

Roswell L. Gilpatric Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 5/05/1970
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Roswell L. Gilpatric (1906-1996) was the Deputy Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1964. This interview focuses on the Kennedy administration's policies concerning Vietnam and Laos and the Defense Department's and Central Intelligence Agency's activities in Vietnam, among other topics.

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Roswell L. Gilpatric
Roswell L. Gilpatric

July 5, 1972
Date

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Roswell L. Gilpatric– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

ROSWELL L. GILPATRIC

May 5, 1970
New York, New York

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, I think the logical place to begin is, when was the first time you met President Kennedy--or John Fitzgerald Kennedy, I should say?

GILPATRIC: While I was the under secretary of the Air Force during the Korean War, and he was a congressman from Massachusetts. He was interested at that time in air power, and he did a good deal in the way of support of various programs, projects, that the Air Force had before the Congress, even though he was not on the Armed Services Committee. As a result, when he was running against [Henry Cabot] Lodge for the senatorial office during '52, he asked me for a testimonial as to his work, and that's the first time I had any contact with him.

O'BRIEN: What were your impressions of him at that point? Was he just another congressman?

GILPATRIC: No, I had the feeling that he had a lot ahead of him. I thought he showed a sensitivity to what were the important issues and problems, which was quite unusual for a freshman congressman. He was several cuts above the level of his colleagues.

O'BRIEN: In the 1950's, after you left the Department of Defense, did you have any other contacts with him, political associations?

GILPATRIC: Only during the '56 campaign when I was the state treasurer for the Citizens for [Adlai E.] Stevenson-[Estes] Kefauver in Connecticut, and Kennedy came down to speak, and we talked there. But I did see him socially,

occasionally, in '59 and '60, largely through a mutual friend, Stuart Symington. So in the spring of 1960, through Symington, I was asked to be on Kennedy's task force on the Defense Department and also, through Senator [Henry M.] Jackson, who was a good friend of mine, on another task force that Kennedy had on international affairs generally. And I met with Kennedy a couple of times in conjunction with those two efforts.

O'BRIEN: Well, how does Senator Symington see him in those years? Does he see him as a potential presidential candidate?

GILPATRIC: Yes. He, of course, was a candidate himself, but he clearly saw the shape of things to come. With [Lyndon B.] Johnson running as well as Kennedy, I think Symington was interested primarily in the vice presidential slot and also in the aura of being a national candidate. He never considered himself really a rival of Kennedy. He was an admirer and follower of the senator.

O'BRIEN: In those contacts prior to the election of 1960, are there any strong impressions that come to mind, that you remember? Conversations with Senator Kennedy about . . .

GILPATRIC: No, because I didn't meet him alone. The few times I saw him I was with a group, and he was in the middle of a campaign. And while I was very much for him, I didn't have any, you know, unique or distinctively personal impressions, just that of his overall candidacy that struck me.

O'BRIEN: Well, were you associated with the Democratic Advisory Council in those years?

GILPATRIC: No, not directly. I was just on these two task forces that Kennedy appointed right after he'd been nominated.

O'BRIEN: I wonder if we can, just for a moment, discuss those task forces. First of all, you're on the task force on . . .

GILPATRIC: The Defense Department.

O'BRIEN: . . . the Defense Department.

GILPATRIC: Kennedy had in mind that there'd been no real look at the structure of the Defense Department, at least

by a Democratic president, in eight or nine years. So he picked a committee consisting of Clark Clifford, [Thomas K.] Tom Finletter and Marx Leva; Symington was the head of it. It turned out that I did most of the work on the report because I'd previously been working with the Rockefeller Brothers [Fund] study of the national security arrangements. So I had a great deal of this in my mind. Also, I'd served myself for two years as under secretary of the Air Force during the Korean War. I didn't personally present the final report to Kennedy; that was done by Symington in December of--right after the election, maybe November of 1960. My work was largely talking to people like Clifford, Symington, Finletter, and the other people who we talked to, and writing up drafts of a report which, ultimately, Symington gave to Kennedy.

O'BRIEN: Are there any strong conflicts in the putting together of that task force report in terms of defense policy?

GILPATRIC: Yes, there was, because we took rather a strong line, and one, ultimately, that was not followed by [Robert S.] McNamara and the president. We recommended a pretty drastic reorganization of the Defense Department. We wanted to do away with the service departments, not with the services, and even more strongly centralize the department than had taken place under the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower administration. And as I've said publicly since then, after three years in the Defense Department under the Kennedy administration, I had some reservations about going that far. But that's what we recommended, and we came out fairly unanimously with only one minor dissent in that report.

O'BRIEN: Was there any conflict in the task forces over the question of strategy, particularly strategy when it comes to--well, what later becomes a building up of more conventional forces in the so-called flexible response?

GILPATRIC: No, that really was the function of the other committee, the Jackson committee. The Symington committee was largely organizational, the organizational structure of the military establishment, the method of managing it, rather than strategy, tactics and policy.

O'BRIEN: Then it doesn't. . . . You maintained a pretty definite division in the functions of the two committees.

GILPATRIC: Yes, because that was the division that Senator Jackson and Senator Symington, both of whom are fairly strong-minded people, worked out with

Kennedy: each would have their sphere of action. I was the only common member of both task forces.

O'BRIEN: Well, would you care to discuss the other task force?

GILPATRIC: Well, the other task force had on it people such as Paul Nitze, who subsequently became assistant secretary for Inter- National Security Affairs, who was a long time student, practitioner, of foreign affairs; David Bruce, who was subsequently ambassador to UK United Kingdom; George Ball who became the under secretary of state. And that group was not as well-knit as the Symington group. Different ones of us took up particular projects: One person wrote a paper on NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization; one on the Far East; one on Latin America. The overall conception of NATO strategy, which did touch on flexible response, was done by Paul Nitze. Thus the report took the form of a collection of these papers because the group never really had worked out to be a comprehensive, concise task force; the report was just a collection of papers based on a lot of discussion among the individuals. Again, I was not present when Jackson--possibly Jackson and Nitze--gave that to Kennedy. Frankly, I don't think that that report had much more impact on President Kennedy's policies than the Defense one did. I think they were useful exercises for the president to find out sort of the cut of the jib of the people who were on the task forces, and also bringing into play on his team two very influential senators, namely, Jackson and Symington.

O'BRIEN: Well, how does your appointment come about? When do you first know that you're going to be appointed?

GILPATRIC: Well, I knew about five or six days after McNamara's appointment, which I think was the early part of December, as I recall, sometime after Thanksgiving. One Friday evening I got a call from Clifford, telling me that I would be getting some kind of a message in the morning. He was very cryptic about it. Sure enough, about six o'clock the next morning--5:30, very early--McNamara called me. I had not met McNamara, and he asked me to meet him.

He never told me who was responsible for suggesting me to him, but Robert Kennedy told me it was the president himself. The president had known of my background; he'd known through Symington and Jackson of my interest in this sphere. He'd been given by Symington, at one stage, a little brochure which included some biographical material about me. I'd been chairman of something called the Aerospace Corporation, which had been set up by Thomas S., Jr. Gates and James H., Jr. Douglas under the Eisenhower administration. So I believe that McNamara

was asked by Kennedy to look me over before he made any other choices about his deputy, and that's what happened.

O'BRIEN: And what's your initial response to the idea of him suggesting that the appointment comes up?

GILPATRIC: After a couple of hours with McNamara on that Saturday, I asked him if I could have until Monday afternoon.

He was very crisp and very precise in wanting an immediate response. I had to talk to my partners and confreres, and I also wanted to talk to, as it turned out, the same man he'd talked to, Robert Lovett, my old boss, who had been offered by Kennedy the secretary of state, secretary of defense, secretary of treasury, it turned out later, but had not wanted to take a full-time Cabinet job. So I went to see Lovett on Monday morning, and he looked at me with sort of a twinkle and said, "Well, I've had a similar visitation within the past two weeks from Robert McNamara." Then I called McNamara back and told him I'd like to do it.

Then the next morning I got a call from Florida from Kennedy. He was down in Palm Beach with Johnson. And we had a brief discussion on the phone. He said it wasn't necessary for me to come down to Florida, although he'd like to announce the appointment that day. He said, "I want you to talk to the vice president about how to handle the people on the Hill." I had a discussion with him about that. And then [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien--no, I guess Pierre Salinger got on the phone, and we worked out a press release. It was all done within twenty-four hours from the time I called McNamara.

O'BRIEN: What are your impressions of McNamara at that point? You, as I understand it, really didn't know him at all.

GILPATRIC: Only by reputation. But in the two hours that we spent together, I was tremendously struck by the grasp he already had of the job and what it entailed. I found myself in complete sympathy with how he envisaged our relationship. And here I was an older person than he was; I'd been in the Defense Department twice before; I obviously had some pretty definite ideas myself, and to have been in a position where I was completely subordinated to somebody with very strong ideas of his own would have presented some problems. Well, that was all worked out right at the go-off.

The first thing we did after that was to sit down and work out possibilities for filling all the other key jobs, because it turned out that McNamara had a very clear understanding with the president that he would be the one who would do all the

staffing of the presidential appointments in the Defense Department, and they weren't to be dictated from outside. That had one exception as it turned out in the end, but that wasn't the president's doing; it was Bob Kennedy's doing.

O'BRIEN: Who was that?

GILPATRIC: That was the under secretary of the Navy.

O'BRIEN: Paul Fay?

GILPATRIC: Paul Fay, yes. Bob Kennedy called us up, McNamara and me, and said, "You've just got to find a place for Fay in the Navy." And so we, having turned down [Franklin D., Jr.] Frank Roosevelt and [Edward L., Jr.] Keenan, the labor secretary, why, McNamara decided he wouldn't hold out. We just designed the administration of the department around Fay, and we felt we had a very good man in [John B.] Connally, so. . . .

O'BRIEN: Who are some of the major appointees of your suggestion? Do you bring any people in . . .

GILPATRIC: Well, first of all, [Cyrus R.] Cy Vance, who McNamara didn't know of; secondly, [Charles J.] Charley Hitch, who was the assistant secretary-comptroller; then a man named Norman Paul, who started out in charge of legislative liaison and became assistant secretary, Manpower, and then he became under secretary of the Air Force; [and a man that didn't turn out named [Carlisle P.] Carl Runge. He'd been associate dean at the University of Wisconsin Law School, and I thought he'd be good for the Manpower job. It turned out he wasn't. McNamara made a similar mistake in connection with Elvis Stahr, the secretary of the Army.] I made a try for [Thomas J., Jr.] Tom Watson. McNamara wanted him--and Kennedy wanted him--to be secretary of the Army. And I had known Watson because we were his counsel. I went to see Watson, but he did not want to leave IBM [International Business Machines]. He hadn't been in too long as chief executive after his father's death. I think that was the only turndown that we got, as I recall it. Then McNamara had quite a problem with my friend Paul Nitze because he wanted my job, and he ultimately did get the job after Vance. But he finally settled for the assistant secretaryship for [Inter-] National Security Affairs. And as far as the R and D job, Research and Development, we decided to keep, for the time being, Herbert York, who was a holdover, the only holdover. And then, ultimately--I think I suggested him--Harold Brown became R and D director during most of the time that McNamara was there and then became secretary of the Air Force. Those were the principal ones that

I recall coming up with.

O'BRIEN: Is McNamara going anyplace else within the department for suggestions for some of the major offices?

GILPATRIC: The only other person I know he talked to was R. Sargent Sarge Shriver, because Shriver had been the one to approach him, and he had a. . . . And I don't know, for example, whether it was he or the president who mentioned Connally. Connally was already in McNamara's mind when I met him. I at first had some reservations because of his political associations with Johnson. But once I met him, they disappeared. McNamara also talked to Adam Yarmolinsky, who he had known before and who had been also active in personnel matters with Shriver. He ultimately came over and became the only special assistant, civilian assistant, that we had in the Defense Department to the secretary and deputy secretary. And other than conversations that McNamara had with the president himself or with Bob Kennedy, I don't think anybody else got in the act, not to my knowledge. And I was with McNamara constantly for--say from just before Christmas until the 20th of January. We were down there, in residence, working, you know, cheek-by-jowl on this question of appointments.

O'BRIEN: Is there any opposition, first of all, in the White House--or I shouldn't say in the White House, but in the incoming administration to any of these appointments?

GILPATRIC: I don't believe so. I spent quite a little time on the Hill myself because, unlike McNamara, I knew most of these senior figures, people like Leslie C. Les Arends and Carl Vinson and Mendel Rivers in the House--and George Mahon I'd known well. And I also knew, besides Jackson and Symington, I knew Richard B. Russell and John Stennis. So I went around, as the vice president and president advised, and talked to these people. And I don't remember we had any problems at that juncture except over the question of McNamara's security holdings.

O'BRIEN: Is there any opposition in the department from the uniform services?

GILPATRIC: Not initially. I think the fact that I'd been there during the Harry S Truman administration and I knew a number of the top military, particularly in the Air Force, very well. The Navy Department was very much on guard as regards both McNamara and myself. We'd both been in the Air Force before, and I'd been in more recently, and my views on organization, of course, were non grata to the navy.

Practically the first call I had was from Admiral [Arleigh A.] Burke saying, "Mr. Secretary, I want to see that you have a naval aide, whom I'll be happy to pick out for you, in your office," which I was happy to accept.

O'BRIEN: Well, I thought today we'd get through some of the foreign policy problems and then, at a future time, come back to some of the organizational problems in the department. And I guess the logical place to begin is with Southeast Asia because of Laos and Vietnam. Do you have someone that's briefing you and Secretary McNamara within the department on Southeast Asia, particularly Laos and Vietnam?

GILPATRIC: Yes. I inherited from my predecessor, Jim Douglas, a man who was then an Air Force Colonel, Major Edwin Lansdale. And he was an unusual military type in that he was completely uninhibited in dealing with politicians and civilians. And he apparently set out on his own to educate the new team. But since he was in my office, the office of the deputy secretary, I had the most contact with him. And within a matter of weeks I'd been asked by the president to head up a task force, the first task force on Vietnam, and I made Lansdale my project officer. So he was the one on the military side, other than the uniform people on the Joint Staff and the Joint Chiefs themselves, that we were exposed to.

We didn't get much policy guidance elsewhere because it was almost a complete changing of the guard, you see, in all the top civilian offices. We talked to all our predecessors, Gates and Douglas and John Irwin, and Perkins McGuire and all the people who were outgoing. As far as current problems, the emphasis was all on Laos. They were almost over-preoccupied with Laos to the exclusion of everything else.

But in regard to Laos as well as Vietnam and the whole Indochina area, Lansdale was very experienced. He'd been out there a great deal. He'd been personal advisor to [Ngo Dinh] Diem. Previous to that, he'd been advisor to the Philippine government in its guerrilla problems. And then I had another very able officer, an army officer, named Colonel [Edwin F.] Black, who had served a great deal in the Far East. So with those two men I may have gotten a somewhat biased point of view, but I at least got a very concrete, specific one.

O'BRIEN: Well, Lansdale's very soon in consideration for appointment as ambassador, isn't he? Isn't he considered after [Eldridge] Durbrow goes?

GILPATRIC: I think so. He was not in favor when I got there,

during my period, with either the military or with the State Department. He was in the doghouse with both of them. And I was convinced they were wrong. I was convinced he was not a wheeler-dealer; he was not an irresponsible swashbuckler, and I finally succeeded in getting him his star as a general--very difficult. The Air Force didn't want to give him a generalship, and I felt it was essential to give him the stature that he needed. The State Department distrusted him because they felt that he would work around them; they thought he'd done so before. So he was an object of some distrust. I thought and still think he was a very able person, although like other people, he had certain fixations and certain biases that you had to weigh against other factors. Anyway, he remained active, both in connection with Southeast Asia and Cuba, up until the time I left in January of '64.

O'BRIEN: At the time you take over the Vietnam task force-- and you were also mentioning here this preoccupation with Laos--at this point, does the administration, does the department, does the uniform services, do they see Laos as an integral part of the Vietnam problem or vice versa; or is there a tendency to look at them as two separate problems?

GILPATRIC: The latter, I think. They had a great deal in the way of contingency planning for Laos, very much like what I'm afraid President [Richard M.] Nixon has been getting for the last few weeks on Cambodia. And they had all these differing plans for varying degrees of military intervention or activity. And we got many presentations on that subject. But as far as Vietnam is concerned, it was not regarded at that stage as a primary theater of military responsibility. There were only, as I recall it, six or seven thousand U. S. military personnel in South Vietnam, and they were dispersed around under various covers and various--they were mostly in mufti, and they had some military advisory jobs. But that was the State Department's primary responsibility. And until a year or so later, when we set up the U. S. Military Command for Vietnam under [Paul D.] Harkins, we, in effect, were ancillary to--we in Defense--to the State Department. And that's why it went down so hard with the State Department when Kennedy made me, I guess at McNamara's suggestion, the head of this first task force.

Up to that time there wasn't any sort of body of doctrine or data in regard to Vietnam the way there was in Laos. We'd get all kinds of background on Laos, military and political background. Vietnam was much murkier, much harder to come to grips with.

O'BRIEN: Well, how did you personally react to the Geneva

settlements of the fifties, coming into office in 1960?

GILPATRIC: Well, I first felt that we'd have to have another Geneva-type negotiation on Southeast Asia because the '54 settlement, as it were, had come unraveled or left so many things open. And it seemed to me then that Laos was just as hopeless from the standpoint of strictly military measures as it is today. So my whole instinct was to resist the proposals from the military for dealing with Laos. Now, of course, that never came up, really, to the front burner of the Kennedy administration until later in the year '61. I mean you had Cuba and you had Kennedy's visit to Europe; you had the problems in connection with NATO, nuclear weapons. And as I recall it, it wasn't until, really, the summer and the fall of '61 and then going into '62, culminating in the [W. Averell] Harriman mission.

O'BRIEN: Well, initially there's, in regard to Laos, that whole deterioration that takes place there in 1960 and '61. There's some suggestion that some military measures. . . . Well, first of all, I guess I should ask when do you. . . . You have a primary responsibility on Vietnam. Do you have the same kind of responsibility on Laos at this stage of the game?

GILPATRIC: No, no. The president didn't follow that. He felt that the staff work, so to speak, had been pretty well done. And while he got very discouraged with the military approaches, because in that session--I'm sure others have talked about it. I think it was sometime in the spring or summer of '61 where he had all five of the military chiefs over, and each one had a different point of view, and he just literally and figuratively threw up his hands and walked out of the room it was so discouraging. But he didn't set up that kind of a study or a group. The State Department had had a desk officer and all the other paraphernalia on Laos, so we didn't go at it the same way as we did on Vietnam. That was a problem we inherited. We went on with it until it turned into a political negotiation.

O'BRIEN: Actually, you inherited a good many of the people, too, for a while, from the Eisenhower administration. I know on the State Department side, [J. Graham] Parsons.

GILPATRIC: Yes, and [Winthrop G.] Win Brown. That's right, there wasn't any immediate turnover there, and in the light of hindsight, I think that was unfortunate. I don't know how fast you can do it as a practical matter. He did have, principally, [Chester] Bowles--trying to restaff all

these embassies, but with career officers like Parsons and Brown and for that kind of a non-glamorous duty, it wasn't a very quick turn around.

O'BRIEN: What was your reaction and Secretary McNamara's reaction to some of the kind of unusual military aid programs that you have in places like Laos, like the PEO [Programs Evaluation Office] office--and also in South Vietnam--as well as the clandestine activity that's going on? Did you have any reservations about that when you came in?

GILPATRIC: Well, I don't know how soon we were made aware of that.

O'BRIEN: Oh, is that right?

GILPATRIC: I certainly wasn't exposed to that--as far as South-east Asia was concerned--very early on in the game. I imagine that Paul Nitze and [William P.] Bill Bundy and the people in ISA [International Security Affairs] were.

McNamara had a sort of a double-barreled system: On certain major matters he felt that he and I should deal with them jointly; that is to say, he'd always take me to the White House; he'd always have me in on any discussions with anybody in or outside. On other areas, we had a division of labor. Things like the whole question of nuclear weapons controls or a question of balance of payments deals or a question of a space program; a lot of the weapons and procurement problems, he would just turn over to me, and I would report to him as I saw fit.

But there were a number of activities that, by the same token, he kept pretty much to himself. For example, the whole Bay of Pigs event was something that I was only partly exposed to because so much of the--right down to the short strokes--decision-making took place outside of the Pentagon. Only two of the Chiefs really were involved, [Lyman L.] Lemnitzer and Burke. And I didn't go to any of the meetings in the White House and State on that. I was only at sessions in the Pentagon and when I was with McNamara alone.

So on your point, I don't think I was aware of how far the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] was really operating as a quasimilitary organization until I got into this task force. That's the first time I knew they were running Meos in Laos and the Montagnards in South Vietnam. And as I got further into it, I found that we were not being told anywhere in the Defense Department very much about what was happening. It wasn't until [John A.] McCone came in after [Allen W.] Dulles

had left that we had a regular interchange at the top of the agency and the department. I think probably because Dulles and Richard M. Dick Bissell and the other principal deputies in the agency had been used to dealing on a very close personal relationship with people like Gates and Douglas before, and they hadn't built up the same confidence factor with us. Then Cuba came along and a completely new ball game.

O'BRIEN: From the later perspective, could you see much in the way of an exchange on an operations level actually in places like Laos and Vietnam? Cooperation and coordination?

GILPATRIC: Not at the headquarters; I imagine there was in the field. But there was what I regarded then and still feel is a gap in communications and coordination between the agency and the Defense Department and, to some degree, the State Department. And that was remedied as time went on by McGeorge Mac Bundy, because once he became seized of the situation in the White House and once you had Maxwell D. Max Taylor in the White House after Cuba, then there was a common point of control that didn't exist before. Certainly that took about six months to really get it in good working order.

O'BRIEN: Well, one of the questions that comes up in regard to Laos and is a question throughout is this business of committing troops and the idea of putting troops either into Laos or, as it was later, into Thailand. Do you recall anything in particular--particularly your conversations with the Joint Chiefs and their attitudes and Secretary McNamara . . .

GILPATRIC: Well, there was a real division going back, I believe, to the discussions that took place at the time of Dien Bien Phu. And the air force and the marines were generally on the side of not putting in troops. The marines attitude, I think, was probably largely influenced by David M. Dave Shoup's own strong feelings on the subject. I don't think this was necessarily the marine party line. But he was always skeptical of anything more than a kind of a hit-and-run type of operation. The navy, on the other hand, took a different view than the marines, even as regards the marines' own role. And both the navy spokesman and the army felt that there was a place for military activity ashore in that area. They had differing views as to how to apply that military force. But as I recall it, that was the initial division. And of course, we had several changes there: Burke went out in the late spring of '61 and George W. Anderson came in; Lemnitzer went to Europe and Taylor came in. So I'm not suggesting it was a static condition there as far as this division--it changed as the people changed.

O'BRIEN: Well, in those early months of 1961 is there any fundamental difference, as you can see it, between State, CIA, and Defense over policy in Laos, or are they all divided at that point?

GILPATRIC: I think that as far as Laos is concerned, unlike future developments in Southeast Asia, the Defense Department was not particularly a protagonist. That was one area where McNamara didn't reach out and sort of take the initiative as he's been accused of, and I think probably rightly so, in the light of events. Certainly it's true in regard to Vietnam. But as far as military activities were concerned and the related State Department moves, it was more of the same; it was a projection forward of what had been going on prior to the change of administration. And I don't recall that anybody in Defense in the new group, new team, had any particular new contribution to make to that other than the feeling that it seemed to me the president shared in the beginning, that this was no place where things could be settled by the application of military power.

O'BRIEN: Is there any thinking or is there any fundamental problem that comes up in regard to the support--well, in those early months--the support of or choosing between Souvanna Phouma and General Phoumi [Nosavan]?

GILPATRIC: Well, the prior administration had put all their bets on Phoumi, and so we inherited a strong antipathy against Souvanna Phouma. He was the bad man, and for a long time that point of view prevailed. And actually it wasn't until much later--I'm not even sure. . . . It wasn't till after '62 that the virtues of Souvanna Phouma came to be appreciated in either State or Defense.

O'BRIEN: How about a guy like Lansdale? Is he on the side of General Phoumi at this point?

GILPATRIC: I think he was. I don't recall specifically how he expressed himself, but he certainly. . . . I think he'd worked with Phoumi, and I think he distrusted Souvanna Phouma. But he didn't. . . . That was a pre-existing state of affairs that we didn't change, and so I don't think his attitude mattered as far as we were concerned because it was the state of affairs when we took over.

O'BRIEN: Can you see any impact of the Bay of Pigs on thinking about Laos and, well, later, Vietnam, too? Is there any carry-over of that, as has been suggested?

GILPATRIC: Well, it had such a traumatic effect on everybody

at the top of the government, in State, Defense, the Agency, and the White House, that it was bound to shake up any assurance we had in just carrying forward with existing programs or concepts. It led us to reexamine all our premises because it was felt, perhaps unfairly, that we hadn't been properly prepared for what we were getting into, at least not in State, Defense, and the White House, on the Bay of Pigs. So I think from April on, there was a tendency to go back and start all over again. As far as McNamara was concerned, he became so disenchanted with the military advice he got that he insisted on examining the basic data himself. He wouldn't just take Joint Chief positions and pass them on to the president.

O'BRIEN: How does the department and, of course, yourself, McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs, look on the diplomacy of a person like W. Averell Harriman as he moves through the Laotian settlements in an attempt to get a settlement? Is there any opposition to or distrust of Harriman on the Pentagon side of things?

GILPATRIC: Only insofar as some of his people tended to--in the eyes of the military, the Defense Department--try to pull off end runs as they did in undermining Diem in the summer of '62.

O'BRIEN: This would be Michael V. Forrestal, Roger Hilsman, and perhaps William H. Sullivan?

GILPATRIC: Yes. Yeah. Well, not Sullivan. I'm trying to think of some of the other names beside Forrestal and Hilsman. But that wasn't personalized in any opposition to or questioning of Harriman himself. Harriman was always well liked by the military, and he has such a proven record of dealing with the Communists that I don't think he ever, you know, was a controversial figure the way some of the others outside were. And, you see, from the beginning of the Kennedy administration, we set up this direct interchange point of contact between State and Defense and the Joint Chiefs in which we on the civilian side didn't personally inject ourselves. Every week someone like Jeffrey C. Jeff Kitchen or Alexis Johnson or George McGhee would come over and meet with the Chiefs in a separate session, and they would exchange views. And that tended to give, I think, the Joint Chiefs of Staff a feeling that they knew what was going on in State and vice versa. And then President Kennedy made it a practice never to have any kind of a special group or task force without having a military representative.

O'BRIEN: You sat in on those meetings in May of 1962, in

which--I believe it was after the battle of Nam Tha.

I can never pronounce it correctly. Those become rather key meetings, as I understand it, in that decision to send troops in. What was your own personal position on, for example, the dropping of marines into Thailand at that point?

GILPATRIC: I was against it, but we had a practice of caucusing in the Defense Department before we went to an NSC [National Security Council] meeting or any other presidential meeting, and unless the president asked me personally or asked Paul Nitze or some other civilian who might be there other than McNamara, McNamara would state the secretary of defense's position. Then Lemnitzer or General Taylor or whoever was the chairman at the time would either concur or add to what McNamara had said. And I don't recall just what kind of a position we had developed in advance because the thing got--I don't know whether it was that session or subsequent ones where everybody got in the act and where there was a lot of improvisation as the meeting progressed instead of just having an evaluation and assessment by the president of different preprepared positions.

But I had no confidence that, whether you had forces in Thailand or whether you tried to move across the Mekong--or up the Mekong from Vietnam--or move them in by air, that it was a viable operation. My whole concept was that we were going to have to live with a de facto division of Laos, and I didn't think the Communists would, you know, try to take Vientiane or they would go much beyond the Plain of Jarres or they would try to capture the capital of--I forget the name of the city where the king lived, north of. . . .

O'BRIEN: Oh, ah. . . .

GILPATRIC: But, you know, it is remarkable

O'BRIEN: Luang Prabang.

GILPATRIC: Yeah, Luang Prabang, exactly. For ten years--if you superimposed, you know, on a map of Laos a series of transparencies, you'd find that those lines have wavered back and forth, but the Mekong Valley has essentially been left alone, and it hasn't been protected by any great body of troops. There's just been a certain self-restraint on both sides.

O'BRIEN: Does--go ahead, I'm sorry.

GILPATRIC: It's only when one side or the other tries to make

a substantial alteration of that pattern that, it seems to me, you get a response from the other side.

O'BRIEN: Does the question of bombing, the use of bombing, come into those discussions on Laos, either in the department before you go over to the White House or in the White House meetings, in 1961-'62?

GILPATRIC: Well, yes, there was to some degree because I think all of us, including McNamara at that stage, still believed that the doctrine or tactic of interdiction was an effective one. I mean we believed the Air Force could carry out that kind of mission effectively. Perhaps that was because at that stage the anti-aircraft defenses, both in Laos as later in Vietnam, North and South, hadn't been as effectively equipped by Soviet and Chinese equipment--I guess mostly Soviet equipment. So I think there was sort of a general assumption and confidence, as I recall it, that we could have pinpoint, precision taking out of targets, sort of a surgical operation, that would be effective against troop movements as well as logistical operations. And we didn't really come out from under the ether of that confidence until later on in '63 and '64.

O'BRIEN: In those meetings that take place in May, there's a rather serious leak, isn't there, to Max Frankel, as I recall, in the Department of Defense that caused at least a tightening up of some of the press.

GILPATRIC: Yes. I think it was a general, now on the Joint Staff, who--I've forgotten that it was Max Frankel, but I remember it was a very serious affair.

O'BRIEN: Well, just one more question on Laos: As I understand it, in 1963 there's a decision to go beyond the limits of the Geneva agreements and sort of resume clandestine activities. Did you get in on that decision at all and the basis on which that decision was made?

GILPATRIC: I didn't think it was that early. I thought it was '64, because it wasn't a definite policy or practice at the time I left in January of '64. As I recall it, we were just working out sort of a modus operandi with Souvanna Phouma, and we had certain reconnaissance, of course, activities that went on, but as far as any bombing with his consent, I don't recall that taking place that early. Anyway, I wasn't in on it if it was.

O'BRIEN: Well, I'd like to actually get into a couple more things today, Vietnam, but also the functioning of the Counterinsurgency Group, which probably

would be best to come back to after talking about Vietnam. Can you perhaps discuss some of the complications that the Department of Defense has in carrying on some of the military assistance programs--and in cooperation with some of the military assistance programs in Vietnam--when you assume the chairmanship of the task force?

GILPATRIC: Well, my first impression was that the conduct of the military assistance programs had been conducted as too separate an operation from the rest of the activities of the services of the military. It had been compartmented; it had been treated more as an adjunct to the overall AID [Agency for International Development] program. And the kind of people who were working on it were usually, to put it boldly, sort of rejects by the military. They were people for whom the services were trying to find places in their final days, and they were stuck over in ISA, and they just lived sort of a life of their own. Very often we'd only know after the event that they were doing something which related to something which existed in the mainstream of the Defense Department's concern. So one of the first things that this short-lived task force on Vietnam did was to try to bring back into the common center of knowledge and understanding what was happening in various parts of the whole executive branch, not just the Defense Department. Most of our recommendations called for immediate action in forms that could be implemented through the military assistance program rather than using regular Defense Department budget funded activities.

O'BRIEN: In this problem as it exists there, when do you become aware of the degree of--well, what we were talking about just a moment ago--the involvement of agencies like CIA with the Montagnards and with other areas of Vietnamese politics and also Cambodian politics?

GILPATRIC: When did I become. . . .

O'BRIEN: Yeah, when do you become. . . .

GILPATRIC: Well, as I recall it, the first realization that came to me was in March and April of '61, when I sat through all these sessions and we heard from State and CIA and AID and our own military assistance people in ISA on what was happening. We conducted sort of a general inventory taking of all kinds of activities, and then I got this overall impact that I hadn't had before.

O'BRIEN: Do you see any cross-purposes there, between programs of Defense and programs of AID?

GILPATRIC: Well, there certainly wasn't any common objective, no fully worked out plan to which all these activities were related in a rational, logical way. The scene there in Vietnam was one of a series of different agencies with operations in Vietnam, and not even the ambassador, really, was seized of the whole situation. He really only knew what some of the other agencies wanted to tell him, and it was really a kind of an ad hoc proposition where you have a lot of very energetic, ambitious people pushing their own projects and points of view.

O'BRIEN: Did you get in on the selection of [Frederick E., Jr.] Nolting at all as ambassador, in either a positive or a negative sense? Did the department become involved in it at all?

GILPATRIC: As far as Nolting was concerned, we in the Defense Department, the military, never had any problems with Nolting; we were more his defenders against his detractors--State. Now, I didn't see nearly as much of him as McNamara did. And I ought to make it plain that I'm the only person at the top of the Defense Department that never got to Vietnam. I was always left behind to be the storekeeper, acting secretary, so I've never been there, never been actually on the scene, which is somewhat ironic.

O'BRIEN: What's President Kennedy's reaction to Nolting? Did you ever get any indication at all?

GILPATRIC: I had the feeling that he really had confidence in Nolting. And there was one. . . . I guess it was in the summer of '63, while Nolting was on leave, on his way back from Vietnam, and Lodge hadn't gotten there, there was sort of an interregnum, and a good deal of work was done to undercut Nolting with the president by such people as Hilsman. And so when we had these sessions, both before and after that famous telegram to Lodge on August 29, or whatever it was, '63, Nolting wasn't even brought into the meetings in the Cabinet Room. On a couple of occasions the president just said, "Where is Nolting?" and in effect, sent for him, somewhat to the discomfort of the State Department representatives. And they'd send the presidential car over and bring him over. My recollection is that the president was not among those who were severely critical, at least, of Nolting. He always called on Nolting for his own views. And I don't remember him ever, you know, working him over the way he did people who he--or show in other ways, some other way, his lack of sympathy for their point of view.

BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I

O'BRIEN: Well, once the task force is established, do you sense any conflict between Defense, State, and CIA?

GILPATRIC: Initially there was resistance to the idea of having an interdepartmental task force at all. In other words, State and CIA wanted to come up with their own recommendation direct to the president, and State didn't want anything run out of Defense. But once they accepted that was the presidential wish, why, we did work together. We had meetings in all three places. We would vary the locale of these sessions for discussion and presentation. The whole operation I don't think lasted more than six weeks because the president wanted to reach some kind of a conclusion before he sent the vice president out to Vietnam. As I recall, that was in June-- I may be wrong on the dates. May or June. And he sent with him [Stephen E.] Steve Smith, his brother-in-law.

So we had several sessions with the president, NSC-type sessions, in which different portions of our report were explained to the president. We did reach a common set of recommendations, common ground on what we would recommend, the emphasis being primarily on non-strictly military activities. And we did recommend, as I recall it, over a period of time, the introduction of maybe three or four thousand more U. S. personnel. That was over a phased period of twelve months at that time. And even that small an increase was greeted by the President with a great deal of impatience.

He showed at the very outset an aversion to sending more people out there. He wasn't averse to various kinds of economic aid programs, programs that had as their object political reform, social reform, cultural exchanges, the idea that there'd be more U. S. military going out and primarily reaching down from the province level, to the district level, to the village level, was one of our recommendations, that we ought to have military advisors in depth rather than just sitting back in the twelve or fourteen district capitals. That, as I remember it, was not very well received, although I think after the Taylor-[Walt W.] Rostow mission took place, we went ahead with it.

So the net results of this task force operation were rather inconclusive. They were cut short when Johnson went to Vietnam. The President himself went to Europe. He had his session in Vienna with [Nikita S.] Khrushchev. And the next step, really, major step, was the Taylor-Rostow mission in the summer.

O'BRIEN: Is there any indication along the line here that, as a result of this task force, Secretary Dean Rusk and the State Department just from that point on considered Vietnam a military problem? Interruption . . . the department simply considered it a military problem after 1961?

GILPATRIC: I wouldn't characterize it in that fashion. I would say that the department from Rusk on down accepted the Defense Department's role as a primary interest and sort of the dominant member of the team. But I don't recall many--if any--sessions where the president would formally listen to discussions of Vietnam that somebody from the department wasn't there. But the major initiatives, the major formulation of steps, was pretty much left to McNamara. I mean he always headed the teams that went out there. Rusk didn't go. There would be somebody from State, but the lead man would be McNamara. And, of course, the more. . . . Once you had Harkins out there, and you'd worked out this treaty between the ambassador and Harkins as sort of a separate but equal--and I didn't personally sit in on that discussion between the department and Defense--it was pretty clear that the president was looking to the Defense Department to take the lead. So that's the way I would put it.

O'BRIEN: Well, getting to the Taylor-Rostow mission, from the Defense side, how does it come about, how does it generate?

GILPATRIC: Well, I don't recall the first visit that McNamara. . . . Well, you have to go back, I think, to the Taylor mission. And Taylor, from the outset, had the confidence and high regard of the president. And when Taylor moved over from the White House to the Pentagon, he sort of brought with him, as one of his ongoing projects, Vietnam. And then as the steps were taken to build up the military element out there and McNamara himself went out, he just sort of took charge; that was his nature. If he was in something, he either was in charge of it or he'd turn it over to somebody else. I mean he didn't take kindly to being just a sort of a junior member of any team. That's my generalized recollection of the course of events. I don't have in mind the exact dates of when that command was set up and the first time that McNamara went out, but he went out, and he spent a lot of time with Diem himself and came back with very positive impressions. And it became a subject with him that. . . . He felt very sure of himself; he felt it was a very heavy responsibility because he knew the president's reluctance about the whole operation. When you add him and Taylor together, that was a pretty strong combination, against which, nobody in State really had the stomach or the

capacity to stand up.

O'BRIEN: Well, at the time of the Taylor mission out there in 1961 with Walt Rostow, November of that year, that really causes some serious rethinking, doesn't it, as I understand, in the department? Do you recall any of the by-products of that? Let me try one thing on you: As I understand it, there's a memo that comes out in November of 1961, that's a joint memo of the secretary of state, secretary of defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff. And I don't know whether this is a part of the Taylor report or whether it's a separate one, but at least it's a memo that suggests that. . . . The language reads something to the effect:

"The chances are against, probably sharply against, preventing the fall of South Vietnam by any other measure short of the introduction of United States troops on a substantial level."

Does that ring any bells to you?

GILPATRIC: Not specifically. And I'm not clear in my recollection as to whether that point of view existed before we had an increase in people there, or whether that was a conviction that grew with the increase in the involvement of the military. In other words, I can't pinpoint now just when it was that the Chiefs and the civilian end, McNamara and the ISA people, felt that this was really a major Defense Department responsibility as against AID, State, CIA, and so forth. I think that must have followed the Taylor mission because he. . . . Max Taylor was a person who either prevails in what he strongly believes in or he, in effect, quits and lays off. He's not one who will be dragged along unwillingly in something that he doesn't believe in, and if he does, he's at the forefront as a protagonist. And I think from the beginning, and it hasn't changed to this day, he's had very clear, well-expounded ideas on the subject, and I think he had a great influence on the president, and up to the time that McNamara went out himself, I think he influenced McNamara.

O'BRIEN: The issue of the use of defoliants comes up about that point, too, doesn't it--or the first use of defoliants?

GILPATRIC: Well, once you. . . . I can't give you the timing on that, but certainly it must have been by the end of '61, because it went on for so long, and there were so many arguments and discussions over it. But I don't recall whether that came up just from the military side

or whether from one of our R and D project groups that went out to see what they could contribute to this strange kind of warfare.

O'BRIEN: Which brings up another point about Vietnam: As I understand it, the Department, not only with counter-insurgency, but there's also a group that's formed in those years called Agile, which is, as I understand it, a particular group that tests some of the new concepts of warfare.

GILPATRIC: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Is this a result of Vietnam, or is it in any way linked to Vietnam?

GILPATRIC: Yes, definitely. It was an outgrowth of our becoming involved in Vietnam. I think it antedated the formation of the Counterinsurgency Group, but it certainly was one of the lines of action that that group was supposed to supervise. And we had some very eager beaver scientific types who were ingenious and inventive in the things they came up with. Of course, ultimately, one of those connected with it was convicted of misappropriation of the funds. That was five years ago. But I don't think that reflects on the quality of the work that was done. It grew out of, I think, an initiative in the R and D end of the department and was sort of sold to the military and then became part of the ongoing effort, just one facet of it.

O'BRIEN: What's the president thinking back in those early stages of Vietnam about Vietnam? Did you ever get any chance to talk to him or hear him expound on his own views on Vietnam?

GILPATRIC: Well, we didn't have any personal discussions in the sense that we talked about it alone. The times that I spent with him alone, I don't recall the subject being a very prominent part of the discussion. But he evidenced from the beginning a sense of frustration, exasperation, about everything that seemed to come up. It was something that seemed to annoy him; it didn't have the same kind of a positive challenge. You know, he'd read some marine magazine about Green Beret type of activity, and he felt that when you got away from strictly a conventional military or intelligence or State Department activities, there wasn't any well-coordinated, cohesive direction. And that's when, I think, he told his brother he wanted to get him into the thing. And that was the beginning of the formation of this Counterinsurgency Group which, I gather, he followed very closely because practically every session we had would be followed by a visit by Bobby to the White House. He'd go right across the street from the old State Building,

Executive Office [Building], and tell the president what was going on. I think he felt that the lines of command, the regular channels of authority in the Defense Department, weren't flexible enough to accommodate to the nuances of this kind of a situation. But that was, just to say, one evidence of his sense of sort of helplessness to cope with this.

O'BRIEN: It's been suggested by some of the people who have written about this period that many people in the Pentagon were very much affected by the remembrance of Korea and the idea of becoming involved in a war on the Asian mainland. Can you see this in your dealings with, particularly, the uniformed services? Does Korea have any effect on their thinking?

GILPATRIC: Well, it certainly wasn't manifest in a way that would strike a person like myself who had been there all during the Korean War and knew the people who had been out there.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about your own thinking?

GILPATRIC: Well, I just felt that a land engagement, a land conflict in Asia, was just something we weren't equipped to handle. I felt an air and sea presence, various auxiliary military activities--but having seen how the military ground forces had to be supported, the kind of a tail, the kind of a logistics infrastructure that had to be built up, up until the time I left the Pentagon in '64, I just didn't conceive of our ever doing that kind of an operation there. But as I recall the attitude of people like General [George H.] Decker, Chief Staff of the Army, General [Earle G.] Wheeler, who became chief staff and then became chairman, and even Shoup, when you present him with a situation when he can send in amphibious forces over the beaches as you could in Vietnam, they regarded that as just one more military engagement. And I never detected any haunting feeling that this would be something which would bog us down as we were in Korea. But that feeling may have existed down at staff levels and was expressed to people outside the department; it wasn't reflected in their own personal attitudes as they talked or in their, you know, formal papers or planning.

O'BRIEN: Well, in your own education, in a sense, as you go through the development of this task force, do you find the intelligence dependable that you're getting on what's going on in Vietnam from the CIA, from, certainly, Defense sources within Vietnam?

GILPATRIC: I'd have to differentiate between different types

of intelligence. Now, as far as I recall, order of battle intelligence, that is to say what conventional units or installations could be ascertained and what kinds of communication would be picked up through these electronic ELINT'S [electronics intelligence], that was to me fairly straightforward. But when you'd try to get an assessment of the political orientation of individuals or, you know, probing areas as to which were pro-Viet Cong and which were pro-government, I found that you got wonderful briefings and you got all kinds of head counts on how many million or hundred of thousands in certain areas were friendly, but it was not "hard" intelligence in any sense at all. And I felt then, and I still feel, that we occidentals just aren't capable of really comprehending, assessing, or evaluating what goes on in the oriental mind, particularly in an area where you've got so many strains. You've got religious sects; you've got tribal units; you've got so many different elements in the picture that don't lend themselves to precise, conventional analysis.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any way within the Defense Department that you sort of checked this intelligence that you'd received, to evaluate the evaluations?

GILPATRIC: Well, we began quite early, and particularly after McCone came down, and with people like [Richard M.] Helms and others that were very responsive, to ask for all military appreciations to be checked in the agency. At first that wasn't known; I mean it was done sort of clandestinely by the secretary of defense's office. Later, when it became known, there was some back up by the military, but that coincided with the formation of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and we got a different cast of characters into that area. We got away from the G-2's.

But what we really ended up with, I found, was you get at least three different points of view, three different intelligence assessments because under Hilsman and under [Thomas L.] Hughes, the State Department felt that they had special capability for making judgments about people and political movements. The military felt that theirs was the only really hard intelligence, and they had very rigid rules and practices about interpreting it. They'd done it the same way for a long time. And as far as the agency was concerned, the [United States] Intelligence Board was the only place where all of these elements were brought together. I think the quality of the national intelligence estimates varied very largely, depending on the area and the subject matter and the situation. It was not a uniform product: Some of it was very good, some of it was very spotty and very incomplete.

O'BRIEN: So you were a little suspicious of it from the very beginning.

GILPATRIC: I was skeptical of it being a standard product in the sense you could always count on it. I think there were some estimates that were very high caliber, but you just couldn't always fall back on NIE [National Intelligence Estimates] for solid comfort.

O'BRIEN: Is there general support in the Defense Department for the report of the Taylor-Rostow mission in the fall of '61, the idea that, I guess, would be tying further military aid with reform?

GILPATRIC: I don't recall any real resistance to that. The principal arguments on the military side were who was going to be in charge? Was the Air Force officer going to be under the army officer? Who was going to be the C I C? Was it going to go through CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, Pacific], or was it going to come straight up to the Joint Chiefs? The arguments were largely jurisdictional over who was going to do what and who was going to have the three-star slot and the two-star slots and so forth. There was more jockeying about those questions than there was about the basic strategic character of the decisions. I think by that time any lingering doubts that there had been, you know, about our being drawn into another Korea-type situation certainly didn't result in any surface resistance.

O'BRIEN: As I understand, this controversy over CINCPAC, reporting to CINCPAC or reporting directly to Washington, becomes a major issue even in between the departments.

GILPATRIC: Yes.

O'BRIEN: What's your own feeling? What were your own feelings on that?

GILPATRIC: Well, first of all, I wanted to get away from the idea that the Pacific was just a navy province and that CINCPAC was always to be handled by a navy officer. Until you could get an army or an Air Force officer in and have that really be what I considered a joint command, as other theater commands were, where you shifted from, you know, Eisenhower to [Alfred M.] Gruenther to [Lauris] Norstad, to Wheeler, and so forth, that as long as CINCPAC was primarily a navy operation, I felt that the line of reporting and command ought to go directly to the Joint Chiefs. But that's not the way it was decided. And I don't know what persuaded McNamara

to accept that. I think probably Max Taylor was convinced that if we didn't do that, the navy would buck the program the whole way through.

But I was. . . . At the time, I. . . . Well, of course, I'd been to CINCPAC many times during the Korean War. In that situation, I did go out quite often. And I could see, also, from the delays in communications that as far as instant response is concerned, where you had this intermediate level of command, I thought, it was a real handicap to the kind of control it seemed to me had to be exercised from on top of this whole operation in view of its combined nature.

O'BRIEN: About this time Robert Thompson. . . . Well, I guess the way it should be put: Are you aware of Thompson . . .

GILPATRIC: Oh, yes. Yes.

O'BRIEN: . . . at that point and some of the things that he was doing in regard to the strategic hamlets?

GILPATRIC: Yes, we heard about him early on, but I don't think I met him till considerably later. He was cited and quoted from and referred to. And much of what the Counterinsurgency Group was concerned with were lessons to be derived from experience in the Malay Peninsula--Thompson views. I don't think he appeared as much personally then as he did later. He certainly wasn't given any U. S. missions at that stage, as he has been subsequently.

O'BRIEN: What goes into the selection of General Harkins to replace [Lionel C.] McGarr? Is there any criticism of McGarr within the department and the way that he handled himself and the operation in Vietnam?

GILPATRIC: Well, it was felt that--as I recall it, he was a two-star general, and he was a typical army type. He didn't have any intellectual orientation. He was a field commander right out of [Fort] Leavenworth or [Fort] Sill or some other army command staff school, and it was felt he didn't have the diplomatic--the broader kind of a base. And so when it was decided to--I guess it was originally a three-star job. I've forgotten whether Harkins went out as a three-star and became a four-star. But in any event, it was felt that a man of more caliber and more stature than McGarr should be put in charge. There were considerable reservations on the part of McNamara and myself and, I think, the president to Harkins. He never quite rang true. But he was certified to

us by the Joint Chiefs and by Taylor, and so his appointment was accepted. That was a case where the military said, "You tell us the job to be done, and we'll tell you who to do it." And he was picked strictly by the Chiefs and accepted by the local authorities.

O'BRIEN: How does he get on with Admiral [Harry D.] Felt?

GILPATRIC: My impression is that Harkins managed to get along with most people. He wasn't strong enough a person to set up any definite attitudes of resistance. He was diplomatic all right, to a fault, in a sense that I think he didn't have strong enough convictions, and he didn't do as [William C.] Westmoreland or [Creighton] Abrams did later, disagree with them as you may, in insisting on his perogatives. So I think he just accepted the oversight by Felt and CINCPAC, and we never had any static from that quarter.

O'BRIEN: Well, in those years following there, as I understand it, there's a good many four-star people that are in Vietnam and officers that are in Vietnam. Does this cause any problem in the management of the war, having too much in the way of top level brass in the field?

GILPATRIC: When I left, Westmoreland was just in the process of taking over. In fact, one of the last things I did was to see him before he went out. And then, really, until spring of '65, the condition to which you refer hadn't become very pronounced. There was a tendency, as there is in all joint commands, joint headquarters, to overstaff because, by definition of joint command, you've got two or more services represented by very high ranking officers. They each insist on having their own staff as well as a joint staff. So there's one vice in a joint command, with all its virtues, and that is you have a definite propensity to overstaff. And I think as the Vietnam operation began to assume more importance in--I think this is mostly true after Kennedy's death--presidential eyes, obviously the military wanted to be where the action was. So there were not only people who were detailed out there on fairly short tours, but there was a constant flow of brass through there, you see. So everybody was an expert on it, and everybody had to express an opinion on it. It was the big thing as far as the military was concerned, whereas the situation in Europe was static.

O'BRIEN: There are a couple things that I was curious about. One we basically touched on was the CIA involvement with the Montagnards. As I understand it, there's considerable involvement during the Eisenhower years with the Khmer Serai, the anti-[Norodom] Sihanouk group in Cambodia,

through Vietnam. Did you see any of this at all? Was there ever any pressure put on either the Vietnamese . . .

GILPATRIC: No, I wasn't. . . . It didn't intrude itself on my consciousness. I'm aware of it, but I think I learned it through other ways than through my experience down there.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever see any pressure applied to stop them from carrying out some of their activities in Cambodia against Sikanouk?

GILPATRIC: No. In fact, during my three years, Cambodia was, you know, out of bounds as far as Defense was concerned. We had very few people there, and it was something that was strictly a State Department and, I assumed, CIA object of interest. It didn't leave any mark in my consciousness at least.

O'BRIEN: How about the so-called Operation Switchback, where the, as I understand it, DOD [Department of Defense] took over some of the training from the CIA?

GILPATRIC: Well, a point was reached where it became evident, particularly, in the first instance, to General Taylor and later to others of us that looked into it, that a para-military operation beyond a certain scale was just outside the capabilities of the agency. And since I didn't go out and observe it in the field, I had to take second-hand opinions and advice on that. But once the military were there in sufficient strength to do the job, they made an issue over the extent of the para-military activities of the CIA, and finally, that went to the president, mostly on General Taylor's advocacy. And there was some ground rule. I've forgotten whether it was two hundred or what size unit. But McCone agreed, finally, after [Marshall S.] Pat Carter and others had litigated the thing up and down the line with Mac Bundy, that any training or other para-military activity beyond this certain size, which was specified, had to be turned over--and there was a turnover, as you say, of Operation Switchback--to the Army, to the Defense Department.

O'BRIEN: As we're getting up here to this period of time just before the coup, as chairman of that task force, do you sense the problems building up, the deterioration of the military situation in Vietnam? Do you have any question about some of the statistics and some of the figures that you're getting from particularly Diem?

GILPATRIC: I can't say that because, as I pointed out earlier, my close connection with the Vietnam reached a rather early termination or phase-down. From the late spring of '61 on, this was an area where McNamara was personally in charge. And he was the one that made all the trips. While I was present at many NSC and other meetings on the subject, and I was very active in the counterinsurgency end because that was sort of assigned to me; when it came to assessing the performance of the Diem regime, what kind of intelligence we were getting and what the problems were, that was all secondhand. My present recollection is that McNamara retained his confidence in Diem pretty late in the day. He tended to defend Diem while submitting his shortcomings. But he certainly was far from being in the van of the effort to pull the rug out from under Diem.

O'BRIEN: Passing on to the beginning of the bonze suicides, what kind of an impact does this leave on yourself, on McNamara? Do you see any indication of president Kennedy's feelings about the Buddhist suicides?

GILPATRIC: The what suicides?

O'BRIEN: The Buddhist suicides. The self-immolation.

GILPATRIC: Oh, well, that was a very upsetting thing. I think, first, it's upsetting effect was not so much from a political and military standpoint as just the human standpoint. For anybody with any religious faith or convictions, that made quite an impact. It was the psychological aspect of it that emerged first; not so much an indication of error or weakness in the Diem government as just a callousness that indicated to many of us how little we know about how Orientals act and interreact. But it certainly had a deep, if momentary, shaking-up effect on people.

O'BRIEN: Passing on to some of the things around and involved with the coup, do you see from your vantage point at all, or are you aware of any solid conversations about coups between American military people and Vietnamese military prior to the famous telegram of the 24th of August?

GILPATRIC: I read the traffic, the cable traffic, but I didn't read it, you see, with the same understanding that somebody would have who knew these people, who had been out there. I did it just more or less to keep myself, you know, posted on a contingency basis if I had to get thrown into it. So nothing stands out very clearly.

O'BRIEN: General Taylor ever discuss any of his contacts

with Vietnamese generals and coup talk at any time?

GILPATRIC: Well, I only recall his favorable feelings about Duong Van "Big" Minh. He had a real rapport with Minh. He'd known him personally and he believed in him. But he never carried that to the point, you know, of making it a real issue. I mean he just was one Vietnamese general to whom he personally felt some--with whom he felt some rapport.

O'BRIEN: What was your reaction when Hilsman and Forrestal and Harriman and George Ball and those people sat down that weekend and wrote the telegram which was--and then, as I understand it, they later called you, didn't they?

GILPATRIC: Mike Forrestal called me at home. I was out on my farm Saturday night. And I was told by Mike Forrestal that not only Ball had cleared it for State in Rusk's absence, but that it had been cleared with the president. And when I talked to Victor H. Krulak, because I got him on the phone--he was with Forrestal--I said, "Well, I think, under the circumstances, we've got to treat this as a White House or State Department political move, and we just don't take a position on it," because I frankly thought it was an end run. I didn't see why it had to be done Saturday night with the president away, with Rusk away, with McNamara away, Bundy away. I was suspicious of the circumstances in which it was being done. But faced with that intelligence and with the fact that while General Taylor was there--he was over in his quarters in Fort Myer--he hadn't been consulted ahead of time. In other words, the Defense and the military were brought in sort of after the fact.

O'BRIEN: In that what. . . . I suspect Taylor had some reservations, too, didn't he?

GILPATRIC: He's writing a book on it. I just heard from him the other day. He asked me to check his own recollection, because apparently he is disputing Hilsman's account in Hilsman's book To Move a Nation. I don't know when Taylor's book is coming out, but he's in the process of writing one on this.

O'BRIEN: Good, I'm glad to hear that. That will be a rather important account. Well, there's a number of meetings that take place in that following week in which you're included. I think these are the ones you were suggesting that Nolting is brought into by presidential request and all.

GILPATRIC: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Do you get any indication of the president's attitude towards coups in Vietnam and American involvement with . . .? .

GILPATRIC: Well, I think his initial attitude was sort of being taken aback. Here he'd been told, certainly, by his principal advisors, McNamara, and Taylor that Diem could be counted on and. . . you see, up until that point, Harriman hadn't taken a very strong position, but during those meetings you speak of, after the cable had gone out, he went right down the line and defended his people. And I think in the face of a very strong statement from him, enjoying as he did the president's confidence, that there was nothing that those of us who had any doubts could do about it. But I did sense the president feeling as being one who was sort of being reluctantly or unwillingly carried along. He certainly didn't. . . . It wasn't something that moved or sprang from any initiative on his part or any sense of judgment on his part.

O'BRIEN: Is there any indication that he, either later in direct contacts with Lodge--either supported that move or rejected that move with him?

GILPATRIC: I really don't remember. If so, I wasn't apprised of it.

O'BRIEN: In those meetings, as I understand, they get pretty rough, particularly in some of Harriman's exchanges with Nolting. Do you recall anything of this?

GILPATRIC: Yes. It was almost, you know, insulting, and the only time I remember in the presence of a president where anybody took the tongue-lashing that Nolting did from Harriman. And I don't think from anybody else it would have been tolerated by the president. But, as I've said before, he was sympathetic to Nolting. Harriman was very rough; in effect, was charging Nolting with having been taken in by Diem and not having really adequately represented the interests of the United States. But again, I say, that because of my sort of secondhand connection at this time with the whole course of events, not having been out there, not knowing the principals, while I had some somewhat reactions to all these things, I really was not one of the major actors in the drama. It certainly was a drama.

O'BRIEN: Well, in regard to one other relationship I might be interested to pursue, and that's General Lemmitzer and Roger Hilsman. I understand that they have a conflict that is a rather serious one, both in Defense and State terms. Did you get any indication of this?

GILPATRIC: No.

O'BRIEN: Earlier? Not particularly here, but maybe in some of the meetings in Laos the year before?

GILPATRIC: At that time Hilsman wasn't very prominent in the presidential discussions, and I don't remember seeing that particular contention surface. I'm very clear in my recollection about the president's disenchantment with Lemnitzer, which grew during the spring of that year, not only because of Bay of Pigs, but also because of Lemnitzer's seeming incapacity to come over with a coordinated series of military recommendations. I didn't realize that Hilsman had much of a part in that because he didn't really come into the forefront of NSC-type meetings until that latter part of Vietnam. And you see, the decision to shift Lemnitzer to SHAPE [Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers, Europe] or SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander, Europe] was made quite early on; and so I don't think, if there was a dissension, division, between them, it could have lasted very long, at least in regard to Laos or Vietnam, because Lemnitzer was out of that particular play so early in the game.

O'BRIEN: Did you become involved in the selection of Lodge in any way--in a negative sense or a positive sense in regard to Lodge's appointment as ambassador?

GILPATRIC: No. No, I don't think so. I thought well of Lodge. I'd known Lodge from before. And I can remember my impression was that this was probably a pretty good appointment.

O'BRIEN: Was there a generally favorable attitude in the department towards his appointment?

GILPATRIC: Yes. No one knew how he would act. Now, after he got out there, there were definite problems of communication. Once he was appointed and once we began to sense how he was going to operate--he wanted to pick certain military types, and he only would talk to them, and there was a definite problem of communication with Harkins. But that wasn't known until later. But I think he went out with everybody's blessing and general approbation, as far as the Pentagon was concerned.

O'BRIEN: Is there a reaction in the department to the sacking of [John H.] Richardson? The CIA guy, Richardson, in Vietnam?

GILPATRIC: Not that I was aware of. We knew there was a struggle there. But I think that was more localized, and when it came up, it came up just through the principals like McCone and McNamara and the people in State. I couldn't add anything to that.

O'BRIEN: The Krulak-Joseph A. Mendenhall mission goes out about that time, too. Do you get any insights into that?

GILPATRIC: Well, that resulted in such a diversity of view that, after hearing the two of them, the president said, "Well, you better go back and reintroduce yourselves and start over again." But Mendenhall was one of those that was regarded even before that--and more so later--with great suspicion on the Virginia side of the river. And while Krulak later, particularly in marine politics, became controversial, he was universally liked and trusted in the Pentagon, both on the civilian and on the military side. And later, when he became such an advocate of Johnson's policies, I began to have reservations, but not then. And I found him to be an absolutely top reporter and observer and a very good mind.

O'BRIEN: This is, really, one last series of things here that perhaps we can work into. From your view, what happens to the coup that everyone is talking about in August? What happens to it? Why doesn't it take place in the very few weeks after that?

GILPATRIC: I couldn't shed any light on that. From where I sat, what I read, it was one of those enigmas that--I've never had a satisfactory explanation myself. I don't know enough about. . . . We'll have to read Taylor's book, I guess.

O'BRIEN: Yeah. Well, when do you first realize that the coup is going to take place, the one that actually took place, which I guess is the same coup?

GILPATRIC: Well, it was only when the actual events were in progress. We didn't get any, as I recall it, other than what we assumed would be the consequences of indicating to Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu a lack of confidence and support. But what went on among the Vietnamese commanders, you know, who was on top and. . . . Except for the dispatches that came through just when the events were in progress, I don't remember having any warning of that.

O'BRIEN: Well, we've . . .

GILPATRIC: Maybe we ought to stop for today.

O'BRIEN: . . . covered Vietnam today, and I think this is probably a good place to stop. Thank you very much, Mr. Gilpatric, for a very informative and interesting interview.