

William P. Bundy, Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 4/25/1972
Administrative Information

Creator: William P. Bundy

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Biographical Note

Bundy was Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, United States Department of State (1961-1963), Assistant Secretary (1963-1964), and Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (1964-1969). In this interview, he discusses debates within the Kennedy administration in 1961 about supporting a coup in Vietnam; debates in 1963 about the same issue; various memos and reports about Vietnam, mostly dating from 1963; a trip that Bundy, Robert S. McNamara, Maxwell D. Taylor, and others took to Vietnam to gauge sentiments within the country about Ngo Dinh Diem's government; and the November 1963 coup that overthrew Diem, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

William P. Bundy

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William P. Bundy—JFK#3

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Third of Three Oral History Interviews

with

William P. Bundy

April 25, 1972
Waltham, MA

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Let me start by going back to what you were saying to Dave Powers [David F. Powers] a few minutes ago about the football team at Dexter School. You said that you and one of your brothers were on the team and in the same backfield with Jack [John F. Kennedy] and Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.]. Right?

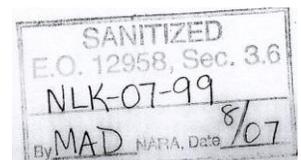
BUNDY: Right.

MOSS: Do you remember any incidents from that period?

BUNDY: No, I really don't. I remember the general characteristics of everybody very much. Joe was a driving, pile-driving fullback.

[-1-]

Jack was rather light and fragile; was quick, clever; called the right neat play and I think did some of the passing. It was a good combination, we had a lot of fun with it. But I don't remember any great victories. I think we did squeak one out. We all played mighty hard. We didn't horse around in those days. We tackled hard, we.... It was early football by today's standards.



MOSS: You recall the birthday party at the Kennedys?

BUNDY: Yeah. I think that must have been in the spring of '27, I guess— somewhere along in there, because they did leave the following fall. And I just remember it being so that you could get out on the porch and everybody milling around in this gray clapboard house and this drink Moxie that was served. That's the only thing I remember. [Laughter] I don't remember Mrs. Kennedy [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy], I don't remember anything particular that we did, but I remember Moxie.

[-2-]

MOSS: Okay. Let me go on then to the Vietnam interview. While I want to get on beyond 1961, there are one or two items in 1961 that I want to go back to before we move on. And one of them is a memo of yours.

BUNDY: Oh.

MOSS: I wonder if I can find it here. It came the 7th, as I remember.

BUNDY: That would be November?

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: That was an eventful week. Any light you could throw on that one would be valuable. I've seen the State Department files but I haven't...

MOSS: Perhaps you'd like to.... Here, that's yours.¹

BUNDY: Yeah. That looks like it, that's my typewriter.

MOSS: Right. It might help you, after you read that, to glance over this listing that I have of the documents that are in the file.

BUNDY: Yes, I remember this paper. This was the paper or second draft of 7 November.

MOSS: "Reflections on the Possible Outcomes of

[-3-]

U.S. Intervention in South Vietnam."

¹ NSF 194; Vietnam, General, 11/3/61-11/7/61; November 7, 1961 W.P. Bundy draft report, "Reflections on the Possible Outcomes of U.S. Intervention in South Vietnam"

BUNDY: Yeah. I think it was one of those private think-pieces that one did. No doubt I may have shot it to my brother [McGeorge Bundy] or somehow or other it may have been passed out at one of the meetings. There were a series of meetings. This was on a Tuesday, I think. And this would have been.... There was one on Monday between Rusk [Dean Rusk] and McNamara [Robert S. McNamara]. And then there was another one on Wednesday. I have seen this paper in the State Department files, and I see it's covered by somebody's doodles.

MOSS: I don't know whose.

BUNDY: "Cy, 2 - B" [Copy 2] suggests it was probably my brother, but that isn't.... It may be his doodles.

MOSS: His doodles are not usually so broad and his...

BUNDY: No, they're not, they're not, and I don't....

MOSS: Writing is a much tighter, small hand, and so on.

[-4-]

BUNDY: I just don't know, but this is.... I think it kind of speaks for itself. I don't...

MOSS: Well, looking back on that, how do you regard it?

BUNDY: Not very highly. I notice that I'm doubtful about our case of aggression.

MOSS: That's something I want to get to as well.

BUNDY: And I see I say, "There is a very considerable chance that under continuing U.S. protection, South Vietnam and the area as a whole would become a wasting asset and an eyesore that would greatly hamper all our relations worldwide."

Oh dear. In other words, what I was really saying was the deeper you get in the more you run the chance of the worst kind of outcome with the Soviets coming in. As I describe it, the outcome is a stalemate in which great destruction is reaped on the whole area. I guess that was pretty foresighted. How long to stick with "A," how long to stick in at a modest level, and that certainly was the question that we faced eventually in 1964-5.

[-5-]

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: So I guess it has a certain amount of foresight in it. But, as I recall, all the

thoughts of that week kind of vanished. Once you made the decision, you had to carry it out, make the best possible basis for it. But this certainly throws light on the kind of thinking that was going on.

MOSS: Right. Well, that's what I wanted to get at in this first bit.

BUNDY: It was not a hopeful, assured sense, at all.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: It wasn't downright pessimistic, but it was far from sanguine that what we were proposing was in fact going to handle it.

MOSS: All right, let me show you this list that I have. I'll turn the tape recorder off for a moment while I show you this list of papers in the file for the period 1st through the 10th of November, and I'll look for something else that I want to show you. [Interruption]

[-6-]

You say Bob Johnson [Robert H. Johnson] was a skeptic all the way through?

BUNDY: Yes. I notice you have several documents on this list dated the 8th, two on the 8th, from Robert H. Johnson for Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow].² Bob Johnson was a former member of the NSC [National Security Council] staff under the Eisenhower administration [Dwight D. Eisenhower] who came to work for Mac [McGeorge Bundy] and Walt Rostow. And he was one of the doubters; at least by early '64 he was certainly a doubter and I think he was probably skeptical even at this earlier stage. That just identifies him. I don't recall the documents which seem to have to have been internal White House memoranda.

MOSS: Okay. The next thing that I would like you to have a look at are these three documents. The first one is, I presume—this is one copy of it—the joint State-Defense memorandum on what action to take.³ Here is a Rostow memorandum entitled “Negotiation About Vietnam.”⁴ And the other one is a

[-7-]

² NSF 194; Vietnam, General, 11/8/61-11/10/61; November 8, 1961 Memo from R.H. Johnson so W.W. Rostow, “The UN, the ICC, and Viet Nam”

NSF 194; Vietnam, General, 11/8/61-11/10/61; November 8, 1961 letter from R.H. Johnson to W.W. Rostow, with attached memo, “Comments on General Taylor’s Report on Viet Nam”

³ NSF 195; Vietnam, General, Memos & Reports, 11/1/61-11/16/61, November 11, 1961 “Memorandum for the President, Subject: South Viet-Nam”

⁴ NSF 195; Countries, Vietnam, 11/14/61-11/15/61, Declassified in Full—FRUS Vol. 1, #251, November 14, 1961 Memorandum from W.W. Rostow to JFK, “Negotiation about Viet-Nam”

Hilsman [Roger Hilsman] memorandum on Taylor's [Maxwell D. Taylor] recommendations on South Vietnam.⁵ I think the three of them, taken together, are interesting for comparison. You have in the joint State-Defense memo the decision, in effect, as it came through the two Secretaries. In Rostow you have a very quick but at the same time a very thoroughgoing tapping of all the presumptions that it seems to me were then prevalent. And in Hilsman you have an investigation of the mechanics of how you go about it.

BUNDY: Uh-huh. It's an interesting.... I'm looking at the Rostow one....

MOSS: I'm particularly intrigued with the Rostow one.

BUNDY: ...suggesting that we put on some pressure, in effect, and try to restore the situation before you started to negotiate. I think that was pretty much of a general feeling.

MOSS: It was.

BUNDY: And there was a good deal of feeling

[-8 -]

at this time too—I don't think this appears in this memorandum—that we wanted to test whether the Laos negotiations would work...

MOSS: Yes.

BUNDY: ...before we felt that it was worthwhile to get into any negotiations on Vietnam.

MOSS: Yes, now I ran into that in another document but I can't locate it at the moment. It is on paper somewhere at any rate.

BUNDY: Uh-huh. You find that in many of the State Department documents, and this was part of it. I think at this time Harriman [William Averell Harriman] did suggest some kind of a tryout with the Russians, and I believe he was authorized to do it. I also believe—from documents I don't specifically have in mind but I think they're clear—that it didn't work, that he talked to Pushkin [Georgi M. Pushkin] in Geneva and it didn't come off.

MOSS: Yeah. The French were very doubtful about this whole thing too on getting the Russians involved in it.

⁵ NSF 195; Countries, Vietnam, General, Memos & Reports 11/1/61-11/16/61; November 16, 1961 letter from R. Hilsman to M. Bundy

[-9-]

On the Rostow thing again, there are a couple of other presumptions. One is that we have always won out if we have faced things squarely with force, that we get home free by doing that. And the other is the Korea analogy.

BUNDY: Those were very basic to Rostow's form of analysis. I think they had many takers.

MOSS: Yeah. How comprehensive was this throughout the government?

BUNDY: Oh, I think it was pretty generally felt that if you moved clearly and strongly that this had a better chance certainly than not acting. But I don't think you really... A lot of people wouldn't have wanted, in that November 1961 decision, to apply that thesis to the extent of saying that we ought to send regular combat forces in. That seemed too abrupt and not really called for. One got, in that week between November 4th and November 11th when the decision was taken, a very clear erosion of support for that.

[-10-]

I think Rusk was against it, but others were only tentatively for it. McNamara and the Chiefs [Joint Chiefs of Staff], even, were only tentatively for it by the middle of the week, and it just faded away.

MOSS: Yeah, there was a feeling too that if you used the engineers' flood control wedge, there was a question of what did you do with them after the flood control disaster was over...

BUNDY: Right. Right, exactly.

MOSS: ...what could be done with them.

BUNDY: Right. Now on the Hilsman memorandum, this is interesting. I don't think I saw it at the time, but this is a paper, in effect, urging the use of police and intelligence and constabulary-type forces in Vietnam. This was Hilsman's theses throughout. This happened to be by INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research], but I have no doubt he played a big hand in it.

MOSS: Was the guiding force?

[-11-]

BUNDY: Yeah.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: I don't know whether that would have had any weight. I see Hilsman sending it direct to Mac, and it went to Max Taylor and Walt Rostow. But this was after the...

MOSS: After the decision was taken.

BUNDY: ...after the decision so it doesn't look as though it had any particular weight with it.

MOSS: Okay. Right. [Interruption] All right. We have a memorandum from Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] on the 13th of November entitled "Neglected Parts of General Taylor's Report on South Vietnam"⁶ and then some comments by Rostow on it.

BUNDY: Oh, I see. Well, this I know would be the Galbraith memorandum which was sent to the President the Monday after the decision, so it doesn't seem to me it was a big part of the real story of the decision. This seems to be Rostow's reply, and I see he says

[-12-]

that "if Galbraith is advocating we disengage and let Southeast Asia and Vietnam go, I think he should say so."

MOSS: Yes.

BUNDY: I've had the same feeling about Galbraith at later stages. This is a typical rebuttal, it's not extreme.

MOSS: Right. How much did that feeling about Galbraith figure in the credibility of his advice?

BUNDY: Oh, I don't think particularly. This was a very small White House dispute. I don't think anybody else even saw the Galbraith memorandum. I don't think it affected his credibility. I think the President was often quite skeptical about Galbraith's judgment when he undertook to give it on matters that he really hadn't known in depth. In fact, I've even heard a story that Dean Rusk tells about Kennedy

⁶ NSF 195; Countries, Vietnam, 11/11/61-11/13/61; November 13, 1961 Memo from W.W. Rostow to JFK, "Comments on JKG's Attached Memorandum"

using a rather vulgar metaphor to describe his feelings about Galbraith on one occasion where he had rendered advice on

[-13-]

Berlin and it had been rejected as totally inapplicable. And Kennedy said you mustn't take this fellow that seriously, he's quite often full of nonsense in a rather vulgar metaphor.

MOSS: Yeah. Okay. Now on the cables that went out to Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.], the instructions, the basic instructions.

BUNDY: Right.

MOSS: Telegrams 618, 619, and 620. The 620, Deptel 620, was the draft letter from Kennedy to Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem].⁷ If you'd just sort of glance at those to refresh your memory and then any comment that you want to make.

BUNDY: No, I've seen those in the State Department files and they go to some lengths to explain how the decision came to be and what's intended by it; how it was intended to ginger up the Vietnamese, and it certainly was. I think for the rest, it pretty much speaks for itself. I remember it lists the things and then says we hope that the South Vietnamese government will do a lot of things.

[-14-]

Now that represented the final decision, which in turn was something of a change from what Taylor and Rostow brought back.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: Taylor and Rostow brought back a recommendation for what they called "partnership," that is we would have Americans working very closely with the South Vietnamese at all levels, both in the civilian administration and the military forces, and this would have its own effect.

MOSS: A partnership is something that I see Nolting trying to sell Diem when Diem says "No, you folks are coming in here and taking over."

BUNDY: Right. Well, partnership was shorthand in this thing for getting in and influencing Diem by showing him how much you were with him and how

⁷ NSF 194; Vietnam, General, 11/8/61-11/10/61; Memo from L.D. Battle to M. Bundy, "The UN, the ICC, and Viet-Nam"

NSF 195; Vietnam, 11/14/61-11/15/61; Outgoing telegram from Department of State, NIACT 620

sincere you were. It was a Lansdale [Edward G. Lansdale] kind of a concept. It was very typical of what Lansdale

[-15-]

did when he worked with Magsaysay [Ramon Magsaysay] in the Philippines, which he has now described in his new book. But during the course of the ten days after the return of Taylor and Rostow, that was replaced by a rather more quid pro quo kind of bargain to be struck with Diem.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: And that was what Nolting was instructed to negotiate. Now, as I think you know from the record, that hit very rough snags and almost came to the point where we were ready to deliver some kind of a minor ultimatum. And then, Diem gave enough ground so that Nolting was able to put together a kind of a compromise under which certain measures having to do with effectiveness were adopted.

MOSS: Well, this is interesting because it always seemed to be just enough to keep us on the hook and not enough to do any real good.

BUNDY: That's pretty much an accurate description, I think, as I look back on it.

[-16-]

I wouldn't have had this.... I didn't participate enough in this to have said this without having looked back over the files.

MOSS: Right. Right.

BUNDY: But, I think this is just about what it did. It was causmatic. It really didn't run very deep at all. And, in effect, what the President must have decided was that this was the best you were going to get. By that time he had Galbraith's report indicating he [Galbraith] thought Diem wouldn't accept anything and he thought you really ought to dissociate from him. Well, that didn't seem very practicable because who would get instead, and so on.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: At the same time, it may well have registered to the extent of saying to the President, whatever else this fellow will do, even if he signed his name to a piece of paper, it wouldn't be worth anything. Therefore, the President may have said, "All right,

[-17-]

we've gone as far as we can go on this bargaining track. We'll settle for what we've got, and then we'll rely on the presence of American advisors and their personal influence to get what further we can hope to get through what might again be called the partnership route. So, it was a combination, bargaining and then partnership. But it was a significant change from the Taylor report. I think Rusk had a hand in this. I think the President himself was very interested in the idea that unless Diem changed his basic methods of operation, this was a lot trickier and more difficult than it would be if he did something about it.

MOSS: And Diem, sitting there, looked on each advancing piece of pressure, the partnership thing, the MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] introduction, and so on, as an erosion of his sovereignty or his image—at least this is a case that is put—and

[-18-]

that every time we laid on a little more, he became more intransigent.

BUNDY: Oh, I think he did and I have no doubt Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] was putting him up to this. I think there were, even at this stage as I recall the files, some planted stories in the Saigon press that the United States was impairing South Vietnamese sovereignty. This was the technique that was the favorite of Diem and Nhu on other occasions and I think it was used now.

MOSS: And the specter of the November '60 coup and the possible involvement of U.S. embassy officials in it and that sort of thing.

BUNDY: Yes, that had left quite a scar. I never was.... I wasn't around during that but I think it left a scar.

MOSS: Yeah. I don't know the facts whether anybody was or not. I can't find any evidence of it.

BUNDY: Well, there had been criticism of Diem in a very strong American communication just

[-19-]

before...

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: ...and I don't think there was direct knowledge. In fact, I've talked to people who were very much in the know in the embassy and they say they

didn't know. The coup broke out, they immediately found out who it was though, and they were thereafter in touch with them. Actually American influence was exerted to get the coup leaders to accept negotiation with Diem. And then Diem took over, in effect, after he once got his chance to talk. So in the end, I think we aroused Diem's suspicions and also cemented ourselves with this particular group, coup group, as not people you could count on to the finish.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: We got the worst of both worlds out of that one, but that's before Kennedy's time.

MOSS: Well, let me show you this one.

[-20-]

We talked about ICC [International Control Commission] and justification, and so on. Here's the Jordan report [William J. Jordan]. And I get the feeling from others that I've talked to that the Jordan report never really did the job that people wanted it to do, that you never quite had sufficient evidence to make the strong infiltration case that everybody would like to have had.

BUNDY: No. I think it was not as strong and the.... You never could persuade the South Vietnamese of the importance of getting this sorted out in terms of who'd come from the North. On the other hand, the 1961 white paper or blue paper, the Jordan report, was a very competent piece of work. It wasn't over-written. It was persuasive as far as it could take the matter—and in that respect, frankly, a good deal better than the rather intense over-written, rather flamboyant white paper of 1965.

MOSS: Right.

[-21-]

BUNDY: So I think it was an effective piece of work, but the evidence simply wasn't dramatic at that stage. We knew that there were hundreds, thousands perhaps, of fellows who had come from the North, but in the nature of the very, very spread out guerilla fight, you just didn't pick up many of them to get the evidence. You couldn't nail it down.

MOSS: Okay. And, you mentioned the coup business a few minutes ago. Here is a end of November memorandum on coup plotting, and the interesting thing there is, I think, that Big Minh [Duong Van Minh] is involved.

BUNDY: Well, that's very interesting. I didn't recall this. This is November 28, a note from Hilsman. But I didn't recall this. This is that Big Minh was very

critical of Diem. I seem to remember a few reports of that over a period of time, but this I hadn't realized.

I see it also notes that Vu Van Thai was sharply critical of Diem. He was then abroad.

[-22-]

Well, that never got much further.

MOSS: I also get an impression from talking to people like Admiral Heinz [Luther C. Heinz], and so on, that the coup talk became so prevalent that you never knew what to believe; that you really were sort of left in the dark most of the time.

BUNDY: Well, it depends on the period. There was always a little bit of undercurrent of it, sometimes it was more active than at other times. Ironically there was no particular warning of the coup that was attempted in February of 1962.

MOSS: Right. Right. There's one feeling that I get towards here at the end November, December, that everybody's saying that it's got to be the South Vietnamese doing this themselves, and yet I have a hunch that nobody really believes it, that we've really got to do the job and go all the way with it.

BUNDY: Well, that's almost psychological. I think a good deal of it depended on temperament.

[-23-]

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: I think that Taylor and Rostow were rather more in the direction of the United States has to do more and really bust this thing open and then let the Vietnamese clean up. Others, the more classic guerrilla people—Hilsman would be one, but I think this was the general feeling of a great many civilians—felt that unless the South Vietnamese could do it, it couldn't be done; really felt it very deeply. I don't know how to assess it at this distance of time, but there certainly was a difference there.

MOSS: All right, you have coming up in early '62 Hilsman's INR "Strategic Concepts for South Vietnam."⁸ Had you seen that?

BUNDY: I really don't recall but I've seen the reference to it in his memoirs.

⁸ NSF 195a; Vietnam, General, Reports & Memos, 1/62-2/62; February 2, 1962, "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam"

MOSS: This, I suspect, is what he refers to in that earlier memo as a thing being prepared by INR.

BUNDY: Yeah.

MOSS: At least it was an outgrowth of it.

BUNDY: Yes, this must have been. And this was rather

[-24-]

specifically what might be done.

MOSS: It leans heavily on the Thompson [Robert K.G. Thompson]...

BUNDY: Yeah, Thompson idea, and the improvement of the civil guard and self defense corps. I think, by and large, this was what civilians inclined to believe. I think the military were more skeptical of it. It called for, as I recall, very limited changes in the regular forces and considerable increases in the irregular forces or the civil guard and so on. This was the strategic villages, as they were called, or hamlets, and so on. I also note that by this time we were including in Viet Cong estimates not only the regular and irregular forces, which were about twenty-six thousand, but the supporters and sympathizers of a hundred thousand, which was the beginning of realism on intelligence. Up through September, we were just talking about the twenty or twenty-five thousand

[-25-]

and not taking any count of the hundred thousand who helped them.

MOSS: All right. Now, let's see if I can find the piece that I want. There is a mention in here of problems between MACV and the Embassy, relationships and so on at the very beginning, in February and March.

[Interruption]

Let me go back to something a minute. Oh no, I might as well get this done first. This is a Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] cable to McNamara after he had been to, he's at USTDC [U.S. Taiwan Defense Command], I guess that's Taiwan.⁹ He's just coming back from Vietnam and he's talking about his trip here at the last paragraph of the cable, "From my inquiries and observations in Saigon, I feel our problems of Embassy-Military Assistance Command relationships is over."

BUNDY: Uh-huh. I think that's true.

MOSS: Okay. Can you recall what the problem was and what instructions Lemnitzer may have had going out there?

[-26-]

BUNDY: Well, there had been a lot of concern in the framing of the powers of the new Military Assistance Commander, as he was called. Actually, just to cite another source, I happened to have read this very morning Max Taylor's memoirs on this subject, and he tells it just about the way I remember it. That is, we hammered out—we being myself for Defense with advice from Secretary McNamara and I think from others, perhaps General Taylor, and Averell Harriman on behalf of the State Department—an agreement on the powers of the new commander, which put him almost on the level with the Ambassador, but the Ambassador was still said to be in overall command. Nolting was a little unhappy that it gave quite so much to the military commander, and so it was an edgy matter. Nolting actually appealed from it and a change was made in his favor.

[-27-]

So it was on paper it looked as though there might be trouble.

MOSS: Yeah.

BUNDY: However, as General Taylor says in his memoirs, once the two men got on the ground and started working together, you could quickly see that it wasn't going to be difficult. I formed that judgment when I was there in February looking at the same problem. And I see Lemnitzer by March, the end of March, thought that this wasn't any problem. Truth was, there never was. Harkins [Paul D. Harkins] and Nolting, in fact, saw things very much in the same light and worked together very smoothly, so there just wasn't any problem. Now there may have been something earlier than the appointment of Harkins there. I think there were frictions of a minor nature in '61, but I think he must be referring to the controversy over the definition of the relationship that we attempted to put on paper.

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MOSS: Okay. Of course with MACV and the increase in advisors and so on, you have the problem with the ICC. I believe that you indicated before that this was largely left up to the State Department as to how to do it, but certainly in the logistical business of getting troops into Vietnam and getting equipment in, it must have affected ISA [International Security Affairs] somewhat.

BUNDY: I don't recall that we were brought in. I simply don't have any recollection. I've dug this story out of the State Department files; it's obviously an

important part. Particularly is it an important part of the explanation why the whole new policy wasn't explained more fully and more dramatically to the Congress and the people than it was. The reason being that you had this question of the ICC, and if you put the Canadians and the Indians on the spot by proclaiming what you were doing, it made it that much harder. As it was, by working very closely with those countries, as well as with the British, and by telling them quietly

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what you were doing, we were able to avoid an outcry, and in the end, the ICC voted by a majority of two to one on a report in June...

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: ...that condemned the North Vietnamese. So there was a lot of important diplomacy toward that end at this time, but we in Defense weren't brought into it that I can recall. You're quite right, I'm sure, that we would have had to participate in framing of the plans so that the arrivals weren't announced and so on. But I think that was second nature anyway; it wouldn't have been natural to shout them from housetops anyway, in a military situation.

MOSS: What about the people in ISA who were in charge of things like this, in charge of the MAP [Military Assistance Program], for instance?

BUNDY: Well, I think the man who really ran it... Two men who were prominent in it that I particularly recall, and doubtless were others, one was Admiral Heinz, Luther

[-30-]

Heinz, and the other was Colonel Kent [Richard F. Kent] of the Army. James Kent, I guess. A tall, Montana fellow, very, very able. He knew Vietnam well. He was one of the fellows who had been out on the MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] and really absorbed what the country is like. And he did a great deal of the handling of the equipment and so on. It was, I thought, a pretty effective operation. Two very able men.

MOSS: I wondered if... I'm trying to think who was the general who was MAP, Palmer [Williston B. Palmer]?

BUNDY: General Palmer, Williston Palmer was the overall head of MAP. He didn't have all that much to do with this kind of thing. This was a specialized program. Vietnam had become a law unto itself almost by this time. And you had the special items like barbed wire, millions of whatever units of barbed wire were going out for the fortified hamlets, strategic hamlets. And this was something that was on a special expedite basis. He didn't enter in a great deal.

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MOSS: What about the defoliant question? This starts fairly early, a lot earlier than I thought.

BUNDY: Yeah. It starts in the fall of '61. And in '62 it occasioned a number of minor disputes with the State Department saying that it ought to be restricted very closely. And I don't think it was used for any food destruction until at least late '62, but I'm rusty on that, I don't have any direct memory.

MOSS: The first one, I forget just when it is, is documented in the NSC files. I'll have to look through my list of notes to find out.

BUNDY: But there was a real distinction drawn between using it along the roads...

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: ...and using it for food destruction.

MOSS: Upland...

BUNDY: For crop destruction....

MOSS: ...crop destruction, and so on, right. And there was some fuss from the Cambodians on the whole thing when the program leaked and that sort of thing. There was a question of the ICC

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and the Soviet Union.... I think TASS at one point, or *Izvestia* I guess it was, had a loud squawk about the whole thing at one point.

BUNDY: Well, it's always surprising to me. They did a make a squawk but they didn't resurrect the kind of thing they had done in Korea where they had used germ warfare charges that had no basis at all.

MOSS: Right. Right.

BUNDY: I guess they realized they'd gone too far in Korea. Well they did attack it but I never thought they'd pulled out all the stops as they might have done.

MOSS: Most of 1962 that I can discover in here is more or less a question of progress reports. How is it coming? How are you doing? How are you

doing thus and so—until you get to the early part of 1963 and the Ap Bac thing beginning to start the whole 1963 trend. Is that an accurate feel for the way things went?

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BUNDY: That's just about the way.... I found that very difficult to write or say anything really striking about 1962....

MOSS: Nineteen sixty-two.

BUNDY: Nineteen sixty-two was a period when you felt a lot of things were being done well on this small scale, relatively, and it was going all right.

MOSS: I have little bits and pieces of things like South Vietnamese relations with Cambodia sort of bouncing back and forth, border problems, border incidents, the business of who was to represent Vietnam in Vientiane, that kind of thing. But other than that, really small stuff.

BUNDY: But I think that's a fair impression.

MOSS: Okay. Good. Now, 1963. I guess we begin with Ap Bac, don't we, really, as the first thing? Let me see, this is.... [Interruption] I don't know if there is anything new to you in that lot.

BUNDY: I don't have a clear recollection of Ap Bac.

MOSS: It's generally regarded, at least in the

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popular literature, as the beginning of the end, the beginning of awareness, the beginning of Halberstam's [David Halberstam] shouting from the sidelines.

BUNDY: Right. That I think is true. Halberstam saw it much more vividly than the government did. And this was part of the problem, the government was slow in reporting it.

MOSS: Simply because they didn't think it was important, or what?

BUNDY: I think they didn't have the dope, probably, right at the very beginning. I didn't really know though. I'm afraid I don't have much to add. I see we

have got a pretty good report in from the 4th of January.¹⁰

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: It doesn't really bring out what the newspapermen brought out, that they had the other side surrounded and let them get away. Well, I don't get too much out of that frankly, I certainly haven't anything to add to it.

[-35-]

MOSS: Okay. I have here an item that is called the "North Vietnam Operational Plan."¹¹ And since it's for the Special Group, I suspect it's the covert operations end of things; and some of it that I noted in there was the harassment and sabotage and so on.

BUNDY: Yes, that's quite striking, that's quite striking. January 1963 that was being done. This is one of the Agency [Central Intelligence Agency] typewriters....

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: ...and it brings out the degree to which it had been stepped up. This program was originally approved—I remember this—in May or June 1961.

MOSS: Right. As part of the so-called "Presidential Program?"

BUNDY: Right. And there was this step-up in September of 1962. This was Hard, hard going, right from the beginning. Aircraft would come in, men were lost, teams.... They said they'd lose fifty percent of the

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teams, and they think that probably will go up, and I think it did. It went up all right.

This merely shows that it was a very active and systematic operation and so on, at this state. I think that's a useful point. When history comes to assess some of the chapters in the *Pentagon Papers*, they'll find that a great deal of fuss is made in the *Pentagon Papers* about a further increase that was ordered in December 1963, as though that were the beginning of what went up into the bombing program.

MOSS: Yeah. Okay. Right.

¹⁰ NSF 197; Vietnam, General, 1/1/63-1/9/63, Message from CINCUSARPAC FTSHAFTER Hawaii to AIG 931

¹¹ NSF 197; Vietnam, General, 1/10/63-1/30/63; December 29, 1962 Memo for The Special Group, "North Vietnam Operational Plan"

BUNDY: In fact, this had been a continuing and ongoing thing very seriously considered and executed over a long period. December '63 wasn't really that significant a change.

MOSS: Yeah. Was there a belief that this kind of harassment could bring Hanoi to terms? I noted in one place Lansdale—I don't know how serious he was—

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... talking about seeding the Red River with a fast growing lily that would clog navigation, and this just seems to me to be so incredible.

BUNDY: I wouldn't have thought that any conceivable form of covert operation was ever regarded as likely to change Hanoi's view. It was a pinprick and a...

MOSS: All right. Now, why was it undertaken then? I think that's the hard question. What was it going to do?

BUNDY: It was undertaken to hit back and to show them you could and as a possible warning of other things to come and to sort of even the score because the North Vietnamese were doing it to you on a vast scale. I don't know, it really.... It's not easy. The theory would be that if you don't keep up this kind of thing, you aren't in a position to take advantage if the other fellow's morale does start to crack at a later point.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: All covert operations initially are expected to have high rates of loss. It's only when you

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... establish yourself in an area.... They are long-shot operations.

MOSS: How much is there of the belief that if we don't try it, we don't know whether it will work or not?

BUNDY: Well, I think that was true in the beginning. I think it was reasonably clear from very early in the game that the security measures in the North were extraordinarily tight. So...

MOSS: We had had a long experience too with teams going into China from Taiwan...

BUNDY: Right. That's right.

MOSS: ...and getting picked off very quickly.

BUNDY: Yeah.

MOSS: Here's a report by the Joint Chiefs at the end of January.¹² At least I believe it's the end. Right. The decision was made to go on the 7th of January and the Joint Chiefs team went in January. It looks like a straightforward report without any particular interest to me. I don't think it's a particularly startling thing.

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BUNDY: Yes. Actually this particular report is covered and summarized in Max Taylor's memoirs.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: No. I have nothing particular to add to this one.

MOSS: All right. Now, in July '62, McNamara had asked for a MACV comprehensive plan for South Vietnam, and you have the Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal] and Hilsman trip and their "Eyes Only" annex and the JCS team, and there was a visit by R.K.G. Thompson.

BUNDY: Uh-huh.

MOSS: And I get the feeling from the February and March cables that all this is beginning to come together a little bit into a comprehensive plan which, eventually, let's see, 8 February I think it appears, or at least it's mentioned.

BUNDY: Eight February, what year?

MOSS: Sixty-three.

BUNDY: Sixty-three.

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MOSS: There is a comprehensive plan. Now, where have I got that?

¹² NSF 197; Vietnam, General, 1/1/63-1/9/63; January 1963 "Report of Visit by Joint Chiefs of Staff Team to South Vietnam"

BUNDY: That could be....

MOSS: But I have the feeling that it never really gelled, that the....

BUNDY: I don't recall its being of great significance. I simply don't recall it under that name being of great significance.

MOSS: Okay. All right. My comment on my own notes is "While there seems to be honest and determined advocacy for different points of view in all this, there doesn't seem to be adequate consensus for policy."

BUNDY: That may be.

MOSS: All right. Let me hold off a minute. [Interruption] Right. This is the memorandum of conversation between the President, Ormsby-Gore [William David Ormsby-Gore Harlech], R.K.G. Thompson, and Chalmers Wood [Chalmers B. Wood] on April 4, 1963.

BUNDY: That's very interesting.

MOSS: And this is the one in which Thompson suggests the one thousand troop withdrawal as a

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sign that things are going well.

BUNDY: "Increase in defectors."

MOSS: Notice that he ties it, I think, to a good deal of success in what he calls some "white" areas which means clear and secure.

BUNDY: White areas, clear areas. Right. And I'm very, very interested that Thompson refers here to the possibility of an announcement that we were reducing the American military, that this would have good propaganda effects, show we were winning, take the steam out of the propaganda line that this was an American war and reaffirm the honesty. It's interesting that the idea of withdrawing a thousand men had planted itself by that time. The memorandum doesn't make clear whether Thompson himself suggested it.

MOSS: That's the first time I run across it in the file.

BUNDY: Yeah. That may be a very important idea, because...

MOSS: It...

BUNDY: ...the idea of reducing by a thousand didn't exist in the plans until at

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least May.

MOSS: Right. And then I begin to see it in CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, Pacific] things.

BUNDY: There were systematic plans at the end of May, 1963, for reduction, by a thousand men was the first bite.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: And then, we were planning to reduce it progressively thereafter. I think we drew up quite elaborate plans in ISA at this time.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: Now that gets you back to the argument about Kenneth O'Donnell's [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] thesis that...

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: ...the President intended to do this no matter what. My strong impression, both in May and in the fall, would have been that the President intended to do it because he thought it could be done, it was right to throw the responsibility on the South Vietnamese and that this could be handled,

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that he was not in any way judging that it should be done even if the South Vietnamese couldn't handle it. In other words, it was pegged to an optimistic view of the situation, and I doubt very much that it was intended to apply if the situation had been going badly. But that's my own impression of his total behavior. I had no direct conversation with him.

MOSS: Okay. As you get into May, of course, you have the Buddhist Crisis. And in the May folder of 1963, until I believe it is the last day, there is absolutely no mention of it whatsoever, nothing once.

BUNDY: I think that's not too surprising. I don't think anybody quite realized through May how important this was going to become.

MOSS: As a matter of fact, I think the first thing I have is this May 31st cable.

BUNDY: Yeah. Well, your cable file would

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be whatever somebody chose to keep...

MOSS: Right. Right.

BUNDY: ...but it is striking.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: And I think that was generally true. I think it was taken seriously in the Embassy and in the State Department; around government, it didn't seem like more than a slightly troublesome thing for at least the first month, six weeks.

MOSS: All right, now I think that the... I could probably do the coup business best this way. I'll show you the collected top secret cable file¹³ and the minutes of the meetings.¹⁴ Let me turn this off [Interruption]

BUNDY: This indicated that Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.] did have a day with Diem about the 27th of October.

MOSS: Right. He did. He did go over to Dalat with him, if I remember, or at least he was somewhere with him. The intention was

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originally to go to Dalat.

BUNDY: Yeah. He says that he had a long and frustrating conversation.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: Then Thuan [Nguyen Dinh Thuan] said... Oh, here he has a report of his day on the 27th which just was....

MOSS: Right.

¹³ See National Security Files: Countries: Vietnam: Top Secret Cables, October, 1963

¹⁴ See National Security Files: National Security Council Meetings on Vietnam

BUNDY: I had forgotten about this one. It must have been so quickly overtaken. I had thought there was a date for some other time at Dalat but I guess that's it, the 27th was it.

MOSS: I think that was it.

BUNDY: All right, let's see. I remember all the coup. I think the striking thing about the coup contacts of October between Conein [Lt. Colonel Lucien E. Conein] and Don [Major General Tran Van Don] is the rapidity with which they started after the October 2nd communiqué. The tone of the communiqué must have communicated to Saigon that the United States was still on the

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path of disapproval of Diem. Incidentally, Conein's given quite an account of those conversations in a broadcast that NBC [National Broadcasting Company] had in December of 1971. I have it at home.

MOSS: Oh really. Oh, I'll have to get that.

BUNDY: This is, this is....

MOSS: You have it on tape?

BUNDY: I have a transcript of it. There's an NBC series of two programs on the Kennedy administration and Vietnam, which you certainly ought to have.

MOSS: Yes. Yes.

BUNDY: And the man who really spilled his guts was Conein.

MOSS: This is December '71.

BUNDY: 1971. And the lady in the New York office of NBC who knows all about it is Helen Whitney, who interviewed me.

Well this would indicate that there was an initial contact about the 5th or 6th in which Conein did not

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give direct encouragement, but did say the United States would support a government that emerged in control and ready to carry on war. And then it all hotted up about the 23rd...

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: ...when it suddenly appeared that they were really ready to move fairly quickly.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: That would accord with my recollection which was that when we put forward the policy in the McNamara-Taylor report, we thought that even if the United States demonstrated, as we recommended it should, a very cool attitude towards Diem, that the military leaders were sufficiently afraid of Diem's security people and sufficiently deterred by the semi-fiasco of late August, that they would take a long time to get going. And it turned out that was a wrong judgment. The coup got underway and was mounted and was really re-planned much more quickly than we had supposed they were going to be able or likely to do.

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That's an important point.

It certainly hotted up the 23rd and 24th on. It couldn't have been more difficult because we didn't have their exact plans, we didn't have their exact date—I'm quite clear on that—and we were afraid, at the end, that it might turn out to be an inconclusive and very bloody mess. We even had tried to get a picture of the forces of either side. So all that....

MOSS: Right. There are continuing cables back and forth saying who is where and who is with whom, and...

BUNDY: Right. Right.

MOSS: ...there was never a clear picture of just who was on which side.

BUNDY: Right. And, these were.... Well, this is interesting. I notice the first one says Conein ran into Don on the 2nd of October Saigon time. Well, that would be before the release of the communiqué.

MOSS: Right. Right.

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BUNDY: So it isn't a reaction to the communiqué. I'm wrong on that.

MOSS: No, I don't think it was a reaction to it. I think that the thing speeded up after the communiqué happened. I think they were ready to feel out the U.S. people at that point.

BUNDY: Right.

MOSS: What do you recall of Serpa's figuring in it? He seems to be in and out of some of these contacts a little bit.

BUNDY: Who is this?

MOSS: He's another CAS [Covert American Source] fellow.

BUNDY: Spera.

MOSS: Spera.

BUNDY: S-P-E-R-A.

MOSS: S-P-E-R-A.

BUNDY: I don't know the exact way to handle this. Conein was the principal one. Spera seemed to have contact with other people. I'm not sure Spera didn't have contact with the Thao group, T-H-A-O.

MOSS: Right. Right.

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BUNDY: Colonel Thao [Pham Ngoc Thao]. Colonel Thao...

MOSS: Who succeeded what the....

BUNDY: ...was the ex-Viet Minh who was...

MOSS: ...Tuyen [Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen] group?

BUNDY: Maybe. Yes, that would fit I think. You'd have to get some of the people who really knew the politics because you have to have a good guide. Now, let's see. These were all CIA messages.

MOSS: Now you do have...

BUNDY: There is quite a gap in here between about the 6th to about the 23rd.

MOSS: That's right, that's right. Somewhere in there you have the Harkins problem.

BUNDY: Right. And I remember the cables on, but I think it's rather vividly told again in Max Taylor's account.

MOSS: Yes, I think it is, I think it is. And it seems to have been a question of inadvertence compounded with not knowing exactly where things stood and wanting

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to keep his people out of politics, the...

BUNDY: Yeah.

MOSS: ...old soldier's cry.

BUNDY: Right. That's right. And Harkins really hadn't grasped the whole thrust of the policy. And I don't know whether Lodge didn't show him crucial messages, or whether Harkins read them with a strong feeling that this was not what he liked and therefore somehow, in a Freudian way, didn't quite understand it. This I don't know.

MOSS: You had quite a change really, where you shift from Nolting to Lodge. It was an almost abrupt kind of thing.

BUNDY: Oh, absolutely. Very hard to get used to. There's no question of that.

MOSS: You had Nolting sitting back there saying that he could not, in effect, betray the government that he was accredited to and Lodge having no compunction whatsoever.

BUNDY: Whatsoever, none whatsoever. Now, any ambassador is in a very difficult position

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knowing of any kind of coup plan. Does he tell the government or doesn't he? The answer may differ in one case to another. But in this case, Lodge felt that to tell the government would just condemn these fellows to death, apart from all else.

MOSS: Now, you have a Lodge-Mac Bundy exchange, there, towards the end, in which Lodge is saying, it's too late, it's too late, you know, you can't turn it off.

BUNDY: Right. You can't turn it off; right. This was when we were all....

MOSS: The White House does not quite accept this, it doesn't quite buy this.

BUNDY: Right. Well, this was when we were very afraid, in Washington, of a

blood bath.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: And, as I recall, John McCone [John A. McCone] of CIA was particularly concerned, was pointing to the worst possibilities—which was right, I think. So Mac Bundy went out and said, in effect, “Can we pull this back if we think it's going to be

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a terrible mess?”

MOSS: Was there any feeling in all this, that we had any, I don't want to say control and I don't want to say responsibility, but somehow a kind of involvement in what was going on over there that borders on control and responsibility? You have the people coming along later with hindsight saying that, in effect, we betrayed Diem, that we meddled in the internal affairs of South Vietnam by encouraging the coup. What's your feeling on all this? Did we have that much to do with it?

BUNDY: Well, I think we did meddle. Yeah. We did meddle. In August, the August 24th cable, between August 24 and 31, we did, in effect, actively suggest the possibility of a change by the generals.¹⁵ And having done that then, even though we didn't repeat that in September—we pulled back and said, “No, we don't want you to do it”—nonetheless, you couldn't get away from that initial act, I think. Now, when it came to the October period, the policy laid down and accepted by

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the President, laid down in the McNamara-Taylor report and accepted by the President, was not to encourage a coup but not to thwart one and to stay in touch and try to follow it. That was a tricky posture to be in, no question about it. And so that was our relationship with the coup.

But most, most basically, from the time that Americans, including the President, sharply criticized the Diem regime, it was obvious that in various ways, the Americans were creating an atmosphere in which people would assume that they would have American support if they managed to bring off a clean cut change of government. That impression was conveyed by things that President Kennedy said in his TV broadcasts; by the cutting off of the commodity import program fund, which was in September, and then in October, and quite deliberately, by the cut-off of funds for the Tung [Colonel Le Quang Tung] special forces...

¹⁵ NSF 195; Vietnam, General, Memos & Reports, 11.1.61-11/16/61, Outgoing Telegram from Department of State “Eyes only—Ambassador Lodge for CINCPAC/POLAD Exclusive for Admiral Felt”

MOSS: Colonel Tung, right.

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BUNDY: ...by the denial of funds for new AID [Agency for International Development] projects, for the electric and the water plant; by, although I think this wasn't in the policy, but by the recall of Richardson [John Richardson] who, through no fault of his own, had become symbolic.

MOSS: Right. Yeah, Richardson really is left holding the bag.

BUNDY: Very much left holding the bag, and he's a very steady, professional officer. I happened to have dinner with him a month ago [REDACTED] [REDACTED] And, poor Richardson, after all, had been given the job—which I think was a mistake—of working so closely with Nhu on...

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: ...the operational side of Nhu's activities that he really couldn't have been expected to have a detached view of what Nhu and others were like. So, he was almost too close to the administration. I don't think that was his fault, I think it was almost natural given the job he was told to do.

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MOSS: Now the papers don't indicate clearly whether there was a falling out between Richardson and Lodge or not.

BUNDY: Oh, there was.

MOSS: The indication is that.... There was?

BUNDY: Not a real falling out, but they were just on entirely different wave lengths.

MOSS: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BUNDY: I don't think there was ever a row or anything of that sort. I think it was just that it was impossible for them to get along very well.

MOSS: Let me cut this off for a minute while you are perusing those.
[Interruption]

BUNDY: ...very, very. Yeah, there were a great many groups. Taylor-Harkins messages. You have everything here as near as I can tell. I guess this was really pulled together systematically at some point.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: Taylor and Harkins messages. Let's see, there's one category called "Reports to the President,"

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no, I think the President was being told. That was a systematic reporting. I think it was set up, or Lodge set.... Are we gaining or losing, and how are we doing; but I don't think that amounts to much now. CIA Intelligence Reports.

Well, there's a lot one could say about this file. This is obviously a superb historical file. I guess.... I've forgotten when this one was pulled together.

MOSS: I don't know who put it together, but it certainly was done afterwards.

BUNDY: I seem to remember it was done sometime in 1964 or five, but I've forgotten.... I think I wrote a memorandum at that time on what had happened for Bill Moyers [William D. Moyers] in the Johnson administration [Lyndon Baines Johnson].

MOSS: Yeah. Now this other file that I have here contains the Washington meetings on Vietnam from, I guess it's right after the August 24th cable went out. [Interruption]

BUNDY: ...memorandum of February 1963 in which it's

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indicated that Wheeler [General Earle G. Wheeler] had given a very rosy report to the President; at least this was the judgment of Mike Forrestal who wrote the memorandum, and he and Harriman obviously weren't persuaded and had a number of points they were perturbed on. I think that reflects the difference of opinion that did grow up in this period.

MOSS: I get the feeling of Forrestal and Harriman and Hilsman really sort of running with the bit in their teeth on this whole thing.

BUNDY: Oh very much so, very much so. And very disturbed about...

MOSS: Diem and Nhu particularly.

BUNDY: ...Diem and Nhu, right. And this was true from early sixty-three on, particularly.

MOSS: That's a xerox; there's no flack there.

BUNDY: I see, yes that's right. In general, they were more pessimistic. I think they were probably more nearly right too. I've seen papers indicating that Hilsman said something to the press in March, as early as March,

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about wouldn't we have to maybe change the government. He was talking pretty freely from then on on those lines at gatherings. I heard him on several occasions.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: Now let's see, the twenty-eighth.

MOSS: The underlinings and notes that you'll find in there are mine, so don't let them throw you.

BUNDY: Yeah, now these are all notes. I wasn't really close to this one. And....

MOSS: I believe there are one or two in which you are listed as a participant.

BUNDY: Yeah. I was not in the last week before this meeting. You see, I was abroad. I was in Italy.

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1; BEGIN SIDE 2 TAPE 1]

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BUNDY: There're notes in the margin.

MOSS: Yeah, the notes in the margin are mine. I xeroxed this lot from the originals in another folder so that I could cart them about more easily for interviews.

BUNDY: Oh yes, I see.

MOSS: I carted them down to show your brother, for instance.

BUNDY: This is fascinating stuff but I don't claim to be able to add to it so I don't know that I ought to get into it.
Hmm, the President, August 28th. Wow, that certainly was a hectic week. It left so many scars. I came back into the situation.

MOSS: How did you find it when you came back? What confronted you?

BUNDY: Oh. It was.... I came back the 15th of September and I hadn't been home in the house an hour before Mike Forrestal came in bounding in and said, "You've got to get into this one;

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there isn't anybody trusting anybody any more; and you're innocent." And Mike by then had said, "This is just too bad, too bad from the government's standpoint and we've got to think again about it." And, I think he had been quite eager for the coup but he was seeing how it had made a shambles of the government the way it had been handled; and he was very anxious to....

MOSS: You mean a shambles of our government?

BUNDY: Of our government, yeah.

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: The way it was handled. So he was very anxious to have some uncommitted people get into the act. He was not so much pressing his own particular point of view as that he was saying, "Whatever we do, we've got to pull the government together."

MOSS: Did McNamara talk to you about this?

BUNDY: McNamara talked to me about this very much along the same lines.

MOSS: Sort of along the same lines?

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BUNDY: Yes, very much. And....

MOSS: How? Do you recall instances?

BUNDY: Oh yes. When I came down to the office on the Monday, practically at once, McNamara—whatever Monday it was, the Monday about the 16th of September—McNamara called me in and said, "I think you've got to get in the middle of this one." I'd of course been the Action Officer on Vietnam but hadn't been involved in the political matters or things of that sort. And, "I want you to..." Then the next day or two days afterward, the President made the decision to send the McNamara-Taylor group. And I have been astounded at Taylor's memoirs which imply that all that was going to be done was to look and see how the program was doing and whether you could perceive would be first withdrawals. That undoubtedly was part of the charter, but the most

basic part of the charter was to make up your mind, should we try to string along with Diem or should we

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dissociate from, or should we start a coup?

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: Everything was up in the air. And this was the real picture. [Interruption] On the meeting of August 30, the notes of General Krulak [Major General Victor H. Krulak] appear in the *Pentagon Papers*; that's just a sidelight.

MOSS: Yeah. This is Friday the thirtieth.

BUNDY: Yeah. Do you want to turn it off?

MOSS: Right. Okay. [Interruption] I see Colby's [William Egan Colby] name there. In effect, he replaced Des Fitzgerald [Desmond Fitzgerald], didn't he?

BUNDY: Right. That's correct.

MOSS: Was there any change with that kind of change in....

BUNDY: I don't know. I never really dealt very much with Fitzgerald, myself. I came to deal extensively with Colby and to have very high

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regard for him. I don't know.

MOSS: Okay.

BUNDY: I wouldn't have said so. [Interruption] ...If everybody had given up on the generals...

MOSS: Yes. After Lodge's cable, this particular coup is finished. I think that that was the case. This is interesting. The Vice President doesn't express his views until the 31st. And then he says that he hadn't known what was underway. And says that he had never been sympathetic and thought we ought to get back with Diem and get on with the war. And, I guess, that same day, CIA was cabling that that coup idea was right out the window. Now it's along in here that there was a meeting with.... Krulak's notes that Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] had something to say about, "If it's hopeless as this, should we consider withdrawal?"

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MOSS: There is. I think, I think it's a little later.

BUNDY: I see. I see on September three, the meeting has the President saying that the Laos neutralization formula wouldn't, wasn't working in Laos, and the President didn't see why it should provide any illustration of what could be done on Vietnam. I think that's an important point and something that the President believed all along from late 1961 onward; that whatever you were able to achieve in Laos, by way of a neutralized situation, by a coalition government, simply wasn't applicable to Vietnam. And the President consistently opposed it, and as this memorandum I see shows, opposed the de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle] remarks which were in the direction of neutralization of Vietnam, in late August 1963.

This was the first time de Gaulle mentioned it, and the President rather bit his head off in the TV thing. And, there's some mention here

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of whether the French would protest.

MOSS: Okay. Now, the President had sent Harriman, in effect, to get whatever kind of settlement he could in Laos. And the President had a very high regard for Harriman, and Harriman seemed to believe right through that he got something pretty reasonable in Laos. And here we have the President saying that it's not working. What's the difference there?

BUNDY: Well, the point was that by the fall of 1963, you could see that there had been assassinations and various events in Laos, which had broken up the planned tripartite basis of government. Actually, I think by September of sixty-three, the Pathet-Lao, the Communist side, had pulled out of the government, you see.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: And that's what he meant when he said it wasn't working. There was conflict and hostility. Well, that's, that's one of the meetings.

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And then there was a meeting on the sixth. The Attorney General asked, "If we had concluded that we were going to lose with Diem, why don't we grasp the nettle now?" I don't know quite what that means.

MOSS: I don't know.

BUNDY: Does that mean that we should overthrow Diem or accept that we might just have to pull out?

MOSS: Could be either way.

BUNDY: But it's interesting that Rusk was convinced by the sixth that you couldn't win with Diem the way he was behaving. This was when the Krulak-Mendenhall [Joseph A. Mendenhall] trip....

MOSS: If I remember correctly, Mendenhall was not originally scheduled to go. They got him on at the last minute because State wanted a rep; or something of this sort.

BUNDY: Uh-huh. The 3rd, the 6th, and the 10th; that's interesting. This was when they sent—and I guess the 10th came after a weekend—and they sent Krulak and Mendenhall whizzing

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out and back; and they came back and disagreed. This is Mecklin's [John M. Mecklin] estimate; goodness.

MOSS: I think that's the Krulak report.

BUNDY: The 10th, yeah. Incredible.

MOSS: That's a later meeting on the same day.

BUNDY: Yeah. The 10th. That may have been another of the ones where the Attorney General said "What exactly do we do?" Well, then they all met the 11th; again without the President. This is all...

MOSS: I notice Nolting, Nolting drops out about this time....

BUNDY: Yeah.

MOSS: You no longer have Nolting....

BUNDY: I don't know. He had gone by the time I came back into the fire. The 11th—you see, I'm trying to do the dates—yes, Sunday the 15th.

MOSS: Monday the 16th.

BUNDY: And then here's September 16, '63, which is, Hilsman had two alternative ways of doing things,

MOSS: Right. This was the one that John Roche...

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BUNDY: Removal of Nhu.... Yeah, John Roche has talked about.

MOSS: ...publicized. Right.

BUNDY: Yeah. Well, I think it.... I guess so. It doesn't appear in detail in the *Pentagon Papers*; it's only summarized. I imagine I had this in some way but I don't recall it very well. It was how you'd fight and how you'd do all kinds of things.

MOSS: I wonder about that. How.... Hilsman here and in that "Strategic Concept for Vietnam," went into great detail as to how you do things. How much of this worked on policy?

BUNDY: I don't think very much. I think this was regarded as pretty far out stuff. And this was.... The 16th was a Monday....

MOSS: And here we have....

BUNDY: Yeah, then you skipped to October 3rd; that's funny.

MOSS: Right. There's very little input; there's nothing in between.

BUNDY: I don't appear at the meeting on the 16th. Well my recollection is that I got into it

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very rapidly after that; that it was about the 17th a limited meeting with the President was held.... Oh, I see, this is a telegram referring to the possibility of a deal between Nhu and the North Vietnamese.

MOSS: Hanoi.

BUNDY: And this deals with the.... This for the historian would be fascinating because this does refer to the Polish ICC commission of Manelli and he's now written a book which you probably know all about this.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: Now, this may momentarily have been taken seriously, But by the time

that the McNamara-Taylor trip went out and all fanned out around, we didn't take it seriously at all and I think it's hardly referred to in the McNamara-Taylor report. In other words, this says that if they are backed into a corner.... And this is interesting because this has the CIA people reporting that there was no capability to overthrow the Diem government and it would take many months to build such a capability. And there was speculation

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that Nhu might make a deal. But I don't think, I don't think anybody ever came to grips too hard.

MOSS: Yes, I don't have you in the meeting until the third of...

BUNDY: October.

MOSS: October.

BUNDY: Well, I went with the McNamara-Taylor group, you see, as Chief of Staff for that operation. Oh, on October 4, that seems to be a meeting.... This was starting off an action group that was going to follow the program. That's what I remember about that.

MOSS: As you look back on it. You have the Task Force Vietnam, and later the Working Group Vietnam, and the Working Group on Southeast Asia, and so on, what usefulness is there in this kind of a Washington "keeping tabs on things" committee?

BUNDY: It all depends who's in charge. I recall in this particular one that for a day or so McNamara was in charge. Then, it had to go to somebody else

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on a day to day basis. And the obvious person to do it was Hilsman. And Hilsman took quite a lot of urging to do it. He didn't like to sort of move in. I think it has to be some one person who really takes charge and moves in. I see you've noted that by the 29th there was a meeting where I was present and Hilsman wasn't. I don't think that has any particular meaning. I suspect it was because Hilsman was away on some.... He made a great many speeches around, even at this time. Harriman was present; I don't believe there'd be anything in that. I was regularly in the middle of the picture from the McNamara-Taylor thing onward.

Well, there we were.... I guess on November 1, that was after the coup had taken place which....

MOSS: That's November 1 here, is twelve hours later than it is in Saigon.

BUNDY: Well, I don't.... These don't kindle anything vast and new. I think it's a

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remarkable file and I think the best one I know of that anybody would have.

MOSS: One thing that amazes me about it and that is the extent to which there is general and deep disagreement; and, in a way, ignorance of what's going on. There's a feeling for a need for information that people don't have. They are looking for firm ground to stand on and nobody really has it.

BUNDY: Yeah. That's true. In essence there were the people who were so hipped on the political situation that they thought there had to be a change and were oblivious to all else. And there were the people who were so hipped on the military situation that they said don't rock the boat whatever the difficulties are. Between the two, I think it's fair to say, that the senior civilians were by and large in the middle. Rusk, McNamara, my brother, myself personally, people like Sullivan [William H. Sullivan], and I think increasingly Forrestall who just said, "Look, this is a very tricky, difficult problem.

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It's a terrible business to tamper with a government, particularly in a wartime situation. And if we're really persuaded that these fellows can't do it, then that's decisive." Now what happened on the visit—and this I remember very well—what happened on the visit to in effect tip the scales—because by the time we finished in Saigon everybody was prepared to accept the idea that we had to dissociate from Diem; that as he was going he simply couldn't possibly do it. That had been Rusk's tentative judgment early in September, but I...

MOSS: But this you had decided in the trip to Saigon?

BUNDY: During the trip to Saigon. Now what was decisive in that was the important thing. I recall two witnesses as being terribly important. McNamara saw both alone and so I only have second hand.... He referred to them by pseudonyms but I think I might as well put it in for history who they were. I referred to them in my draft manuscript; I referred to them only in broad

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terms as respectively a "non-American European observer of Vietnam with long experience," and a "senior member of the Vietnamese government." They were in fact Professor Patrick Honey [Patrick James Honey]...

MOSS: Oh yes.

BUNDY: ...of London...

MOSS: Yes.

BUNDY: ...and Defense Minister Thuan, T-H-U-A-N. And the two, in interviews very carefully arranged so that it wouldn't be realized that they were seeing McNamara, saw him and conveyed to him very, very strong opinions that the situation not only couldn't go on but that it was sure to explode the way it was going. Honey, who had been, started the summer and had been out all summer I think on an observation of Vietnam and then early in the summer had been convinced the Buddhist thing was a passing thing and that Diem was still [unclear], and who had been pro-Diem for a long period, was now exactly the reverse. He just felt that he [Diem] had lost all capacity; that

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Nhu controlled him, Madame Nhu [Tran Le Thuan], the worst things. And he made a very persuasive argument to this effect, as McNamara recounted it.

The Thuan was even more striking because of course he was terribly close to Diem and had been and had been the strong man on the administrative side of the whole administration. And I think he.... I'm not sure whether he actually described his own children being arrested but he certainly described his friends' children. And, in effect, what he conveyed was that there were no longer senior men, enough senior men who were disaffected with Diem to run the government—which one could sense because by that time Vu Van Mau, the Foreign Minister had resigned, the ambassador to Washington had resigned....

MOSS: Tran Van Chuong.

BUNDY: And he was saying, "This is desperate, this is really desperate as it's going now." Now those two witnesses who were reported, whose views were reported with cover names, I think, at the time, were terribly important. So that,

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when you added up that plus the careful conversations with Lodge trying to get the basis for his feeling, a lot of conversations with the embassy people, a lot of conversations with the Vietnamese in which you didn't ask questions right out but you did get the state of their feeling, convinced all of us who had responsibilities in this area, that is to say McNamara, myself, Sullivan, Forrestal, and Colby—Colby was more reluctant because he was rather in the CIA skeptical frame of mind when he arrived, but by the end of the trip I thought he was pretty well persuaded—but anyway....

MOSS: Did Harkins ever get cranked in here?

BUNDY: Harkins was chasing around the countryside taking General Taylor and usually McNamara—I think he took McNamara every time. They went on a terrific field trip routine, and these special interviews were sandwiched in for McNamara. But in the mean time, the others of us stayed and covered the Saigon beat most of the time. We went on one or two of the trips,

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but we didn't.... We stayed and talked to people and tried to get a feel of the situation. And we concluded that that we had to somehow get Diem to reform or else see something else happen.

MOSS: All right, the argument is made that what you saw was the disaffected urban intellectual and that it didn't affect the rural peasants as much and this sort of thing, or the army.

BUNDY: Right. Well, it was always very difficult to gauge in the army. You couldn't get to talk to anybody in the army in any political way, it was just terribly difficult to do.

MOSS: Oh, speaking of the army, just off the record, I notice that Colonel Vann [John Paul Vann] had himself quite a day yesterday.

BUNDY: Yes, yes, yes.

MOSS: An old name from the period.

BUNDY: Yeah. Well, the army, it is true you didn't know what the army thought, except through the CIA contacts which after all did go back to August and did indicate that many of the senior generals were disaffected. I don't think anybody

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talked directly to the generals at our level during the CIA thing. And you had the rather comic business which General Taylor tells in his memoirs of General Taylor's tennis game with Big Minh with McNamara going to watch, which couldn't have been a more ridiculous thing and it was doubtless picked up by the Vietnamese, and didn't produce anything Minh had much too much sense to talk in that setting.

MOSS: Yeah.

BUNDY: And this was really amateur cops and robbers stuff. So you didn't have much direct stuff on the military, except this knowledge that the senior

men, senior military, were disaffected. You didn't have rural stuff; how could you get it?

MOSS: Yeah.

BUNDY: Even today, nobody gets real information on rural attitudes politically. But it was serious people in Saigon, and it wasn't old line opponents of Diem who really weren't seen to speak of, the so-called intellectuals.

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And some of them became important; they weren't to be sneezed at. But in point of fact they didn't affect the thing. What did affect it was the general run of views all the way around from third country people, reporters, Vietnamese that you did talk to—some of whom people in the group had known before, Sullivan had been in Vietnam before, Forrestal knew people, Colby knew a great many people—and they brought back some fairly interesting reports. I remember they had some interviews with students, they had some interviews with labor people. We tried to cover different kinds of groups; anything but the intellectuals, really. And then these two rather decisive ones, the Honey interview and the Thuan interview, played an immense part. So that by the time we came to write the description of the political situation and the American posture, all the civilians in the group were thoroughly aboard. I think Max Taylor wasn't as persuaded. And I

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rather think McNamara had to persuade him very hard in the early stages of the trip back. But in the end, Taylor went with that. And we signed.... And we had an essentially unanimous report. McNamara had said on the way out that this report had to be a fair reflection of what everybody thought. If anybody didn't agree with a part of it, he was to put a footnote on of dissent, and there was complete freedom of dissent. In fact, there was only one footnote. When we came to the part of the report that said what would happen if there was a successor government of the military, we said in the report we thought it was about a fifty-fifty chance that it would be better than Diem. And Sullivan footnoted that saying he thought it was more than fifty-fifty. So he was more gung-ho, if you will, in the direction of letting that happen. And the rest of us merely thought it had an even chance of being better and that it was quite hopeless the way we were.

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So the essential calculation was we were in a poker game where you can't win with the hand you've got, why don't you draw another card, or let another card be drawn. We weren't going to actively do it, but you were going to—as Lodge put it in that cable—not thwart whatever might happen.

MOSS: Right. Right. Right. Let me ask you a question of a little different thought.

And that is to describe McNamara on one of these trips. What did he do? What was he after? How did he conduct himself?

BUNDY: Well, he was incredibly industrious. He would talk.... On the way out in this case, we all spent quite a long time with our briefing books which were voluminous. We got over toward Alaska, as I recall, and he said, "Let's have a brief meeting." And that's when he said to everybody, "Now we have a tough problem to figure out. Whether what political posture ought to be and also what we think of the military situation.

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This has got all kind of problems on which we've had sharp disagreement. And this report is going to be totally candid, and it's not going to fudge anybody's views for the sake of agreement." And that's when he mentioned about the dissent.

Well, then we had a long, long flight. I remember we flew all the way; we flew non-stop from Anchorage to Saigon on this flight, a fourteen hour flight. And I think McNamara got some real sleep on that one. This was one of those long nights and then you'd wake up the following morning in Saigon. And I guess we got in about in the morning. Then he would.... He had the most amazing capacity to shake off or discipline himself against the time change bends that everybody else gets, so that when ordinarily I'd just be feeling absolutely whipped by three o'clock in the afternoon which was three o'clock in the morning by the time we had left—by Washington time—McNamara kept going. The first day we had a lot of briefings. Then he

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sees us at odd moments. He was staying, if I recall correctly, he stayed with Lodge and Taylor stayed with Harkins. But, he was talking with Lodge and we would see him usually at MACV headquarters as he came and went in the late afternoon. I remember his office very well, exactly what it was; it was actually a general's office, I think, that he had turned over to him. And he had us in there so that we'd all have a small get together in the late afternoon on several of the days that we were there; we were there for about a week. And we'd come in and say, "This is what I've picked up" and "This is what you've picked up." And that's where he first told some of us—I've forgotten what group—about these special interviews that he had had with Honey and Thuan.

MOSS: Who set those up?

BUNDY: I think the CIA people did. I'm not sure though, it may have been CIA; it may have been.... I just don't know. I think Lodge.... Lodge

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set it up with Honey; and somebody set it up, some private contact, with Thuan.

MOSS: It might even have been Trueheart [William C. Trueheart]...

BUNDY: It may have been.

MOSS: ...because Trueheart had a close relationship with Thuan.

BUNDY: That may well be; and Trueheart was very gung-ho on it.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: Then McNamara just just incredibly driving and affecting. I think this was.... He was in superb form all through this thing. He'd go on these long trips. He'd ask very searching questions. I remember he.... I was down.... I took the trip down to the Delta with him and his questions got the advisors started on what was wrong in their areas. And by the time this formidable list of corrupt appointments, nepotism.... I remember one of them getting up and saying that the province chief in the Plain of Reeds was a complete bust. Well, who was he? He

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was the nephew of Archbishop Khang [?]

MOSS: Yeah.

BUNDY: And this said it very bluntly. These guys got up and started talking. The briefings with the Vietnamese were usually larded with what one thought were excessive claims. But the sessions privately with the Americans were very blunt. And McNamara was just excellent at drawing people out in the thing and saying "Now, what's really the situation here," and getting quite a lot. Everybody knows, I think, that those trips have their limitations. But, in those days, people were ready to talk; they were disturbed; they were.... And these were very impressive officers. That first wave, or the first two waves of advisors were the pick of the Army. They really were first rate. I remember two or three who weren't on this trip, but by and large they made a very strong impression and they were men who didn't have political sense in a sophisticated way; but they did have the common sense to see that the situation was all

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wrong if it was. So you felt you got a lot from them.

Well, anyway, since I'm talking about McNamara, the main point is that he was very effective, I thought, in the field. And he'd conduct these briefings and really wade in and ask

searching questions. It was quite something to see, and particularly in this first one where he had really gone at people hard in Saigon. It was quite a series of sessions.

Then, on the way home, we had sections of the report that we had written in the last two days before we had left because we knew we wouldn't be able to finish it just writing it on the way home. We didn't have a political section, so I had to work on that for the first three or four hours, and get one drafted. And McNamara sat down with people in relays. And then, we left at about five o'clock in the afternoon, I think; and then he went to sleep fairly early I guess and maybe got some sleep. Well, all

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I remember is the way I used to tell it afterwards. We arrived in Honolulu at noon. And then we had the report re-typed in a relay of five sergeants up in the headquarters, and I did all of that.

MOSS: Up at Camp Smith?

BUNDY: Up at Camp Smith, up there. And McNamara talked to Felt [Admiral Harry D. Felt] about what we'd seen; I guess it was still Felt, yes it was.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: Well, then he and I re-edited the thing after we got back aboard the plane. And Art Sylvester [Arthur Sylvester] ran through it, and Art Sylvester had an old city editor's eye for copy and was a very good critic. Well, the long and short of it was that McNamara and I stayed up passing this thing back and forth, changing it, editing it, getting it ready to be finally typed the moment we landed, which we did at six o'clock in the morning in Andrews [Andrews Air Force Base]. And we finished off, he finished off all the gin

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on the plane and I finished off all the whiskey. But neither of us were in the slightest degree affected; this was just a way of sort of keeping yourself going through a long night of work.

MOSS: Yeah. Right.

BUNDY: All together, I figure he had about six hours of sleep in the total return trip—which was roughly twenty-two, twenty-four hours—and I had two, so I wasn't in too crisp shape by the time I landed. [Laughter] I was fortunate though. Coming off of leave, I was in better shape than I guess I ever was on any other, on any of those trips.

But, they were exhausting; they were back-breaking; and they weren't very conducive to good judgment.

MOSS: Uh-huh.

BUNDY: I've always thought that the rather simplified and misleading form of words that we thought that the American part of the job would be done by the end of '65....

MOSS: Yeah.

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BUNDY: And I can't recall how that came to be in the text. I think it sort of went in as a very firm thing that McNamara and Taylor had agreed on. It went back to the earlier withdrawal plan. It just stuck there. But the failure to criticize it and to say, "Now wait a second; we're saying the political situation is desperately serious. How can we really suppose that we haven't got such a big unknown that any prediction is no good?" And, we should have seen that and should have realized this was sticking our necks out of foot—as the press was sure to read it. And I blame the people at home in part for not being critical of that. I think the President bought it very early and thereafter it was set in concrete. But I blame us for writing it that way and I think it's because you get punchy on a trip of this sort.

MOSS: Yeah. I had heard from one source that somebody tried to knock out the thousand troop withdrawal from the press announcement, but McNamara insisted that it go in. Do you recall that?

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BUNDY: Right. Well, this is.... Cooper [Chester Cooper] tells in his book...

MOSS: That's right. That's where it was.

BUNDY: ...that he remonstrated, but not directly to McNamara. He remonstrated to my brother Mac and myself, and that we said, "Look, this is all agreed." I think there had been some discussion; there must have been some discussion or we wouldn't have been able to say, "Look, this is, this is orders." This was from the President as we both saw it. Now I don't remember whether it was argued or not, but it seems to me to have been a clear mistake. And so, I inclined to blame a lot of things but among the things I blame is that.... And I believe, I believe.... I've heard from Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan] that he called it to McNamara's attention on the plane and McNamara said, "Look, that's one we've really got to have." And there was just the shade of an implication, which I've never pursued and I may be wrong on it, that this statement was something

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McNamara had decided with Taylor. And possibly this was an important thing for Taylor because it supported the idea that the military thing was going well. And it may have been that McNamara was prepared to buy this while Taylor felt he was at least edging the point in accepting the political diagnosis. But I don't know that's true or not. It was just a possible impression.

MOSS: All right. Let me take you to the end of the month. The people are getting ready to go out for another Honolulu conference, and the Cabinet is taking off for Japan, and the assassination comes. What is the thinking at that point? Where is it going and what does the assassination do to the thinking on Vietnam?

BUNDY: Well, that's a hard one. This is the period the 19th, 20th, 21st, 22nd of November. This is the period where Henry Brandon in his book has quoted Kennedy as saying, "We haven't got really much of a chance here..."

MOSS: Uh-huh.

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BUNDY: ...and, "We've got to find a way out." And I believe Brandon's source is Mike Forrester. And Mike reports that Kennedy did in fact, the President did in fact say something of that sort to him at this stage. Not of that was visible to me. From where I sat, there was no tremor about policy. We were worried about the situation and it was already clear that the Viet Cong had mounted an offensive and were making gains. We were worried about the degree to which all the officials in the countryside had been changed, a fantastic numbers of province chiefs and district chiefs, and all that. It seemed far too many had been changed for effectiveness. And this sort of political vendetta had swept through and this was dangerous, risky. How we were worried about the economic situation as I recall. But, all of this, from where I sat, seemed to be questions of serious difficulty we might be about to run into but we had to.... We had all sails set

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and we were just going to go right through. In other words, I didn't detect at the time any indication of real doubts about the policy or of a sense that it might be up for reconsideration up to the time of the President's death. This is one I wouldn't be expected to have in the sense of knowing, being seeing the President closely; because I didn't. But it is the fact that you just didn't get that feeling.

MOSS: Now, with his death, is there any immediate change or is it....

BUNDY: No, I would say that the very first thing that in effect, LBJ moved into the Vietnam problem with two very clear ideas in mind. A) He had thought all

along that it was just terribly important to win this one. I think he had been strengthened in that by his trip in the area in May of '61. But all along he had been convinced that this was a terribly important place and a terribly important struggle. Point two was that he had lived through

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the disastrous split within the government over the question of dealing with Diem in August and September, and had been appalled with the degree of division and lack of teamwork and lack of unity and so on all through that period. And so, both those, in effect, reflected themselves. Lodge had been on his way in from Honolulu. And when Kennedy died, he stayed for a moment in California and then was told to come on in anyway. And they had the celebrated meeting on that Sunday...

MOSS: Right.

BUNDY: ...after the assassination. And the President turned for briefing papers—this has probably lost its significance—he asked McNamara for briefing papers on what he should say to Lodge. And I drafted them, which was indicative of something, not total confidence in Harriman and all those people...

MOSS: Right.

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BUNDY: ...who were in any case absolutely prostrated with grief. I was stricken with grief too, but I wasn't as close to the President as they. And of course, McNamara was simply carrying on the best way he knew how, although perhaps right up there, there wasn't anybody who [unclear] grief. Indeed, certainly up there with anybody. But we wrote papers saying there's a real problem with teamwork in the nation. And this is something you do need in distress. And get everybody together and get on with it. And, a firm tone was what we conveyed and this is what the President said to Lodge. This is the one where some people said he.... Well, where LBJ said, "This is the only war we've got...." I don't think he said quite that but he did over and over again say, "This is a place where people are dying and that has an absolute top priority on everybody's time." That you don't go to.... That if you go home in

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the afternoon or to bed at night not sure that you've done everything you can do, you're letting the side down. Well, a perfectly understandable attitude.

But, in short, what was conveyed to the President by McNamara, Rusk, Mac Bundy, as far as I know, by anybody, by Hilsman, by Harriman, by anybody, was, did not contain any element of doubt. I mean, for example, at the turn of 1963-4, New Years, it was appropriate to send a message to General Big Minh who was in charge, the top man

nominally in Saigon. And that message was drafted by Hilsman and it could not have been a stronger denunciation of the whole idea of neutralization; in effect, a reaffirmation that the United States was seeing this one through. It was not going to go—the French were urging neutralization. It was going to stand fast and see it through.

MOSS: What do you think...

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BUNDY: So I think the people, the people closest, who had been in every way closest to Kennedy, the senior advisors as well as men like Harriman and Hilsman who had their own special relationships with President Kennedy, all were very firm at that stage. And that again strengthens my feeling that Kennedy may have had private doubts but he did not convey to anybody of any significance the idea that he wasn't seeing this one through.

MOSS: What do you think of the Gelb [Leslie H. Gelb] report conclusion that because we encouraged the coup we incurred a commitment to the successor regime, and that this led us down the garden path?

BUNDY: Oh, I think this was an intangible.... Well, I think it was an intangible. It deepened our commitment. I have no doubt of that. I think that's a fair conclusion. It was not something that was argued at the time.

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And I think we were rather blind to this obvious effect. Once we were taken to have done this, people in Saigon counted more on us, expected more from us. We were more deeply involved in the political thing but we were also, in the psychological sense, more deeply committed. You have the same problem if you tell your wife that you don't like her dress and then she wears the one that you do like and somebody says they don't like it, you're sharing the responsibility.

MOSS: Yeah. Yeah.

BUNDY: You're committed. It's the same. Or if you criticize the PTA [Parent Teachers Association] and you get elected to the PTA, you've got more of a responsibility.

MOSS: All right, I think I'll end it on that note and call it an afternoon. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW #3]

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