

William P. Bundy, Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/12/1964
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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 planning the Bay of Pigs invasion; escalation of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam during the Kennedy Administration, and Robert S. McNamara's role in developing Vietnam policy; and U.S. military aid to India; among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

William P. Bundy

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William P. Bundy—JFK#1

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First of Three Oral History Interviews

with

William P. Bundy

November 12, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Elspeth Rostow

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ROSTOW: What were your first impressions of John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

BUNDY: I knew the President first when we were in Dexter School, I think we were together for two years in the same class before they moved to New York. And we played football together and did a number of other things together, but I never knew him really well in the intervening period at all. I met him once or twice here in Washington when he was in Congress. I saw him in June of 1960 but on a very small matter. I had no part in the campaign and it may be that I wasn't even very closely identified as a strong Democrat, although, in fact, I've always been one.

ROSTOW: When was the proposal made that you shift to the Pentagon?

BUNDY: Paul Nitze [Paul Henry Nitze], who had just been offered the position of Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, talked to me on Christmas Eve of 1960. We've known each other for a very long time, and we have a common tie arising from his very close association with my father-in-law, Mr. Acheson [Dean G. Acheson]. He asked me if I would like to come in as a deputy to him, and I immediately said that it interested me very much. I'd always thought ISA was one of the most important spots in government, and so I

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accepted it very quickly thereafter. To the best of my knowledge, President Kennedy himself had no part in picking me. From the very first time we saw each other he immediately picked up where we had left off. He knew me immediately and, of course, had by then brought in my brother [McGeorge Bundy] in a much closer position to him. I accepted the offer for the very simple reason that government is my life, as near as I can make it, and this was obviously a fascinating position with potentially considerable usefulness.

ROSTOW: When you went across to the Pentagon, how would you describe your assignments? What did you do during that early period after the Inaugural?

BUNDY: Well, I think all of us have a vivid memory of those last days before the Inaugural when we were all breaking in, those of us who had accepted positions, and the first days afterward. It seemed as though there was just no end to the really critical situations that we were confronting. Paul Nitze was quickly brought in on all of them, and I took on a role in some of them, including Cuba. He took on Berlin right from the outset and carried it throughout our association. We were both together on Cuba to some degree. I, from the first, was perhaps a shade more involved in Vietnam and Laos than he was—day-to-day, at any rate—but I so well remember the early snow-covered nights when we used to speed through the streets and go up to the State Department to discuss the horrors of some tropical situation.

ROSTOW: The crises then were Cuba, Berlin, Laos, Vietnam, and the Congo?

BUNDY: That's right. I really didn't get into the Congo in any depth. I don't recall that it was in a particularly critical point in January—it may have been.

ROSTOW: On Cuba. How soon were you deeply involved in the issues that led in the direction of the Bay of Pigs?

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BUNDY: Almost at once. I had been, of course, in CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] previously, but I'd spent 1960 working on President Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Commission on National Goals so that, in fact, I had no knowledge whatever that President Eisenhower had authorized the inception of this operation, which I think came in about March 1960. Indeed, the fact that there even was such an operation was not known to me when I came into office. As I recall, it was one of the very first things that I learned through Paul Nitze, and at a very early stage I became the man who almost at once kept the papers and went to all the meetings in the White House on this subject, except the obviously private ones with the Secretaries of State and

Defense [Dean Rusk; Robert S. McNamara]. I was very much in the group that hashed this thing out for the next, say, four months till it came off. Or rather—didn't.

ROSTOW: Do you remember the first meeting at which Cuba was discussed?

BUNDY: I remember very clearly early meetings in the Department of State when Tom Mann [Thomas C. Mann] was still Assistant Secretary and when Mr. Berle [Adolf A. Berle, Jr.] and, I guess, Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin], were there as White House advisors on the subject. One of the early things that came up which I remember quite clearly was the question of whether the U.S. could or should support the effort of this force by the overt use of our air power. My recollection is that there was no serious plan in existence (this has sometimes been asserted) when we came into office for the overt use of U.S. air. There had been one or two JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] pink papers about it and I think we saw those, but very early (and I think it was Tom Mann who urged this most strongly) there seemed to be an absolutely universal point of agreement that the U.S. could not get into the position, for the sake of its long-term interests in Latin America, of supporting an invasion of this sort by its own open use of its own military forces. That was a decision taken very early, and all the planning thereafter proceeded on that assumption. So that's one point to make.

Then it became a question of a series of meetings which at first were mostly in the State Department and, I think,

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didn't move really to the White House until early in March, in which it immediately became clear that there was no proper political planning or preparation for a government that could be installed with any kind of plausibility. I always thought that Dick Bissell [Richard M. Bissell, Jr.] and the men in CIA did an extraordinary job of doing everything effective in the way of bringing together the various very discordant groups and so on into something that you could hold together, at least for the time of the operation itself.

But obviously what had happened and one of the major causes for the failure of the whole undertaking was that the only thing that had been done before we came into office was to start training a force and to start training it in an area in Guatemala where its tenure was limited and where Guatemala was ready to entertain the force and play host to it and accept that degree of responsibility only for a limited period of time. That factor came in very early. So we were, from the very first, confronted with a short time fuse on this operation. The government of Guatemala wasn't ready to have the force stay. The estimates in February were that their hospitality would run out about the end of March. Subsequently it was extended, but it was, I think, made quite clear that the force had to be out of Guatemala by roughly early May, and this became a tremendous sort of forcing aspect to this situation as we looked at it in March. (The actual embarkation base was in Nicaragua.)

ROSTOW: You mentioned force. Did the plan always involve only twelve hundred men?

BUNDY: Actually, the force was considerably built up. I don't know the exact figures, but my recollection is that when we started it was only about four hundred and a great deal of high-speed recruiting was done in Miami to raise it to twelve hundred between early February and early April.

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The training quality was checked out. I remember the Joint Chiefs sent a mission down there because there were doubts about whether they were being properly trained. And they gave a rather glowing report on the morale and state of training of the outfit, which was being multiplied all the time by these additional recruits who were being brought in.

ROSTOW: On training: why were they not trained for guerrilla warfare? As far as I can see, they were just trained for one operation—cross the beaches.

BUNDY: I'm not so sure about that. I think they were given pretty solid basic infantry training, and certainly in those days that was thought to fit them to conduct guerrilla warfare. Of course, in the very last stages the plan did come to include an option of their taking to the hills if they couldn't make headway frontally. Whether that really would have been possible, I don't know because it was quite a distance from the Bay of Pigs up into the hills. I never thought that their training was seriously at fault. But I really don't know; I'm not an expert on that.

ROSTOW: What was the original assessment about Castro's [Fidel Castro] reaction when he heard of the operation?

BUNDY: Oh, I think everybody supposed that Castro would throw everything he had into it. The gut question was whether there would be an accompanying sort of thrill of revolt and substantial anti-Castro actions within Cuba.

And another point I'd like to make there from recollection is that both Allen Dulles [Allen W. Dulles] and Dick Bissell were very careful in their estimates on this point. They made it repeatedly clear that nobody could really tell whether there would be any kind of an accompanying uprising that went with the landing of the force, that there were a lot of defectors, that the defectors said everybody in Cuba was against Castro,

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and so on. But, as they repeatedly pointed out, the defectors you got were quite often from the classes and groups that would be expected to be against Castro. These weren't real readings of the underlying broad public opinions in Cuba and particularly whether that public opinion, whatever it might be feeling about its privations under Castro, was ready to act effectively against him in the sense that the operation would have required, in order to be really successful. They always said—remember, “we don't *know* this.” And I remember Dick Bissell particularly saying, “I'm too deeply engaged in this operation to be objective, as

objective perhaps as I should be about this, and I tell you I don't know the answer to this one. I think there is a real possibility, but I can't take it further than that, that you'll get an uprising.”

Then you come to the time when alternate landing sites were considered, and when the question of how much air would be used was brought in...

ROSTOW: Are we now roughly in March?

BUNDY: Roughly March. At that time there was a proposal at one point for a landing, and I think this perhaps did involve some element of gunfire by U.S. warships, which re-opened the question that my memory says was settled in early February. That plan came up, and it was thought to involve too great U.S. participation to be in—I've forgotten the name of the place; about the middle of the south coast—and that a different kind of landing place and a different scale of involvement and preparation should be prepared, that that one wouldn't do.

Well then, on very short notice the CIA planners came up with the Bay of Pigs plan, and there you come down to what I regard as perhaps the greatest of the errors or the failures of staff work that contributed to the decision, and that is that I think the President never had an adequate military assessment of the true chances of the operation either of (a) getting across the beaches and establishing a lodgment, (b) really picking up and snowballing with the assistance of the people, and so on. Particularly (a) When the plan was changed (whether it was in February or March) from one that did involve some degree of U.S. support on an open basis, the thing was really much reduced in its likelihood

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of success, and I think this was the judgment of a number of officers that I talked to privately in the Pentagon. And I think if you look at the JCS papers, you'll see that they never committed themselves that the operation was really likely, or in such words, to succeed.

But what I get back to always in my recollections of this are two things. First, that there was never to my knowledge—which, I am sure, it was incomplete, but I would have thought I would have been in it if it had been done intensively—a rigorous cross-examination by Secretary McNamara and the civilians in the Pentagon of the military so that Secretary McNamara would have been the one to say what the chances were as he saw it, based on all the best military advice he could get. There never was that kind of cross-examination. But secondly, as far as the oral impression and effect made on the President at all the meetings at which I was present by General Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] and by other members of the Chiefs who were called in together once or twice in the course of these meetings was concerned, the Chiefs collectively left with the President the impression that this had a very, very strong chance of getting across the beaches and at least roughly a 50-50 chance of snowballing so it would go all the way, and if that didn't work, at least a sporting chance that the force could get up into the hills and, in effect, stay in existence in a guerrilla capacity.

I think—I'll go back to a very basic tenet of staff work in government—that you're responsible for the impression created in the head of the man you are advising and it doesn't matter how much you put in the fine print because people skim that. This is a fact of life in

government, and I suppose President Kennedy read the formal Chiefs' papers, but I think he relied much more on what was said to him. And the net effect of what was said to him by the senior military representatives who advised him was certainly that this thing had a very, very strong chance of coming off. I think that was the basic error of the JCS role in this thing and—I say this frankly—to a very considerable extent, the role of us as civilians in the Department.

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We just didn't go to the mat on it with them and say: "Now in any words you want, what do you really think are the chances of this thing succeeding?" It was cut back; things were changed in it; logistics were examined and so on. But a reassessment that gave the President a really clear picture on this point was never made at any time to my knowledge.

ROSTOW: Is it fair to infer from what you've said that by the same token no one pointed out how costly failure would be?

BUNDY: Oh, the President really did get into that one. He assessed the consequences of failure. He also asked about two weeks before the thing finally went, for a really hard look at what would happen if he called off the operation. Where would the force go? What were the chances that the information would get out that there had been a force and the attempt had been abandoned? I must say the returns on that, I think, played a part in the decision because, as I've said, Guatemala wouldn't hold the force; it couldn't be sent back to Central America or kept in Central America. It had to be brought somewhere, and if it didn't go ashore in Cuba, that somewhere could only be the continental United States or some U.S. base over which we had control. The one that was in mind on the alternate plan was, I think, Vieques, which is off Puerto Rico, somewhat separate and secure. But nobody thought that you could put a force of this size out of sight, feeling as they would be feeling with the attempt abandoned for at least the time being, and keep the lid on this story. The world—Latin America, Cuba, the American people, everybody—would know that we had had this thing in mind, that it was ours, and that we had called it off. It was not a very cheerful prospect, to put it mildly, to think of that alternative. So that certainly weighed.

The consequences of failure I don't recall were ever spelled out in a paper. And, as I say, I don't think there was enough weight given to the military possibilities of failure which seemed awfully clear in retrospect, of course. But I remember senior officers in the Pentagon saying they

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didn't suppose it really had more than a 30-40 percent chance of succeeding, but they still thought it ought to be done. Well, that to my mind was an inadequate weighing of the consequences of what happened, but it was the way people felt. That kind of feeling—the feeling that we just had to do something about Castro, which was very strong in the Pentagon—may have contributed to the judgments not coming through to the President as

forcefully as they might have done. Those are what I thought were the key points and the key errors in the whole process.

I might just comment for a moment on a point that I think you've noted: the famous meeting where Senator Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] participated. This took place under highly tense circumstances. Macmillan [M. Harold Macmillan] had just arrived, and we all gathered in Secretary Rusk's back conference room, and the Secretary joined us fresh from having greeted Macmillan. Then we attacked this problem. I remember Senator Fulbright was obviously very doubtful, but he took the line of argument I think most calculated to arouse everybody's else's feelings in support of the plan. He took the line: why was this really worth it? Suppose you did install a friendly government—it would be troublesome to you; it would cause difficulties; you wouldn't be sure at all that you'd really got stability. Did it matter this much?

Well, I think the one point that all of us (and perhaps this is inherent in the planning process) had come to believe was that it mattered a great deal. Whether you had the right answer might be another question. But the one tender nerve you could hit was the question of whether it mattered. You could almost see his line of argument stiffen everybody in the room, and it was at that meeting that the President, again not getting—and this is one of those thoughts that keep crossing my mind—not getting a statement of what were the realistic chances of this thing coming off, which would have been very much to the kind of line of argument that Senator Fulbright was making, finally turned to those present and said, “Do you favor going ahead with this operation?” Everybody present affirmatively indicated that he did. And this was in a sense the Rubicon for the decision making, I think. Of course, I don't know what the President may subsequently have seen or to whom he may have

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talked. But I have that very vivid memory of that particular meeting.

However, basically, I come back to these points that there was not an adequate military judgment expressed to the President; there was not an adequate cross-examination by the civilians in the Defense Department of the military. And, as you see, I am myself a very little critical of the actions of the CIA and particularly of Dick Bissell because I thought Dick was in the position of a man asked to make bricks without straw. I thought he did a remarkable job. I thought he was extraordinarily clear and objective in his presentations to the President, and I think it was the lack of an independent military crosscut on what was being done that was the chief real fault in the staff work we did for the President on this whole undertaking.

ROSTOW: To what extent do you correlate all this with the fact that the Administration had so recently taken over? Would the same errors have been made by a more experienced government?

BUNDY: Well, afterwards, of course, the President himself became terribly critical, in the best sense, of almost anything from the Departments, and Secretary McNamara realized that you had to get right down into the middle of military issues and learn about them yourself and ask all the questions and so

on. So the experience was in that sense a very constructive one for the whole performance of the Administration. I must say from my past experience with, at least, the Eisenhower Administration, that I'm not sure the judgments would have been very closely cross-examined under that Administration. I think it's a matter of what people learn to do and qualities of the people. After this, there was no possible doubt that you got into the middle of the thing up to your armpits in every single situation.

ROSTOW: These are surely some of the lessons. Would you say that the impact on the use of the Chiefs would be worth discussing? Did the Chiefs lose through the Bay of Pigs any degree of access to the President? He took full blame himself, of course.

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BUNDY: Yes, he did. And I thought the Chiefs did deserve great credit for keeping their mouths shut afterward, which I think they did almost without exception. Possibly there were some exceptions, much later on. But in the period when they were being criticized, when the Agency was being criticized, I thought they and the Agency both kept their traps shut and took their lumps very courageously. Of course the President did accept the responsibility, and I think this was wise and certainly courageous on his part. I think it shook his faith in taking the judgment of the Chiefs without having Bob McNamara at his elbow, who had been through it all in much more detail before it reached him. Thereafter that was almost always his practice. He did have individual meetings with the Chiefs but, frankly, the real military advice he got was from McNamara or, quite often, from McNamara and the Chairman of the Chiefs together.

ROSTOW: And, of course, immediately after the Bay of Pigs he called General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] back and used him in a sense as a...

BUNDY: That is exactly right. He used General Taylor. And of course, he brought the Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy] very much more closely into it. The Attorney General, I remember coming in to one or two of the meetings, speaking only slightly but sort of taking it all in, but obviously not in the thing to the degree that he was in every subsequent national security decision that was taken.

ROSTOW: So that the entire episode, you feel, was constructive as well as painful?

BUNDY: Oh, yes. No question about it. The government learned the lessons I've spoken of.

ROSTOW: Aside from Cuba, you were given other equally challenging tasks. When were you first given the Vietnam responsibility?

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BUNDY: Well, looking back on it, we were all so preoccupied with Laos in the spring of 1961. Of course, the Laos ring of the circus was running almost concurrently with the Cuba one, when Paul Nitze went with Secretary Rusk out to the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] meeting and we had the decision as to whether to intervene militarily or to seek a negotiated solution. I wasn't in on that one. The signals came very clear, I think, after the Bay of Pigs that we were going to go for a negotiated answer, and Governor Harriman [William Averell Harriman] was put to work on that, which was a master stroke.

The importance of Vietnam was certainly stressed during that early period, particularly by Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow]. The necessity of getting a much more sophisticated counterinsurgency, anti-guerrilla military approach was stressed. We did put a lot of thought into the selection of Fritz Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] as Ambassador, and Fritz went out in the spring of 1961. I don't think we realized then how the situation was eroding, both in terms of the increased efforts from the North or the decline in Diem's [Ngo Dinh Diem] hold on his people and on the key individuals who were necessary to make an effective government. I don't think we gave it the attention it deserved, largely because there were so many other crises. This was a case where the switchboard was really overloaded, and I don't think we focused anywhere near as hard as we should have done. I was interested in it because I was involved deeply in the Military Assistance Program. And we did make some substantial increases in the Program; we did say a lot of things to Fritz and to others about the necessity of changing the tactics, but we were still operating with only a military MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] strength of about six or seven hundred who were not out in the field out there, and I'm not sure how much effect all this had other than to provide more hardware for the Vietnamese forces.

ROSTOW: We didn't use as many helicopters at that point, did we?

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BUNDY: No. We had no helicopters at all. Our military presence in Vietnam at this period consisted of the six hundred or so who were the limits, the absolute maximum limits (by stretching a point here and there on certain classifications of civilians that had been replaced by military) that you could justify under the Geneva Accords of 1954, and that remained the situation until the decision of December to go in with a very much higher advisory effort.

But, picking up the chronology, there weren't too many signs of how much really was happening out there and, in retrospect, I think we just didn't have any kind of reporting at all in this period that was good. But in September, I think, one or two province chiefs were killed and the Viet Cong pulled a couple of rather spectacular successes which had a pronounced morale effect. Then in October, I think, you had the flood in the Mekong Valley which, at the time, seemed a serious and perhaps even catastrophic event that could destroy the whole rice crop of the country, or at least the major part of it, and the two together combined to make things look very critical.

So it was at that point that the President sent a mission of General Taylor and Walt Rostow out there to give a really hard look at the situation. They came back, and my recollection is that they thought it had already become so serious that we must consider sending in, I think, some figure on the order of eight to ten thousand American combat troops to deal with the situation in specified areas but to get us in militarily and that the whole thrust of the effort had to be changed and a great many other things. A great many economic efforts were all in their recommendations.

Well, when this report was received which, as I recall, would have been toward the end of November 1961, it led to a really intensive series of meetings. I remember Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara and George Ball [George W. Ball] being present. I sat in on a fair number of those. In fact, I think I was in it more or less all the way because this again coincided with critical developments in Berlin and by then Paul Nitze and I had sort of a division of labor. He was handling the Berlin and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] things plus disarmament, and I was doing almost all the Far East things and other areas of the world which, by and large,

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fitted with what I was doing with the Military Assistance Program. Those were very intensive meetings and weighed every kind of alternative. This was a very different government already in terms of decision-making. And you had the suggestions that we send in combat forces. The suggestion that we let it go without more, I think, was made simply because it wasn't clear how either combat forces or the final solution, the advisory effort, would really work. We weren't clear that it wasn't already deteriorating so fast that it wouldn't have great difficulty in righting itself.

Well, the final decision was in two parts, really: that we would tell Ngo Dinh Diem that we were prepared to throw in a great many more Americans to advise him, to give him logistic support, and so on. We had in mind certainly the helicopters in some degree in this kind of thing. We didn't have in mind, at least as I recall in November, quite the degree of involvement that ensued in the combat air side. That was the first part—that we would offer him all that assistance. But we would say also: you must set your house in order and make certain vital reforms, land reforms, great participation of people in the government, and a number of other things that may have been a little semantic but added up to what would have been a very effective reform program.

Well, Fritz Nolting got the message and, I think, did all that a man could have done to persuade a very unpersuadable man and came back and said that he won't undertake to do all these reforms. What he'll do is A and B and then he'll talk about C and D at some future time. A very grudging response. And I recall that the President had to decide whether we would accept that and still go ahead with all the fears that we had that Diem might lose and wasn't doing the things that were required in the effort, and so on.

And he decided that this was all that we could expect, and people who knew Diem said that this was about the response he would make and perhaps he would do more later and so on.

At any rate, the decision was made to go ahead with the whole advisory effort and to get as many reforms as we could, but to take the best we could really under that heading. I'm

not clear how much difference it would have made if Diem had made those particular reforms, because I think it was his whole style of governing and the use of Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] and so on that was much more the eventual villain and lost him the support of key elements.

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Then here's where I really did have some vivid recollections. This policy was obviously an in-between policy; it wasn't committing us to go in with combat units; and I should say we had also considered whether we should start hitting North Vietnam even at that point. Those had been rejected. This policy that had been adopted was a total stranger to any military effort we had ever made anywhere in the world in the past. You could feel the leaden feeling in the Pentagon of how do we carry this out? What are we going to do? What does it mean? And in this situation the President wisely sent Bob McNamara to stop in Honolulu and to bring the whole first team in from Vietnam for a session that, as I recall, was December 18, 1961, in Honolulu.

This was an extraordinary meeting. McNamara and General Lemnitzer came in from NATO via Alaska, and I went out and did the advance-man sort of job, running through topics we expected to discuss. It wound up as an enormous session with all the CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, Pacific] staff, large hunks of the staff from Vietnam. Fifty or sixty people—what would seem an almost unmanageable type of meeting.

From the very first, McNamara just took command of that meeting. Admiral Felt's [Harry D. Felt] people briefed on the situation, very much in a stereotyped military way. General McGarr [Lionel C. McGarr] from Vietnam talked about the plans to deal with Zone D, the Viet Cong stronghold, by a sort of division-scale attack through the underbrush. McNamara, by a few questions, absolutely tore that plan to ribbons, really, so that anybody in the room could see that just didn't make any sense at all, and I think frankly that he decided in that five minutes that there had to be a new commander in Vietnam, that General McGarr could not think other than in conventional terms.

Then a series of questions came up: what do we do about adequate communications? What do you need? Have you got a plan? It was extraordinary. And then the CINCPAC officer would get up and say, "I think we should put in this kind of a system. AID [Agency for International Development] had had a system going for a long time, but it isn't off the ground. We need military communications."

"How much is it going to cost?"

"I can't say, but on the order of eight million dollars out of military Defense Department funds."

"I approve it in principle."

Right there. They'd never heard decisions made like that. A series of them: what do you need? Do you need helicopters? How many helicopter companies have we got? "General Lemnitzer, find out. We're going to send as many as they need—one, two, whatever it is."

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A series of very specific extraordinary decisions was taken, and I think the officers in the room just had no idea how the policy would be fleshed out. But above all, they got the feeling that the Pentagon was going to say yes to anything within reason that fitted and made sense and that the quicker they could get on to it, the better. And as the day wore on, you could feel the atmosphere lift, and at the end of this—I remember it well—Bob, who by then was running quite a cold which laid him up for several days after the meeting when he got back to Washington, said, “There is just one thing I want to say to you. We are going to win, and that is your job.”

And you just felt it was an extraordinary moment in government to see that number of men fired up by the performance during the day of one man, tearing their initial favorite ideas during this thing to ribbons and then laying out an approach to the thing with certain decisions. I think the decisions in principle were made for somewhere perhaps on the order of fifty million dollars in that one session, with much more foreshadowed to come within the next few days.

Well, after the December 1961 conference the whole policy obviously did take on very great momentum. I guess the next crucial decision was the selection of a commander, and Mr. McNamara went through the whole top Army for this one and finally, I think, took crucial advice from General Taylor, and it ended up in the selection of General Harkins [Paul D. Harkins]. I could say a lot about that one. In general, I think he was the right man to start the policy and initiate it, and I think he made several serious and continuing errors later on. Then we had to work out the terms of the Command, and I guess that's a bureaucratic story that one needn't dwell on, but it certainly was a stormy business whether you had a separate Command or whether it was under the Ambassador. The latter was finally chosen.

ROSTOW: Was this an innovation or was there any precedent that had to be overthrown?

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BUNDY: No. There were no precedents because what was involved was purely a much less advanced or numerous program than had been the Korea Command or anything of that sort. But there were very strong voices in the Pentagon that thought that it was entitled to a sort of separate and co-equal status, so that there was pain when the decision was made to do it the other way. And I assume this to have been made ultimately by the President, and I should say very much on the insistence of Secretary Rusk and particularly strongly on the insistence of Ambassador Nolting, who was a very stubborn Virginian indeed on this issue.

And then there was the question of whether it would work. I remember when I went out there in February this was almost the first question on my mind. I quickly sized up the two men and the way they were working together and concluded it was never going to be a problem, and between these two men it never was. It subsequently was between Ambassador Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.] and General Harkins, but not ever at any time between Ambassador Nolting and General Harkins.

ROSTOW: Was the February trip your first to Vietnam?

BUNDY: Yes, in that Administration. I had been there before in 1956 and 1958. And it was not an exhaustive trip. I did happen to meet General Khanh [Nguyen Khanh] and formed a very favorable impression of him. I got there just after the Vietnamese aircraft had bombed the Palace, so it was rather a tense period in that sense. You wondered whether something was happening. But it was a time when things were just beginning to take hold.

Well, to cut a long story short, I think the Honolulu meetings, which took place in virtually every month from January through May, were a tremendous advantage in bringing together the people from the field, the people in CINCPAC who had the logistic responsibilities and a great deal else, and the people from the State Department, and so on. The whole thing under McNamara's leadership did iron out the program in absolutely record time and get it really going. It certainly couldn't have been done in any other way.

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ROSTOW: Maybe this is a good moment to ask a question that something you said a moment ago suggested to me. I'm tired of hearing the charge about McNamara that he pursued steadily a no-win policy. I think I'd like you to spell out the implications of what you've just been saying on this issue.

BUNDY: Well, this gets back really to the basic decision, to the policy, which was the President's policy but given tremendous leadership by McNamara, that we were determined to do everything we possibly could to help South Vietnam win this thing. In short, it was a "win" policy really from the outset. This was very clearly spelled out in the President's mind. It was based on the rejection of certain alternatives, at least at that time a quite clear rejection of sending in U.S. forces.

Everything that any of us could think of about the French experience in Indochina indicated that if we took over this fight with our own units it would destroy ultimately the whole sense that this was a Vietnamese conflict and turn into a picture of resurgent colonialism and all the rest. And that was just the sure road to defeat. I think this was probably vivid in the President's mind because he had been out there as a senator in 1953.

The second thing about it was at that stage we thought that starting to attack the North would be very difficult to sustain in many quarters of the world. We were not at all clear that it would do the job, that it was just more than the situation—at that time at any rate—appeared to call for. We did think it could be turned around by this policy. And indeed, for a year and a quarter I would have said that judgment was being vindicated.

But what I'm saying in answer to your question is that at no time was it a "no-win" policy at all. And I think to a remarkable degree this was understood in the military, and up to the time of serious difficulty I don't think there was any doubt that we were on the right track.

ROSTOW: Well, we're talking in November of 1964, and we haven't yet won. What have been the obstacles?

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BUNDY: Oh, well, above all the lack of cohesion and lack of training, lack of whole national sense, primarily due to the way the French handled the whole situation over a long period of years. If you had had a trained group of people who were accustomed to the idea that they were going to take over their country in due course as India had for really a generation prior to its independence, the performance of the government and the way its impact was felt, the whole sense of nationality of the country would have been entirely different. And I venture the picture would have been entirely different.

Secondly, you certainly had a wrongly trained and conditioned military force, and there I think the blame must lie very heavily upon the Pentagon and the individuals who laid out the whole line of our Military Assistance Program during the 1950's. We trained that force as a conventional force. I remember the briefing that I had in Saigon in 1958 which was devoted wholly to the possibility of a conventional North Vietnamese attack across the 17th parallel and was just a re-play of Korea on Vietnamese soil. This was the whole thinking of our military people. And it must have been the thinking that was imparted to the Vietnamese so that they didn't think in terms of how you dealt in a refined Malaya-type fashion with the kind of thing they actually had on their hands. They downgraded it, and our own people downgraded it, pretending, or believing perhaps, but at any rate, asserting that it was really very minimal, so that when this disease started spreading they were still trying to deal with it by conventional means. And I don't think we are out of those woods yet. I think this is despite all the efforts and the pounding in which the President himself played a part and in which many people have played a part that the Vietnamese Army still doesn't have a real understanding of how you fight this kind of war. So these are two big ones in themselves.

Then you have the plain fact that North Vietnam had a tremendous amount of assets in this area: southerners who knew the area, ready to go back and with high morale; Communist discipline; and so on. That's obviously been a major factor in itself. The behavior of the Diem regime, which I

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think had done a wonderful job under the circumstances up until about 1959, is another factor. After that it became increasingly personal, and with the apparatus of the Can Lao party alienated very large segments, not only of the people at large, particularly in such areas as Hue, but most notably the key groups in the all-too-small trained element in the country, the men that you had to turn to to fill Cabinets posts, key ministry posts, and all the rest, were progressively alienated. I think this was the thing that finally meant they couldn't go on. Men like Vu Van Thai (who went into exile in 1960 or 1961)—a whole series of men who were disenchanting progressively with the way Diem and, above all, Nhu conducted the affairs of the government, which was personal, setting all kinds of store on loyalty and very little on performance and so on. That was perhaps the worst.

Well, I might switch, for the value of my own personal recollections, to the events of the fall of 1963 when I was with Secretary McNamara and General Taylor on the McNamara-Taylor mission to Vietnam. I really hadn't followed nearly as closely as I should

have, being then in the Pentagon, the series of events that followed from the Buddhist riots in May. But in August, as we all know, those resulted in Diem's saying that toughness is now the answer and attacking the pagodas, and all of that, I'm sure, on the advice of Nhu and Madame Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu, Madam]. I wasn't here during the ensuing period of vast confusion and really serious backbiting within our own government—the abortive attempt to see if you couldn't overthrow Diem through the military, the question of whether the JCS and others were consulted on that course of action. I have seen all the papers on that, but I didn't live through it.

At any rate, by mid-September not only was the situation in Saigon uncertain, but the situation in Washington was downright chaotic. The State Department was leaking against CIA, or so the articles would appear, and vice versa. Strong criticisms of everybody and sundry. The whole picture was one of great government disorganization and recrimination.

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I happened to be on leave in Europe during this period and came back about the middle of September to find myself almost at once right back into the middle of this thing. About the 19th of September, immediately after my return, Secretary McNamara said to just drop everything and concentrate on this one. He was asked to go out and pick a team of people who were not emotionally involved on one side or the other to recommend what our policy should be. Should we go on with at least small measures, holding back aid and so on, or should we revert to full support of Diem? Should we encourage forces that might overthrow him? Stand aside? What should we do? And what was the whole situation anyway—was it deteriorating in the countryside or was it not?

Well, those were the key issues that that mission addressed, and I suppose its membership was significant in later terms of responsibility. Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan] was there for the State Department, Mike Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal] was there from the White House, General Krulak accompanied General Taylor for the Joint Chiefs, we had Bill Colby [William Egan Colby] from the Agency with long Vietnamese experience. We hit Vietnam and fanned out all over the place. Some of us talked to everybody we could get hold of within Saigon. Secretary McNamara and particularly General Taylor made as many field trips as they could fit in to see how the whole situation was shaping up.

Well, the upshot of all this was that we wrote a report, largely written in Saigon but re-worked and revised on the way home in the plane, and presented it to the President immediately on our return, a report in which we all absolutely fundamentally agreed on our assessment of the situation. Secretary McNamara had said on the way out that he wanted this to be the case, that at least if there were disagreements, they would be reflected and that all of us were, in a sense, responsible for the content of the report. And we did, in fact, manage to achieve virtually complete agreement. The thrust of what we agreed was that the Diem regime had lost the critical support of these key people I've spoken of before.

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There we had some unusual incidents: senior people, very senior people in the government coming to us quietly and saying, "We just can't go on," people who were very high in Diem's esteem, who were the absolute pillars of the government. We had the judgment of an Englishman, Professor Honey [Patrick James Honey], who was quite an expert on Vietnam and had been around for many months. He brought his thoughts to the Secretary personally. All this we shared in the group. And the conclusions we reached were that Diem could not go on as he was doing, that he must change in major respects, hopefully by getting rid of Nhu. But frankly, we didn't think that was likely, the tie between them being obviously very strong. But at any rate, by major reforms and changes. If that failed, it was quite likely that a coup group of real power would form, and we should try to be informed on that while not getting involved in it in an affirmative sense.

And thirdly, and a prophetic conclusion, that while it was clear that Diem unchanged couldn't do this job, the prospects for an alternate government (which would necessarily be military because they were the only ones with the power to do it) was only about 50-50 that it would be better. I particularly remember that sentence in the report. In other words, we didn't think the military were going to be the answer to anybody's prayer at this point. We just said that the chances are very low of doing this job under Diem. We didn't think it would seriously deteriorate, but we thought it must in the end start to deteriorate.

ROSTCW: Did you anticipate either Minh [Duong Van Minh] or Khanh?

BUNDY: Well, we thought Minh was a very likely key figure. Khanh was then a Corps Commander up in the Second Corps. We saw him during the trip and were much impressed by what he had accomplished, which was a lot up in the Second Corps. But we didn't think of him as a key figure. Actually, he was to some extent identified a little bit with Diem at this point because he had helped Diem during the November 1960 coup. But he wasn't thought of as being a member of the coup group. Well, perhaps

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we didn't put this into the report, but I do remember also that Professor Honey told the Secretary that if we left Saigon without a very strong endorsement of Diem, he thought the government would change hands in about thirty days. It was twenty-nine, I think. But in any case, we didn't really suppose it would come that soon ourselves. We thought it must come, but we thought Diem's whole intelligence and security apparatus would probably be pretty strong and a coup might be a tremendous mess if it came. So that we really did give a try—a hard try—to getting Diem to change the way he was running the war and the way he was running things internally,

ROSTOW: How did the President react to your report? After all, this was not actually good news from his point of view.

BUNDY: That meeting was really quite short, as I recall. It was the first meeting. I remember it well because we were exhausted from the long plane trip

and writing the report on the way and so on. The President said, "I want to read this. I want to think it over. I think we've got to frame the kind of announcement we want to make right away because people are looking for a clarification of where we stand."

This gets back to the fact that all kinds of notes all over town had been struck, and the crucial need was to clarify government policy. We worked during the day on a statement which, I remember, my brother Mac drafted. We criticized it a lot at the Pentagon. I think other hands were at work on it, and it was issued at 6 o'clock that evening as a sort of statement of government policy, and it incorporated key sections of the report. In short, the President, I think, must have been instantaneously convinced that our conclusions were correct and he accepted them. In effect, the White House announcement adopted them in key respects.

The President, as the text of the announcement shows, put into Secretary McNamara's and General Taylor's mouths the prediction that the war could be won by the end of 1965, and, in retrospect, I think this was a mistake of that mission. This

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was the thought that we should start on a phased-withdrawal type of planning. It went back to May of that year when the predictions had been much more rosy, and while there hadn't been really marked deterioration as we saw it, I think we were wrong to some extent here. There had really been deterioration, but it hadn't shown up yet in the inadequate reporting of that period. At any rate, viewing it as we did as not having deteriorated to a very major extent, the Secretary thought it was wise to keep this thought in mind. I think he thought it would have a favorable effect on the American opinion to think that we were not going to be there forever and that there was an end to this tunnel and so on.

ROSTOW: Well, in this respect, did you agree?

BUNDY: No. I think it was a mistake, and I feel badly in a way that I didn't argue more strongly against it. I don't recall that I argued it at all in detail, but I argued more strongly against putting that whole thought into the announcement. It certainly haunted us during the ensuing winter.

ROSTOW: Well, we've reached the period of your return. In the twenty-nine days left, do you recall any decisions made or any things worth noting here?

BUNDY: Well, let's see. We came back the beginning of October. Then we had a period of watching from week to week on the withholding of certain types of aid, but particularly the budget support. We thought we could do that for a while without hurting the thing. But, to cut a long story short, we hadn't reached the critical point by the first of November, and then the coup came along, and we did have some inkling—a pretty strong inkling—of a coup just before it happened. But I think the record was clear. Ambassador Lodge stood aside and let it happen. We particularly regretted

Diem and Nhu were killed in the process. I've forgotten whether this was expressed directly by the President, but I've no doubt at all of his feeling.

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But in other respects, we thought it probably was a more hopeful turn in the whole conduct of the war. Then almost immediately—and I guess we're really talking in the period up till the President's death—almost immediately it became clear that the disorganization was total, that everybody in the provinces had been replaced, the whole security situation was going to suffer enormously as a result. The end of November was a rather gloomy period. We did have a Honolulu meeting, oh, four days before the President was killed, and it was a very uncertain report that was received at that time.

ROSTOW: You mentioned Ambassador Lodge a moment ago. Was the shift from Nolting to Lodge a change in terms of our ties to Diem, or were they on equal terms?

BUNDY: Oh, no. I think that was clearly taken in Saigon as a major change. I don't know where the stories that were picked up at that time originated, and I don't know the circumstances in Ambassador Lodge's appointment. But I do know that there were strong voices in the State Department that thought Ambassador Nolting had become nothing more than a political advisor to General Harkins. I didn't think, myself, that was true. He might have been perhaps more forceful on some things, but he was heard from pretty loud and clear when he wanted to be, and I thought he carried out what he believed to be the policy of the government, certainly with a considerable degree of skill. I didn't think he could necessarily have done much more, as long as your presumption was you were supporting Diem. Now, he left at the critical time. The trouble started in early May and he left about ten days after. I've never known whether in the intervening period we could have done more to ease the situation down and prevent, for instance, the pagoda attacks of August which followed the failure to settle it all.

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But during this period, I don't know how the President came to pick Ambassador Lodge. Lodge had been interested in Vietnam, had served a tour of duty as a reserve officer the preceding summer, and my understanding is that his availability became known and the Secretary and the President said that this would be superb. At that time, in June, I'm sure none of us thought it would deteriorate as it did. None of us, that I was aware of, thought that there was going to come an early time when we would feel Diem couldn't make it or any of the things that followed thereafter. The security reports of May were extremely optimistic, and this wasn't just the Command, either. This was independent people like Thompson [Robert K.G. Thompson] (the Britisher), and neutral diplomats. The people that you sort of turn to to hear if this noise was the same we were all saying, "We don't quite see how it's happening, but the fact is that the situation has improved a tremendous amount and seems to be gathering momentum." The Viet Cong were already starting to nibble at the over-extended

hamlet program. But we certainly didn't realize that, and we didn't appreciate it as well as we should have in September, partly because the whole reporting system was bad, and that's another story.

ROSTOW: You had previously mentioned the strategic hamlet program. This got underway after the Honolulu meeting?

BUNDY: This was really a slow starter. After we got started on the whole advisory setup, which was initially installed with the military units, then everybody on the ground felt that you needed something more systematic that wound in the military to other measures and so on. And the strategic hamlet program, as I recall, dated from about April of 1962, somewhere along in there, and it was adopted only, as everything else was, after a great deal of back and forth with Diem. I don't know whether Thompson played a part in this, but he was among those largely responsible, and I think Walt Rostow and others played a

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part in ginning it up here. That had had a Malayan background, but Diem was slow to adopt it. And then when he did adopt it, he adopted it with a rush, and Nhu took charge of it, and I think he visualized the whole thing as almost a political machine. That was one of the reasons it got overextended.

ROSTOW: Well, we leave the story more or less in mid-stream. Do you want to go on now to other things?

BUNDY: Do you want to take three minutes on India? I won't take more than that. Isn't that the only other topic?

ROSTOW: Yes, it is.

BUNDY: Well, the only other thing on which I have any sort of useful first-hand knowledge of how things went was on the military aid to India. And that, of course, coincided in time with the Cuba Missile Crisis, and, to me, this was a remarkable example of how a government can work, at least bureaucratically speaking, practically with mirrors. Ambassador Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] had seen what was coming; the attacks of late September foreshadowed possible other attacks. He said that if there were other attacks he was sure Nehru [Jawaharlal Nehru] would turn to us. And he was absolutely right. For three or four days before it happened after the second attack started, he kept saying, "We are momentarily going to get a request; we should make up our mind." I don't recall there being any meeting in this period, but it was immediately made known that the President was for this if it came. There wasn't any doubt about it. And when it did come, with almost everybody else in the government preoccupied on Cuba, the signal came through to me: get cracking on this thing. I think we got the message on Monday; by

Wednesday night we had the first three or four carefully picked officers in New Delhi. By Thursday, Friday, and Saturday we had considerable numbers of C-135's landing in Calcutta.

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ROSTOW: Where did they come from?

BUNDY: They came out of the U.S., mostly. And they stopped in Rhein-Main in Germany, which was near the appropriate depot, so we had the appropriate kinds of mines and mortars and various other things. And we just piled the stuff on the C-135's and sent it kiting over to India, knowing full well that this wasn't going to stem the tide of the invasion, but knowing also that it probably would have a considerable psychological effect, which I think it surely did have.

ROSTOW: Oh, it certainly had. I've heard Indians report their impressions.

BUNDY: Well, we did this without the benefit of an NSC meeting, without the benefit of anything on paper and anybody's signature, but because it was known that this was the President's decision and because everybody said we were just going to do it. We gave brief progress reports. I recall reporting to Secretary McNamara about daily to say we have sent out X additional aircraft loads or something. But it was just about that, because everybody was absolutely right up to their ears in the Cuba crisis and in what was by then the post-Cuba negotiations. I think the Cuba crisis ended about the 7th or 8th of November. The basic momentum derived from the White House, there is no question about that. The President, the White House staff was calling to see how it was going and so on. Well, that's the main interesting sidelight, that a thing like that could be done without any bureaucratic machinery at all but simply because the command was basically there, and it was felt.

ROSTOW: On this—do you have to regularize something like this after the fact? Does the JCS have to approve what has been done?

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BUNDY: No. Nobody ever felt that need. We did have to do a fair amount of tidying up. We were legal. We had the right determinations, and we very quickly got the appropriate extension of our basic agreement with India through Ambassador Nehru. He was rather startled and thought we were rather bureaucratic, but we managed to phrase it in a way that he found reasonable, and he brought us back a concurrence from New Delhi in something like three or four days which was rather record time for this kind of thing. Phil Talbot [Phillips Talbot] handled that extraordinarily well.

Then we came into the question as to what the real scope of the program might be in the first stages, and we designated a Chief of the Mission, General Kelly [John Kelly], and had him on the ground by, oh, I should think Thanksgiving Day, three weeks after it started,

roughly. The ground had been held beautifully in the meantime by a very superior colonel from my office and a half dozen other fellows. They got out there, and they had the job of immediately surveying what the Indian needs were on the basis of our supporting a small number of divisions appropriate to defend the northeast area and so on. They drew up a total program of what we might do and the British might do in equal shares. They brought it back to Washington about the 12th of December.

We put it together, took it over to London, and intensively negotiated it with congeries of ministries in the British Government because they had no centralized responsibility there. They really didn't know what had hit them. We brought back the plan that became the Nassau Plan in this area and flew with it back to Washington and then six hours later down to Nassau. Mr. Macmillan had signed it, I think, before his bureaucracy had had time to get to it. But the President had left no doubt about it. Ken Galbraith was there at Nassau, of course, and he thought it was fine, so we did it. That was about it. The rest is a less exciting story—an interesting one, but less exciting.

ROSTOW: Well, it's a nice one because it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, which your other topics do not.

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BUNDY: That's right. Exactly.

ROSTOW: Before we finish, what do you think will be the major things that will be remembered about the Kennedy years?

BUNDY: Oh, obviously the President's tremendous personal sense of style and his tremendous attraction for people who like to feel that their minds are being constantly challenged to something greater than they ever thought they could achieve. He created élan in the government such as it has not had really since the early New Deal years, if then. And on a very wide scale. He brought people in who were excited by government and excited by the way he operated, and all the rest. Then apart from those, which are questions of style and of the quality of the Administration, on the substance side, I think, as this Administration matured under the President the combination of very great maturity in the handling of Berlin, in the first instance, but above all, of course, the Cuban missile thing, and then the responsiveness, the very quick responsiveness that called for the American University speech, that was prepared to move to a new flexibility and could play on either front. This not committing yourself one way or the other but being prepared to be tough where you had to be and to work something out where it could be worked out. This very sensitive feel for relationships, perhaps most demonstrably with the Soviet Union but with a great many other people, too. I think that did a great deal for the credit of the United States that will not be easily erased, and it is something to live up to.

ROSTOW: Thank you very much. Is there anything else that we should say?

BUNDY: I can't think of anything.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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