question. This is the kind of piece of paper I think that if something like *Ramparts* got hold of, you know, they'd really have a go at it.

¹¹ Vietnam Vol. I(a), Jul 61/Box 193
07/05/61 State S(...) 3pp
Vietnam Task Force memo: "Contingency Information Program"

BUNDY: I imagine there are a lot of those.

MOSS: It looks as though—the paper talks about seeding ideas with favorite journalists and this kind of thing, in a real public relations job, in a way to sell the Vietnam involvement to the American people. And I just wonder if you have any general comment.

BUNDY: Well, I think the most important thing to say about it is that it has no standing whatever. It's an

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internal paper by one guy in a planning group, that as far as I know never had either review or approval from any serious person. So I just don't think that it's relevant.

MOSS: Well, I think it's worth saying. Good. It's worth saying that, though, because with the thing just sitting there, sort of in context but without any value placed on it, it's very difficult to determine just what its role or function was.

BUNDY: Zero, I would think.

MOSS: Okay.

BUNDY: Just casual reading of these files is that they are really not, most of them, not close to anything that the President was doing except from time to time. I don't really believe that...

MOSS: That's my impression, too.

BUNDY: ...Vietnam was heavily on his mind in this period, nor do I get very strong feelings of his own direct engagement. I suppose one reason for that is that, not only was Laos more important than Vietnam in terms of his own engagement in it—Laos was the dominant

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subject in the meeting with Macmillan [M. Harold Macmillan], for example, in February and March—but Berlin was very much more important than either; and, of course, the ill-fated Bay of Pigs.

MOSS: This is something that I find in—right through, at least until the Buddhist crisis.

BUNDY: Until, I would think, the summer of '63, you won't get a very heavy presidential engagement on Vietnam.

MOSS: You have some momentary things, particularly with the Taylor-Rostow [Maxwell D. Taylor] mission...

BUNDY: That's right.

MOSS: ...in October, and in the setting up of MACV [Military Assistance Command Vietnam] in the following January or February.

BUNDY: Quite right. Okay, now, I don't find much yellow in this next file.

MOSS: No. You have one or two there.

BUNDY: There's one right at the beginning which is—I don't know what the problem is here. Appointment with the President—oh, Staley.¹² It's a—did Staley ever see the President, I don't know.

[-47-]

MOSS: Okay.

BUNDY: I guess he did. [Pause] Here's a Rostow paper on the Staley report or—a long memorandum. Don't have any view on that either.

MOSS: Okay [Pause] While you're thumbing through that, there's one point that I think needs to be touched on in general, and it has reference to Laos, and I wonder throughout all this how much the decision not to stand in Laos sort of backed us into having to stand in Vietnam, how much this colored the thinking?

BUNDY: Well, I'm just reading here a memorandum from Rostow to the President on October 5th [1961],¹³ and I would think that it's not quite the way you put it, but rather that Laos being—Laos was regarded as an unpromising area for military action, but that it was felt very strongly that we couldn't

¹² Vietnam Vol. I(a), Jul 61/Box 193
07/22/61 State S(...) 1p

L.D. Battle [Lucius D. Battle] memo to McG. Bundy: "Appointment with the President for Dr. A. Eugene Staley, Chairman, U.S. Special Financial Group to Vietnam" (and attached report: "Joint Action Program Proposed by the Vietnam-U.S. Special Financial Groups")

¹³ Vietnam Vol. I(c), 10/1-15/61/Box 194

10/05/61 WH S(...) 3pp

W.W. Rostow memo to JFK: "Southeast Asia"

afford to lose Vietnam without a bigger effort there, and that that was a better place to make the effort than Laos was. I think that's the underlying sense of this—of the documents in these folders.

MOSS: There's another general point, I think, that we might

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talk about while you're thumbing through that, and that is the question of how valid really, basically, was the approach that we made. There's an accusation that is fairly current that our approach to the social and political engineering in Vietnam somehow did not really understand the situation, that we fell somewhere short of our ambitions on the thing.

BUNDY: Well, I think it was clear, and I've seen references to the point in these files, that it was a very difficult problem—very difficult to do business with Diem and impossible to do business without him, in the situation in 1961. So you have the constant tension between the kinds of things we would—they're not as acute as they become a year and a half later, but the notion that it was not an easy area, which is I think taken for granted in most of this.... You do have very great difficulties, which we've had at every stage and at every level of our operations in Vietnam—still have them today—in translating specific objective into something that will work on the ground. I don't think there was much doubt that

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this all—President Kennedy, certainly, had a lively skepticism about how easy these things were to accomplish, all the way through.

MOSS: And yet, and yet you have to go ahead and you do go ahead and then there's a different momentum that builds up in the country. Different things are going on. You have Hilsman coming out with his Strategic Concept for Vietnam,¹⁴ you have Thompson's Appreciation of Vietnam, and the whole strategic hamlet program. And then you have Diem wanting to go on an across-the-board approach throughout the whole country. And McGarr's view that there should—excuse me, that comes later with Harkins [Paul D. Harkins], a national explosion idea. These things have different momenta and don't quite work together, and I was wondering about the relationship between them, how much what was going on in-country affected the planning back here in Washington, how the frustrations changed or affected the plan?

BUNDY: Well, there's no question that there's an interplay between the two, and there's no question either that

¹⁴ Vietnam Vol. V, Reports and Memos, Jan-Feb 1962/Box 195
02/02/62 State S(...) 31pp
R. Hilsman report: "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam"

[-50-]

some of the Americans in the field had less sophisticated views than some others in the field and than some in Washington. There are a wide variety of opinions all the way through, and—here's an—I'm just looking at a paper submitted to Carl Kaysen and passed on by him to Bob Johnson which says that there are lots of good people in Vietnam, but that nothing can be done until there's a coup.¹⁵

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: Well, that's an individual impression which turns up in the file but there was nothing else to do with it at that point. And there isn't any doubt that the difficulties here are reflected at every stage in different ways. And what people don't conclude in the main here is that this is the sort of thing that is going to be so unmanageable that the thing to do is not do it. That is not a dominant thought in any part of...

MOSS: No, it's not a dominant thought, but it comes up at least from Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] after...

BUNDY: That's right.

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MOSS: After the Taylor report. After the Taylor-Rostow report.

BUNDY: That's right.

MOSS: There is a letter from Galbraith, and I note that Rostow, in commenting on the Galbraith letter, says, "If Ken means disengage, he better say it."¹⁶

BUNDY: Mmm-hmm.

MOSS: Instead of talking around the point.

¹⁵ Vietnam Vol. I(c), 10/16-31/61/Box 194
10/05/61 Private U 7pp

F.C. Child paper: "U.S. Policy in Vietnam" (filed according to dates of covering memos, 10/31/61)

¹⁶ Vietnam Vol. III, 11/21-30/61/Box 195

11/21/61 State TS(...) 10pp NEWD 9941

J.K. Galbraith message to JFK re Vietnam

11/24/61 WH TS(...) 3pp

W.W. Rostow memo to JFK re Galbraith message

BUNDY: I haven't come to that.

MOSS: Yeah. It may be in the next folder. Do you recall whether this disengagement idea was seriously proposed at any point, other than by Galbraith?

BUNDY: I don't recall that there was any strong sentiment of that sort, no. I think the general feeling was that if South Vietnam were lost to the Communists, the consequences would be very serious, and we had, certainly in '61 we had not anywhere near exhausted the possibilities of an effort to prevent that.

MOSS: Okay. [Pause] There are two things about the Thompson paper. The first is a matter of coordination. As I understand it, there was a little slip-up,

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in Saigon or between Washington and London, on just what Thompson was supposed to be doing and whether or not he was going to coordinate with the American Embassy in Saigon. Do you recall any of that?

BUNDY: Don't know.

MOSS: Okay. The second point, and the more important one, is that this paper seems to be the point at which Hilsman takes off on his strategic concept for Vietnam, and the whole strategic hamlet program seems to follow from it.

BUNDY: Well, that's...

MOSS: Go ahead.

BUNDY: If that is so, I don't have an opinion on it.

MOSS: Okay. In the application of it, there seems to be a real problem. They don't proceed according to the plan in fact, and the blame is variously placed on Diem and on Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu], on the provincial chiefs, on American military advice, back and forth. Do you have any view as to the implementation of the thing?

BUNDY: No.

MOSS: Okay I think then maybe we ought to move on to the

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next lot of things. [Pause] Would you like to comment on that Mansfield [Mike Mansfield] memorandum?¹⁷ I also have here somewhere the report of the four senators somewhat later. It comes a good deal later, about a year later.

BUNDY: Well, I think the interesting thing about it is the—it's very thoughtful, and then he really in effect advances a program for doing more by doing less, which is very hard to do, even harder to do than what was tried.

MOSS: What was tried.

BUNDY: But very thoughtful, characteristically straight-forward.

MOSS: Do you recall how it was received?

BUNDY: No. [Pause] Okay. What's the next problem?

MOSS: The first thing I believe I have tagged there is the Harriman draft memo on diplomatic and political action...¹⁸

BUNDY: Right.

MOSS: ...with respect to Vietnam. I think the note on the front is interesting in the light of what he says

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in the text, that he reports that Rusk says it's a matter of timing, bearing in mind other considerations on the same subject, as though—almost as though Rusk is taking the steam out of what he is saying without saying it. He comes out fairly strongly in the text—“If the government of South Vietnam continues a repressive, dictatorial and unpopular regime, the country will not longer retain its independence, nor can the United States afford to stake its prestige there.” And Rusk's comment on this document is that it's a matter of timing, bearing in mind other considerations on the same subject.

BUNDY: Other communications.

¹⁷ Vietnam Vol. II, 11/1-10/61/Box 194

11/02/61 Senate C(...) 4pp

M. Mansfield memo to JFK: “The Vietnamese and Southeast Asia Situation”

¹⁸ Vietnam Vol. III, 11/11-20/61/Box 195

11/11/61 State S(...) 5pp

W.A. Harriman memo to JFK re a diplomatic-political course of action in Vietnam

MOSS: Communications, excuse me.

BUNDY: Well, I think what Rusk probably means is that—this memorandum of November 11th which just follows in the documentation.¹⁹

MOSS: Yes. The State Department memo that Alexis Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson] evidently drafted, or at least, he....

BUNDY: He sends it to me, I see.

MOSS: I wonder about one statement in there. It seems

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curious, looking at it from the perspective of this time, that there seems to be a very sensitive right flank, domestically, in political terms, the feeling that any withdrawal or backing off from the challenge in Vietnam would stimulate bitter domestic controversies in the United States.

BUNDY: Where do you find that?

MOSS: That's in the text of the Johnson memo. "...It would be seized upon by extreme elements to divide the country and harass the Administration." In effect, he sets up the challenge in Vietnam and the danger to Southeast Asia in general, the question of undermining the credibility of U.S. commitments in general, and then, as a third point, he says that a withdrawal or a dropping of the challenge there would stimulate bitter domestic controversies.

BUNDY: I must be looking at the wrong memorandum or else I just don't find this here.

MOSS: Excuse me. [Pause] Okay.

BUNDY: I don't believe that in the first place, as I look at it, I don't really think that's a—that that was a major point from the point of view of the people

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¹⁹ Vietnam Vol. III, 11/11-20/61/Box 195
11/11/61 State TS(...) 8pp
Unsigned memo to JFK: "South Vietnam"

putting forward the paper. I think they were probably pressing that argument on the ground that it would be persuasive to others who might not agree with them on their own basic argument. I really don't know, though. I don't....

MOSS: In the....

BUNDY: ...don't recall that as having been a major element in the discussion.

MOSS: I wondered about it because this ties in with the whole business of the China experiences earlier, in the '40s, and the question of the State Department particularly, its sensitivity to backing off from Communist challenges, the desire to look tough.

BUNDY: Possible. I really don't know. I don't think that there's a—as I say, I don't believe myself that the rationale in this paper was very important. The critical questions, and the ones that would have interested President Kennedy and also his own staff are the specific recommendations. And even then it would not be the general recommendation so much as the particular action that the President would have signed on to. I don't—do we come later to papers

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which implement the decision here?

MOSS: Yes, we do. You have the joint State-Defense recommendations and then you have the draft cables, or the departmental telegrams, excuse me, to Nolting of 14 November—department telegram 618²⁰ and 619,²¹ which in effect implement the specific instructions and spell out this idea of partnership, what we'll do and what we expect Diem to do.

BUNDY: This is an outgoing cable?

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: I don't find it yet.

MOSS: It should be coming up shortly.

BUNDY: Was it tagged?

²⁰ Vietnam Vol. III, 11/11-20/61/Box 195
11/15/61 State TS(...) 4pp Deptel 618 (Saigon)
Instructions to Ambassador Nolting, based on Taylor Report

²¹ 11/15/61 State TS(...) 6pp Deptel 619 (Saigon)
Instructions to Ambassador Nolting for discussion with President Diem

MOSS: Yes.

BUNDY: That's probably the next tag. First of a series relating to the decisions, yes.

MOSS: Right. Let me shut this off while you read.... [Pause]

BUNDY: As you see, that telegram doesn't say yes or no on all these....

MOSS: Right.

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BUNDY:large-scale stuff in the preamble of the State-Defense recommendations, and I think that's characteristic of JFK's own view. He was not signing on to as big a view of—in his practical decisions, he wasn't signing on to—in effect what he would have regarded as the boilerplate in the State-Defense document.

MOSS: Yes. Yes. I get the impression that he did not involve himself in the wranglings over rationale but simply waited until people were asking him to make this or that decision and then asking them to justify it.

BUNDY: That's right. That's very—you can argue that it would be better if you laid your philosophical or general principles as underpinning and signed on to them, but that simply wasn't the way he worked, and these two telegrams which have presidential clearance on them do reflect something he was ready to go with.

MOSS: Let me call your attention to something that's a little further on, I believe two—maybe it's the

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next—

BUNDY: What day is it on?

MOSS: —piece of yellow paper. On the 15th of November.²² There's a memorandum from you to the President, which is the first instance I see of you offering him direct advice on Vietnam.

²² Vietnam Vol. III, 11/11-20/61/Box 195
11/15/61 WH TS(...) 3pp
McG. Bundy memo to JFK offering advice on Vietnam situation

BUNDY: Well, I haven't got there yet. Okay? [Pause]

MOSS: Let me know when you arrive there. [Pause]

BUNDY: ...memorandum used—has a note on it in my handwriting, “Used by the President as a talking paper,” on November 14th.²³

MOSS: The Johnson memo to Rostow?

BUNDY: No, it's a draft memorandum to the Secretary of State and Defense.

MOSS: Oh, yes.

BUNDY: And I must have prepared it at his instruction. So that he could hit back at the departmental presentation with some informal questions. Now this is the one that I wrote, is it?

MOSS: Right. [Long pause]

BUNDY: That's an interesting memorandum. Well, he obviously didn't decide to commit the division.

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MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: Neither did he push through to get a first-rate military man. [Laughter.] He got just what I was afraid he would get. You have some particular question about it?

MOSS: Well, I was just wondering—this seems to be the first time he had formally asked you for advice on Vietnam and the first time that you made a formal reply. I was wondering if there had been anything previous to that that you felt was significant and why you suddenly got brought into it.

BUNDY: Oh, I would guess that I had been in the meetings and following the documents but not been the primary staff officer concerned, and I guess when we were clearing a cable he asked me what I thought, and I began to—I tried to write it down. And I think it is probably true that what I was reporting was that everybody, the Vice President, the two Secretaries—this is a very interesting point, and I think I'd rather talk about it off the tape for a minute. [Pause]

²³ Vietnam Vol. III, 11/11-21/61/Box 195
11/14/61 WH U 1p

Memorandum for D. Rusk and R.S. McNamara, used as talking paper for NSC meeting of 11/14/61 by JFK

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MOSS: ...notes for a talk with Secretary Rusk seems to contain the scenario for the Thanksgiving Day Massacre, as well as questions on Vietnam.²⁴

BUNDY: Well, that's right. And there is the suggestion of Harriman for Assistant Secretary, which finally happened. [Long pause] That's right.

MOSS: Didn't quite follow exactly that plan.

BUNDY: No.

MOSS: There's a lot of it there.

BUNDY: Yes. That's right.

MOSS: Do you recall what the President's reaction to this was?

BUNDY: No.

MOSS: How it got worked out eventually?

BUNDY: He must have asked me either to put it all down after we had talked about it and then he would have acted according—it all happened ten days later, doesn't it?

MOSS: Mmm-hmm.

BUNDY: Well. This, of course is not—it's most unlikely that this memorandum will have had all these names in it

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for the first time. There would have been back and forth with the President, as to how he was going to do this. And then he will have talked to the Secretary and done it the way it did happen.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: I've forgotten this memorandum entirely. I suppose when we—if we're

²⁴ Vietnam Vol. III, 11/11-20/61/Box 195

11/15/61 WH TS(...) 1p

McG. Bundy memo: "Points for Discussion with Secretary Rusk – Nov 15, 2:30 P.M"

going to do this as a comment, we might just feed in the memoranda and make them part of the....

MOSS: I don't think that that....

BUNDY: ...oral tape. Or do you think....

MOSS: No, I don't think...

BUNDY: How are you planning to handle the reference?

MOSS: ...don't think that's necessary, because.... Because we've mentioned that it occurred about 15 November and that this is in the files on Vietnam, so....

BUNDY: Okay.

MOSS: ...it will be found. [Pause] I think the next point that I have in there is a Nolting cable, in which he mentions that Diem is reflecting on the

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proposals, and then a little further on one that I don't tag but it follows the Galbraith letter.²⁵ On 22 November he—Nolting has another cable in which he reports a talk with Secretary of State Thuan [Nguyen Dinh Thuan] in which he says that Diem is brooding over the proposals.²⁶ And I would just like to get your comment on the reluctance of Diem to implement the proposals that were being made from Washington.

BUNDY: Say that again. I'm not sure I....

MOSS: Right. Nolting reports in two cables, the first one that Diem is reflecting on the proposals and that he can't get a direct answer out of him, and later that he after a talk with Secretary of State Thuan that Diem is brooding over them. He chooses the word, I think, carefully, and there's a general reluctance, evidently, for Diem to accept and implement our proposals. And I wonder if you had any comment on the problem of getting Diem to....

BUNDY: No, it's a part of the general problem, which gets more and more acute later on of our pressing him

²⁵ Vietnam Vol. III, 11/11-20/61/Box 195
11/18/61 State TS(...) 3pp Embtel 678 (Saigon)
Reports meeting with Diem

²⁶ Vietnam Vo. III, 11/21-30/61/Box 195
11/22/61 State S(...) 8pp Embtel 687 (Saigon)
Reports conversations with Thuan

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to do things that he was reluctant to do, but that's the best I can say.

[Pause]

MOSS: I believe you mentioned in your interview with Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt] that the President enjoyed Galbraith's communications. I wonder how seriously he took them.

BUNDY: I don't think I can give you a categorical view on that. I would say that he took some of them seriously and others not. I think in this particular case Galbraith probably complicated the usefulness of his telegram by telling the President he's just made a serious mistake. But I really don't recollect.

MOSS: This is the Galbraith letter of 21 November you're talking about.

BUNDY: Yes. Yes.

MOSS: And it's followed shortly thereafter by Rostow's comment on the letter.

BUNDY: Yes. I guess—I don't know, but my guess is that the President will have looked at the telegram and said let's see what Walt says to that. A legitimate way of playing off conflicting or differing advice.

MOSS: All right. I get the picture of the conflicting

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advice. How did he synthesize? I never can quite get a grasp of this.

BUNDY: Well, as you can see in this particular case, the question really doesn't arise because he's—the letter comes after the decision, and he's still playing out the decision. I would guess that he very much absorbed Galbraith's view that if Diem didn't pan out, the thing to do was to get rid of Diem. And it's at least conceivable that Galbraith's influence comes to play in the later '63 events which are nearly two years off at this point.

MOSS: Since we are running out of time this afternoon, I'd like to skip to that....

BUNDY: Ohay.

MOSS: ...'63 period and ask you about one specific document.²⁷ This is in late August after the flap about the August 24th telegram and the coup. And this document is an exchange of cables between the President and Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] personally, in which the President in effect says that "I may have to change signals on you rather rapidly. I hope

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you'll understand." And I wonder if you would, since you seem to have been privy to the whole thing...

BUNDY: I'll have to look at them.

MOSS: ...would you make some comment on it. As I get the picture from the cables, the United States government is pretty well committed to the coup.

BUNDY: What are the other messages, do you recall?

MOSS: I beg your pardon.

BUNDY: What are the other messages?

MOSS: Oh, the others are the August 24th cable and its later modifications, that he's talking about, adding up really to the fact that the U.S. Government is going to go with the generals, at least that it hopes they'll succeed. And I wonder what the origin of this was and how seriously the President was having second thoughts about the whole thing.

BUNDY: Well, let's see the earlier cables.

MOSS: All right. If you go through these, it begins with Department telegram 243.²⁸ I've got it down here on the bottom somewhere. Let me turn this off while you look through it. [Pause]

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BUNDY: Well, I think it's really very simple. It's what it says.

²⁷ Vietnam Vol. XIV, 24-31 August 1963, Memos & Misc./Box 198
08/30/63 WH TS(...) 1p

McG. Bundy memo to C.V. Clifton [Chester V. Clifton, Jr.] re attached items

²⁸ Vietnam Vol. XIV, 24-31 August 1963, State Cables/Box 198
08/24/63 State TS(2) 3pp Deptel 243 (Saigon)

Instructions to Lodge

MOSS: Yes. Okay. Fine. That's what I was after, really. I wondered at the exclusiveness of it, whether this would have—why it was held quite so closely. For instance, I wonder if Hilsman having seen it would have made any difference—why this was bothering you or the President?

BUNDY: I really don't know why the President wanted it handled so tight. I'd suspect that it was because he didn't want anyone but Lodge to see it, and I may even have had to talk him into making sure the Secretaries of State and Defense saw it. All presidents have this feeling that they are entitled to private conversations with their ambassadors, but in order to have them, as you can see from this procedure, it's a hell of a task. You have to operate it—this almost surely went on what we called a "CAP channel." Yes.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: And that means that it didn't go through State channels. I don't think it's anything more complicated

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than that the President wanted Lodge to know privately that he would have to have the right to turn the thing off and didn't see any reason for anyone else to know that.

MOSS: The assumption from reading the cables, particularly the CIA cables, is that we were very much committed to what the generals were trying to do. Is that fair?

BUNDY: Well, I...

MOSS: We really wanted to get rid of Diem.

BUNDY: You know, what interests me in re-reading these cables is that they are stronger in their commitment to a change than I had realized.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: I knew that Lodge felt very strongly that there ought to be one, but I had forgotten that we....

MOSS: The other side of the folder, particularly the CIA reports—if you flip the folder over and thumb through them, you see a very strong development.

[END OF INTERVIEW #3]

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