

Maxwell D. Taylor Oral History Interview—RFK #2, 11/13/1969
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Maxwell D. Taylor (1901-1987) served as General of the U.S. Army; Military Representative of the President (1961-1962); Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1962-1964); Ambassador to Vietnam (1964-1965); Special Consultant to the President (1965-1969). This interview focuses on Taylor's role in dealing with crises in Southeast Asia, the Special Group (Counterinsurgency)'s actions in Vietnam, and the debate over whether to put troops in Vietnam, among other issues.

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MAXWELL D. TAYLOR

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Maxwell D. Taylor—RFK #2
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
32	Robert F. Kennedy (RFK)'s resignation as Attorney General
33	Taylor on dealing with crises in Vietnam and Laos
35	American relations with Ngo Dinh Diem
36	Washington's realization of the seriousness of Vietnam situation
40	Lack of communications between American intelligence in Southeast Asia
42	Taylor's report on his mission to Vietnam
47	John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s personal opposition to introducing American troops in Vietnam
48	U.S. objectives in Vietnam
50	Efficiency of the Defense and State Departments
52	Reorganization of U.S. military command in Vietnam under General Harkins
53	Taylor's appointment as Ambassador to Vietnam
53	RFK's impressions from his 1962 trip to Southeast Asia
54	Special Group (Counterinsurgency)'s focus in Vietnam
57	Early talk by Vietnamese military leaders regarding potential overthrow of Diem

Second Oral History Interview

with

MAXWELL TAYLOR

November 13, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By Larry J. Hackman

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program
of the Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Okay, while I still want to focus on Robert Kennedy and get a clear understanding of his role, to the extent that there was a role in this, I want you to feel free to go beyond Robert Kennedy, since Viet Nam wasn't discussed very much in the other interviews.

TAYLOR: Good. Remind me of when he resigned as Attorney General.

HACKMAN: It was in August of '64, August or September of '64 [September 3, 1964]. You're already in the field at that point, aren't you? You're in Saigon, I believe.

TAYLOR: Yes.

HACKMAN: Right.

TAYLOR: I'd just gone out.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Okay, well, let's just start off by me asking you if there's anything you can remember in the spring or the summer of '61 when you first came down here, with Robert Kennedy, in relation to Viet Nam? Can you remember any discussions in that time?

TAYLOR: Well, very shortly after coming back to active service as the Military Representative, actually a few days before I took the job, I got my foot first in the flypaper of Viet Nam. I met the President [John F. Kennedy] in the hall just outside of his door in the White House, and he had in his hand the letter from President [Ngo Dinh] Diem of June 9, if my recollection is correct, in which Diem asked for an increase of a hundred thousand men in his army.

The President gave me a copy of it and said, "How shall I answer it?" And I spent the next six months trying to get the kind of answer he needed. Now we, of course, gave an interim reply at once, but there were so many things involved in the responding, because to respond implied commitments, implied undertakings. It involved relationships outside of Viet Nam, certainly in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia. So the entire Southeast Asian policy was really involved in replying to that letter.

HACKMAN: Can you tell me a little bit about whom you talked to at that point and if . . .

TAYLOR: I came back to active duty then the following month and set up business actually in this office, I was involved in two areas on opposite sides of the world, at the direction of the President. One, Berlin, which meant NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], and the other, Southeast Asia. Actually, Laos was of prime concern in the early, early months of '61, although the relationship between Laos and Viet Nam really was so close that they blurred; the situations blurred into each other. One situation in one country was constantly influencing the

TAYLOR: Well, I'd forgotten that, if I ever knew it.

HACKMAN: But you never heard him comment on that?

TAYLOR: I never heard him comment on it. Of course, when, in '63, the situation was becoming very, very shaky because of the repeated plots for a military coup to throw him out, and then the development of the so-called Buddhist confrontation with the Diem government added to the increasing criticism here in the United States of Diem, Diem became a topic of conversation for all of us. And I would say that Bobby shared the view which most of the President's advisers did, that Diem was far from perfect. We certainly wished he would do a lot of things he either couldn't do or wouldn't do, but at the same time we saw no one on the horizon who could replace him.

HACKMAN: Can you remember talking to him at all about [Frederick E., Jr.] Nolting's appointment as ambassador or then later about Nolting, his impressions of Nolting?

TAYLOR: No, I really don't. I had not known Nolting myself. He had been appointed, I believe, in April of '61, before my coming here, so I never knew him until later on. I believe the first time I met him was in October of '61 when I went out with a mission to Saigon, and there I got to know him quite well and formed a very high opinion of him. He was a man of rather slow speech and seemingly slow in reacting, but that slowness was not a lack of mental agility; it was the fact that he reflected before he spoke. He was conservative and cautious and I thought very sound, very careful to be sure of the facts that he reported to Washington. I don't know that Bobby and I ever discussed him as an individual, either before I went out or subsequently.

HACKMAN: Can you remember talking to Robert Kennedy at the time that then Vice President Johnson went out in May of '61, I guess, and came back . . .

TAYLOR: No, but I was working at the time on the Bay of Pigs. I knew nothing really--about the Johnson mission, until after the fact, when I read the record.

other, and really one couldn't deal with a Laotian question or a Vietnamese question properly--some people tried to-- they couldn't be dealt with properly without looking at the entire area of Southeast Asia. So that I was working with many of the White House staff, [McGeorge] Mac Bundy, with Walt Rostow, who was Bundy's expert or specialist on Southeast Asia, and the people in State and Defense and so forth. With Bobby, I was seeing him frequently and talking about the situation, always trying to keep him abreast. I think I mentioned in my last interview that it was rather a self-appointed job of keeping Bobby cut in on those things which I knew he would be interested in and furthermore those things which sometime the President was going to ask him about.

HACKMAN: Do you remember him having strong impressions of his own at that time? What did he bring . . .

TAYLOR: Well, he was entirely in support of the President's policy, which was, in the case of Laos, not to get militarily involved. And in this he was getting mixed advice from his military advisers. At the same time he recognized that Viet Nam was a great stake and furthermore was geographically located so it did not have many of the complications which would have affected the use of military force in Laos.

HACKMAN: Do you remember him having any ideas in his own mind at that point or impressions of, let's say, Diem or [Ngo Dinh] Nhu or anyone else, any of the figures in Viet Nam?

TAYLOR: No, I never heard him discuss the individuals. You see, he had never been there and so he didn't have that . . .

HACKMAN: He'd been through on a trip in '51.

TAYLOR: Was he with the President when the President made his visit?

HACKMAN: He was with the President and I'd wondered . . .

HACKMAN: You mentioned in your interview with Elspeth Rostow that one of the first things you can remember on Viet Nam was talking to General [Lionel C.] McGarr when he came back. Was Robert Kennedy involved in that at that point?

TAYLOR: Yes, I invited McGarr to come over and brief the Cuba Study Group. It didn't bear directly on Cuba, obviously, but it did bear upon paramilitary operations and guerrilla warfare. And it certainly was a matter of general interest at the time. So, McGarr came to our office in the Pentagon and chatted with us an hour or so just talking about his impressions. Bobby was very much interested in that. I think he, as I was, was impressed with the deterioration, the evidence of the deterioration of the situation in Viet Nam at the time, something that was generally not understood in Washington.

One of the turning points in the situation in Viet Nam was in 1959 when Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, declared the so-called War of National Liberation at the end of '59. Well, the words meant nothing to us at first. This was just unintelligible Communist jargon as most people read the words. I know of no one. . . . I don't think the record shows of anyone showing a sense of realization, at the time, of the significance of what was taking place. But then in the year '60, events started to show that indeed the game had been changed, so that by early '61 there was a growing impression that things were going downhill. And McGarr came back and went all around town talking to everyone and presenting a very graphic picture of the problem. I have a feeling that Bobby got his introduction to the complexities of the problem there from that discussion with McGarr.

HACKMAN: Was there anyone around town who was particularly paying much attention to McGarr? Can you remember any of his problems in trying to . . .

TAYLOR: Oh, I'm sure there were. I'm sure there were, but I wouldn't necessarily know who. He was being interviewed by everybody in the Pentagon, State,

and whether he actually came to the White House to talk to the President, I don't know. But he had a good hearing around town. It was not a sort of a private meeting that we were having of which the rest of the officials were deprived.

HACKMAN: Do you remember people around town at that point being very surprised at this kind of pessimistic report or. . . .

TAYLOR: I think the depth of the pessimism surprised people. Obviously, one can't read the cables at any important desk in Washington without getting some impression of what's going on. But there were the indications of growing control of the countryside by the Viet Cong and increased evidence of support from Hanoi, which had been suspected for a long while, but really I don't think had been thoroughly appreciated until at least '60.

HACKMAN: Is it your impression that McGarr's report at this point is in close accord with the feelings of the other parts of the country team out there at that point, or is everyone else that concerned, do you think?

TAYLOR: I would think that was the case. Prior to Nolting's appointment as ambassador, Ambassador [Elbridge] Durbrow preceded him. As we now know, though I didn't know in the early days of '61, Ambassador Durbrow and Diem had never got along together. Whose fault it was, I don't know. It may have been simply the fact that Durbrow was always required to carry bad news to Diem. He was constantly. . . . He was necessarily pressing Diem to do the things he didn't want to do at the urging of Washington. McGarr, the military man, had the good fortune of not carrying bad news to Diem. He was bringing him help. He had weapons; he had money. He had resources and was obviously very sympathetic to Diem and his military problem. So that I would say McGarr, as his predecessor, General [Samuel T.] Williams, had an inner track with Diem, which I'm sure made the Ambassador somewhat unhappy, although it was in the national interest, I think, to have at least somebody who had the advantage of warm relations with Diem. So when you ask me, did McGarr represent really the mission view, I can't say except that

by the time I got out at the end of '61, there was no suggestion that the embassy and the mission were apart in their evaluation of the situation.

HACKMAN: How does General [Paul D.] Harkins come to be chosen to replace McGarr at that point?

TAYLOR: Well, he was a rather natural man to replace McGarr as our senior military officer. He had a very fine record in World War II and subsequently. He had been with me in Korea. He was a close friend of mine, although that did not. . . . I was not responsible for his appointment, although I certainly supported it. He had just been the commander of the Army Forces in CINCPAC, [Commander in Chief, Pacific] and from that position he had an outlook over and a responsibility for the situation, and he was the senior Army officer that had that kind of orientation. So it was a rather natural appointment and I thought a very, very good one.

HACKMAN: This is sort of off the subject, but can you remember Secretary [Robert S.] McNamara taking a much closer look at appointments like this than previous Secretaries of Defense had taken?

TAYLOR: No, I don't think so. Every Secretary of Defense that I've known, quite properly, has wanted to know what kind of men he's putting in the key positions around the world, and most of them have gone to great pains to look them over. In 1955, I was pulled back all the way from Korea to be looked over by [Charles E.] Charlie Wilson to decide whether I'd pass as Army Chief of Staff, and that was quite proper. I would say that McNamara certainly had a sharp eye on personnel and I thought he was a fair man on personnel. I say that not to suggest that any of his predecessors were unfair, but there is the kind of civilian official who arrives in the Pentagon and immediately starts picking out good and bad admirals with absolutely no background to do so. I would say McNamara withheld his judgment until he had a reasonable chance to get a feeling of the kind of man he was dealing with.

HACKMAN: You'd mentioned in that interview with Mrs. Rostow that when your trip in September of '61 to Viet Nam came about, that there had been people pushing that before you went out. And I think you named Walt Rostow as one. I'm wondering if there were other people who were strongly urging the mission like that?

TAYLOR: Well, yes, Bobby brought me the message in mid-summer that the President had also mentioned a couple of times in his hearing that he was looking forward to my going out there. So I wrote the President a note, as I became aware of this, that obviously I would always do what he wanted me to do, but I thought it was untimely, that we better get our own ducks in a row here in Washington and know where we were going before we started rushing about and tackling a problem piecemeal. In such a case, the action taken on the kind of recommendations I'd bring back might be inconsistent with the subsequent policy.

HACKMAN: What had to happen then subsequently, before you went out?

TAYLOR: A great deal of discussion, which went on for week after week all through the summer and early fall on some of the points: what is the relation between Laos and Viet Nam? should we look at this as a U.S. problem or should we use SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] primarily? There was every natural desire to get an alliance in here--let's not do it all by ourselves. So there was a great deal of examination of the SEATO planning, which had been oriented not at the problem that actually was presenting itself, but rather at a large scale China-supported invasion of Southeast Asia where conventional forces would be rushed into the Mekong Valley and various parts of Southeast Asia. The problem of trying to readjust that past planning and getting allied commitments so that we could do what was necessary under several flags was a subject of a great deal of work. And it came out favorably only to a limited degree. You may recall that at least on one occasion we did put forces into Thailand. At the same time the British, the Australians, and the New Zealanders put in token air contributions. But at least we were doing that under the SEATO flag and I think it had some political effect.

HACKMAN: This is primarily in reference to the Laotian thing, I believe, at that point.

TAYLOR: That is correct. It was primarily Laos. There was always the feeling that at any time the Pathet Lao, supported from Hanoi, could move to the Mekong Valley and take the principal cities, could even take Vientiane, which they could have, whereas their actual objective as we now see it was to play it cautiously there but meanwhile to protect the Ho Chi Minh trails and occupy all the terrain necessary to give them a good cushion of protection.

HACKMAN: I think you'd implied a little earlier that maybe there was a bit of a problem in getting people to see Southeast Asia as a while, or at least the connection between Laos and Viet Nam.

TAYLOR: It was strangely difficult. Actually, I'd noticed that on my first trip there in 1956, how little communication there was even between Americans in different countries. I found no military MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Groups] chief, for example, in Thailand had ever been in Saigon. We just weren't talking back and forth, and in that, we were simply following the pattern of behavior of the governments. Here in Washington we were organized, in State, by country desk organization. So that we were discouraged from looking over the barriers and trying to make Southeast Asia into a single aggregated problem.

HACKMAN: Can you think of any people here at the Washington end that were particularly difficult to convince of this? I mean, I'm trying to get a

TAYLOR: No, I wouldn't say that there was any intellectual resistance to quite an obvious argument, but there were just old habits to be overcome and that was tough going.

HACKMAN: Is this something that you think was solved to a great extent before you went out or was the Did the Special Group people . . .

TAYLOR: No, I would just say that by insisting on not going out until some of this undergrowth had been thinned out and until we'd isolated the problems. . . . Just to isolate a problem is progress, because then you go out and look for ways and means to solve it. But simply to say, "There's a mess out in Southeast Asia. Go out there and tell us what to do about it," which was rather the tone with which my mission was first proposed, just didn't appeal to me for obvious reasons. I would say that we made good progress during the spring and summer and early fall in deciding what the issue was.

I may have pointed out in my previous discussion, my letter from President Kennedy didn't say, "Go out and tell us what our policy should be, whether we should get out of Southeast Asia or not." It was, "to go out to Viet Nam and tell us how to improve the situation." By that time the broad policy had been reviewed in all this discussion I described. And I heard no voice raised at that time to say that we ought perhaps to hedge our position, that we might be undertaking too much, and that sort of thing. There was great concern about military involvement in Laos. But the hope was that in Viet Nam there was enough strength which we could tap upon which we could build, which would prevent the dissolution of the entire situation.

HACKMAN: Was there any suggestion like that from the field before you went out and then when you went out, that things were so bad that, you know, you cut . . .

TAYLOR: No, I never never heard an example of that. McGarr, for example, we had asked many times. He'd say, "No. Things are bad, but if we do certain things and if the South Vietnamese do certain things, the situation can be redeemed."

HACKMAN: How closely was Robert Kennedy following this situation, then, through that fall and. . . .

TAYLOR: Well, I would just say that he attended many, many meetings on the subject. I don't recall his particular role in any one, but he was close to the problem and constantly giving his advice to the President.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any discussions with him on your return from that mission, in terms of report. . . .

TAYLOR: No. Of course, again he was present during my reports to the President, to the National Security Council, but I can't isolate any particular incident.

HACKMAN: Well, do you have the feeling then that in discussions like this, National Security Council meetings, that he is less inclined than many others to speak up, for instance, Secretary McNamara or Secretary [Dean] Rusk or others?

TAYLOR: I always felt he handled himself extremely well, as a young man and, he'd be the first to say, inexperienced in many things such as the military aspects. He was certainly not pushy. He showed good judgment in holding his tongue, but when it got onto the level of general policy, especially the policy that was going to affect his brother, the President, he did not hold back. And he always spoke, I thought, well, with force and a lot of sense.

HACKMAN: Can you remember the reaction of the various areas of the government to your report? Were there any problems in getting the report written and getting the people who went with you to agree and this kind of thing?

TAYLOR: I went out there with a letter from the President charging me to go out and make a personal report, and that was understood among the team that I put together. I asked for a senior representative from each one of the interested agencies to serve on the team. Actually, I had at least two from DOD [Department of Defense], an officer from ISA [International Security Affairs], also one from the Joint Chiefs. Then I had an officer from CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]; from State and from what is now AID [Agency for International Development]. In all, there were about eight

to ten, I would say, in the party. And, of course, there was Walt Rostow from the White House.

HACKMAN: How does he happen to. . . . Is that your request or their request?

TAYLOR: Well, it was again a natural thing because he was the so-called expert on the White House staff who had been writing on the subject and making many suggestions to the President. The President usually turned to him for advice on a Southeast Asian matter. So his background made him highly qualified to go. I welcomed him because of his personal abilities, his knowledge of the situation and his ability to write--an excellent writer--and also the fact that the President had confidence in him. So it gave me a feeling of support to have someone along like that to act as a sort of deputy for the expedition. But it was understood that the end product would be my report.

When we got to Saigon, each expert took off and contacted his opposite number in our U.S. mission, and then accompanied by our mission people went to talk to the South Vietnamese. So I had a number of annexes to my final report that simply were the views of the individuals. They could write anything they wanted. But the covering memorandum that went to the President, was my report.

Actually, however, everyone concurred in it. I told them at the outset, "Now, if you don't like this, all you have to do is to say so." And I said, "I'm not going to ask you to concur." But when the time came there was no disagreement among us.

Really the only controversial question was, "What about American troops on the ground?" I knew the President was very clearly against that although in the early spring he had asked the Secretary of Defense to study the question of what kind of troops we might have to put in, which was simply wise contingency planning. But the last thing he wanted to do was to put in our ground forces. And I knew that. I had the same feeling he had on the subject. But all the way, starting with CINCPAC, the feeling was that we'd better get something into South Viet Nam. I spent more time, I would say, debating that, or listening to people's views on that

~~44~~

subject than on any other part of the report. Actually, the report in the final form came out this way: we recommended an engineer force to be sent in with its own infantry protection. It was to be somewhat like the first contingent that the Koreans put in in 1964.

The purpose was to be double. They had just had this great flood in the Mekong delta, the greatest flood in the century, as I recall. You couldn't see a thing in the whole south of Viet Nam except flood water and a few little berms along roads and canals with roofs of houses sticking up. And this was a great cause of concern to the South Vietnamese, the loss of the rice crop, the fact that about five hundred thousand people were homeless and so on. So they were faced with a major disaster. It looked to my group, to me and my advisors, that we could kill two birds with one stone. We could bring in a logistic force to help with the aftermath of the flood, use that military presence to raise the national morale--which was right down on the ground at the time-- and then later we'd decide whether we had good reason to take them out, the flood's gone, we'd take the people out if indeed that looked like a good thing to do. So that was the recommendation in my report. That, of course, was debated very sharply in Washington and that was the only thing in the entire report that occasioned any opposition. The real question was, was it the thing to do and the time to do it? What would be the consequences? --issues which were very pertinent and needed discussion.

Actually, my recommendation was never accepted or rejected. It often happens in Washington that you just keep talking and nothing happens. After we had talked about this for about two months, the waters in the Delta went down, and as so frequently is the case, the disaster wasn't nearly as bad as the first indications suggested. So it was just put on the back burner as something in the report on which action is suspended.

The report as such was simply an outline of courses to develop without presuming to be a plan that had been worked out in detail and costed and the personnel evaluated and so on. My outline was turned over then to the various responsible officials as a general guideline from the President for which they were to develop specific plans. So a great deal of work in '62 was doing just that, producing plans, getting specific plans approved, and then implementing them, getting them going in South Viet Nam.

HACKMAN: During that mission out in '61, what kinds of problems did you have while you were there in making judgments about what was going on in the field? You talked last time about always having the problem of adequate intelligence.

TAYLOR: That is correct. That is one of the things I first discovered, how inadequate and unreliable the available intelligence was. There's really only one way to seek the facts: first, to talk to all the knowledgeable Americans, and then to sample the views of senior officials of the Vietnamese government and then take whatever time you have left to get out in the countryside and see how the situation hits your eye. I always felt that's an extremely important part because, just as the picture of the United States seen from Washington, I think, is far from corresponding to the fact, it's certainly true in Viet Nam that the picture in Saigon of Viet Nam is far from being the full story. So we simply worked awfully hard at getting the facts while we were there, and I don't think any of us left with a complacent feeling--now we know all about it. We had just scratched the surface really. But we had no doubt that those things we were recommending were movements in the right direction. We were never prepared to say how far we'd have to go, what the total bill would be for carrying out the programs we were initiating.

HACKMAN: How aware were the people in the field at that point about problems and possibly the accuracy of information or whatever?

TAYLOR: Well, you see, we didn't have many people in the field. This was a small mission in South Viet Nam at the time. The military were by far the most numerous, about 800, and they did not have advisors below the regimental level. There would be one U.S. officer per regiment, so that we'd go out and talk to this advisor and ask him how the war was going. Well, he would describe it. And I'd ask, "Well, how do you know it?" He'd say, "Well, I went out with a battalion last week and they did so and so and meanwhile I get the reports from the regimental commander," and so on. In other words, he didn't have the means, really,

to do much more than spot check the situation. So that all the information we were getting was coming from the ARVN [Army, Republic of Viet Nam] reporting on itself or reporting on the enemy. It took just the turning over of a few reports by a military man to see whether they were plausible or not, and many were obviously not plausible. So that it created immediately a suspicion which was, I would say, a certainty by the time we left, namely that since we did not have enough Americans to evaluate intelligence, we were dependent upon ARVN reporting and ARVN often didn't know what was going on itself. And hence most of these graphs and data charts we had back in Washington and kept so solemnly really weren't worth the paper they were written on.

HACKMAN: I haven't seen your report, but were things like that put in your report? I had read that you then made an attempt to do something about this and to reorganize the intelligence out there in some way. What exactly happened and how did it work?

TAYLOR: Well, there's been a tremendous amount of work that has gone on and still is going on there. Intelligence is never entirely satisfactory. You work at it constantly trying to approach some minimum acceptable level of effectiveness. My report had an intelligence annex which made a lot of suggestions regarding improvement.

There were seven intelligence services working in Viet Nam, and there was nobody in charge. Well, the answer would be to put somebody in charge, something like the CIA in its role as the overall coordinator of intelligence. Well, the CIO [Combat Intelligence Organization] was set up for this purpose, but like anything else that you set up in Viet Nam, it takes a lot of doing to make it work. It's still not working as well as you'd like, but we put U.S. advisors into the intelligence system and tried to make intelligence really a joint operation in which we helped the Vietnamese as members of their family, and had a chance to look more closely at their sources of information and to form a better evaluation of their reliability. So this kind of thing went on there for years after that, and it's still going on. Really we never solved the problem, until after '65 when we introduced U.S. forces in

numbers. Soon there were Americans all over the place, and you had American eyes and ears to report information through American channels. So I would say that since about '65, we haven't had any gross errors in our intelligence although I'm sure we've had plenty of minor errors.

HACKMAN: Let me just ask you, when Secretary McNamara put through the reorganization at the Defense Department, consolidating the services' intelligence organs, did that have any impact on Viet Nam at all or in South--let's just say Southeast Asia?

TAYLOR: I would say not in that frame of time. Actually, it took DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] at least three years after that to get completely going itself.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Okay. You talked about the discussion of introducing some kind of troops to handle the flood and then the infantry with them, to protect them. In that round of discussions, can you remember who took what position, so to speak--some of the people who felt that was the thing to do or any who felt that clearly it was not?

TAYLOR: Well, I would say that most of the people were for it. I don't recall anyone who was strongly against it, except one man and that was the President. The President just didn't want to be convinced that this was the thing to do, and I think he was probably right at the time. I think we were premature, although we had to do it later, in 1965. And perhaps it might have stiffened the South Vietnamese earlier if we had in 1962. I don't know. It's one of those things you'll never know. But it was really the President's personal conviction that U.S. ground troops shouldn't go in.

Furthermore he had the word of a great soldier to support him. He had had a luncheon with General [Douglas] MacArthur about that period, and General MacArthur held forth eloquently at great length, in a way that no one else could, and impressed the President enormously. And MacArthur said, "Above all things, Mr. President, never commit your forces to a ground war in Asia." Well, that made a hell of an impression on the President, as it should, so that whenever he'd get this military advice from the Joint Chiefs or from me or anyone else, he'd say, "Well, now, you gentlemen, you go back and convince General MacArthur, then I'll be convinced." But none of us undertook the task.

HACKMAN: Well, maybe just this might be of interest to historians, just to see how you react to that idea, because I believe you said in, I'm not sure it was in my interview with you last time or Mrs. Rostow's, that--I believe it was in mine--that Robert Kennedy was always saying later, "Well, you were the guy who told me you don't put troops in Southeast Asia," or something like that.

TAYLOR: Well, yeah. He was always quoting my sage military advice to him on the Bay of Pigs. We had warm debates on tactics of Bay of Pigs. So he was always repeating what I allegedly had told him at that time to prove that I was not consistent later. I always told him, yes, I was against putting troops on the continent of Asia. I was against putting troops any place abroad. I am really a dove and not a hawk.

You can't make these "never" statements and live with them. You put troops where your national interest is and the question is: Are our national interests there or not? If it is, we'll probably have to provide military support so that that was my defense against Bobby. I said, "Now, you civilians, now you decide about the national interest and that will determine the use of troops."

HACKMAN: Well, can you remember ever along the line--maybe this is what took place in the summer of '61--the question being framed in those terms: Is South Viet Nam in our national interest?

TAYLOR: No, I do not, not in those terms. Actually, the NSC [National Security Council] had a meeting in May, which dealt with the subject. I didn't attend the meeting, as a matter of fact, but I had the record of its action by the time I took over as Military Representative. So that when I started out in October of '61, it was my only formal guidance. It stated the U.S. objective to be the prevention of Communist domination of South Viet Nam and the creation of a viable democratic society. That was the government's position and I saw no reason to question it. Later I've often asked myself, "Why didn't I go out to Viet Nam with that as my number one question?" If I were doing it over again, perhaps I would. Well, my answer, which isn't a good answer perhaps, is that I assumed that the preservation of

Viet Nam was in the national interest because a few months before the NSC had taken this action. And it was in the context of acceptance of that policy that all the discussions took place in summer and early fall. I never heard anyone raise the question whether Viet Nam, Southeast Asia, is important. There were lot of questions as to how much Laos was worth, and could it be shored up, because it was so obviously weak, remote and inaccessible. But with Viet Nam and Thailand we felt we could hold the shoulders of Southeast Asia.

HACKMAN: Was the question ever put in those terms throughout the Administration or through the rest of the Administration?

TAYLOR: I don't. . . . I never heard it so expressed. Now this is the Kennedy Administration?

HACKMAN: Yes. Right. Can you remember various people's reactions to the suggestion at the end of that trip of the possibility of applying air action against North Viet Nam, what some people referred to as Rostow's . . .

TAYLOR: Well, in our report we mentioned to the President that there were a lot of serious questions which we were not undertaking to answer, that one was the question of whether international law should not identify the kind of aggression which we now call the War of Liberation as a form of illegal aggression, and accept the fact that the source thereof is responsible for what's taking place. That was a sort of quasi-legal question. And thereafter the question was, having identified the source, may we not be required to strike at that source as the sure way, perhaps the only way, of ending the illegal aggression? But we simply raised these questions.

In effect, we said, "That question may come up later, Mr. President, but let's try these lesser measures now and see if we can accomplish our purpose without going beyond them." So we simply raised the red flag, but without making a recommendation. I don't recall then that air retaliation was really debated because things started to go better, not brilliantly better, but better. '62 was a pretty good year and it was not

until the summer of '63 when the Buddhist agitation and Diem's internal troubles on the political front started the pot boiling that concerns were felt back here in Washington as to how we were doing. And meanwhile the military program was going quite well, but our political program was certainly in trouble. I might say that the unevenness of progress was frequently discussed in '62-'63--how McNamara could take a decision of the President back to the Pentagon and with all his resources, people, money and men who understood planning, had discipline, could get quick results. But while the military program charged off under full steam, the much more difficult, much more subtle program for getting some political stability in a country that had never known political stability was constantly lagging. This was a known fact, a regretted fact, and McNamara was the first to ask, "Well, shall I hold back until the rest catch up?" Well, no one would ever say that. The answer was "Let's try to move the other program, the non-military program, with equal vigor." And that was just never accomplished.

HACKMAN: Were other people, yourself or Robert Kennedy or the President or others, ever trying to bring these other questions to the front? I mean, can . . .

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. They were constantly considered. It was not through neglect or failure to recognize these problems. It's just a fact that you can't by fiat or by money or by sudden training, organize a political party in a foreign country, a political party that can talk to its own people, that can provide the kind of political base which Diem never had and which the present government's never had. We were dealing with a society that did not have the social and political mortar that holds together advanced nations.

HACKMAN: Was this in any way because--some people have talked about the State Department--maybe other areas of the government couldn't get their viewpoint in as quickly or as effectively as Secretary McNamara?

TAYLOR: Well, I think in a mechanical sense that's probably true. If the President said, "Let's have a paper tomorrow at 4 o'clock on a given subject. Bob McNamara, you deal with this and Dean Rusk, you deal with that,"

Bob McNamara would be there at 4 o'clock and have a pretty well documented paper. His staff would have burned lights out over in the Pentagon in hundreds of rooms in putting this thing together, whereas, over at State they didn't have that kind of reaction capability. It was perhaps the lack of resources available to the State Department of their lack of training in producing papers that were really action papers. You can get a fine thoughtful paper out of State, I have found, involving philosophical discussions of situations in the world, but a paper that recommends certain specific actions and tabulates the means for implementation, that kind of paper is awfully hard to come by. So in that sense, I'd say, in a mechanical sense, the State viewpoint was at a disadvantage. But that doesn't mean that anyone was suppressing State's voice. In fact, I would say the President would plead with State to come forward, "Let's have some suggestions; let's have a scenario, a political scenario, to link up with the military scenario." Bobby was often very, very impatient with State, as was the President. The President was more polite about it.

HACKMAN: Does the focus then of any impatience go primarily to Secretary Rusk or were there other people in State on down the line, let's say, Harriman when he became Assistant Secretary, or later [Roger] Hilsman, that they feel the same way about--"You people aren't turning out anything, or you're not feeding in anything"?

TAYLOR: You mean the attitude of the President and Bobby?

HACKMAN: Yes.

TAYLOR: I would say that the President came to office, somewhat as President [Richard M.] Nixon did, prejudiced against State from what he had seen and what he had heard. He didn't have any feeling of reliance in them and hence leaned very heavily on his immediate advisors, on Rusk as an individual and on [McGeorge] Mac Bundy. His tendency was, when he found Mac Bundy was as smart and as able as he was with the support of the very strong staff he built in the White House, to let Mac be the de facto Secretary of State.

Mac himself wisely resisted that, not that he was backward about expressing his views, but, he argued, I think entirely correctly, that you just can't run a government here as we're organized by our Constitution without a State Department that works. And the way to get State to work was to pass them responsibility and press it on them. I thought Mac was very good at that and the President accepted his approach but he really never had his heart in this work of revitalizing State. He felt he was leaning on an institutionally weak reed, although he had a very high regard for Dean Rusk as an individual. I might say that that was President [Lyndon B.] Johnson's attitude also.

HACKMAN: There was, and I'm not sure of the details on this, but there was a reorganization under General Harkins in the field, I believe, in February of 1962, the military command. Do you recall that?

TAYLOR: Yes, it ceased to be the MAAG, the Military Advisory Group, and became MACV [Military Assistance Command, Viet Nam].

HACKMAN: Yeah, does that come directly out of your trip or what really results in that change?

TAYLOR: We found that the MAAG directive was inadequate even for the situation in '61. It had been doing about the kind of thing a MAAG would be doing in Peru, for example. They were receiving equipment, seeing that it arrived at its proper destination and then assisted in the training of the Vietnamese to use it properly. That's about all.

The question of intelligence--when I raised the deficiency of intelligence, it startled them that I thought they should do anything about it, and strictly speaking they had a case. They said, "Here, look at our directive. There it is. That doesn't say anything about a responsibility for intelligence." That may not be an adequate reply, but at least it had legal basis. So one of the things we recommended was that we give the MAAG the kind of directive that we thought was appropriate saying what we really wanted them to do. And then the additional people moved out resulted from our recommendations.

Initially I had no idea how many people would be required to do the things I thought should be done. The President asked me, "Got any feeling for numbers?" I said I thought about ten thousand would probably do it. Well, I was almost a hundred percent wrong; it was about seventeen thousand by the end of 1962. By that time the MAAG organization itself was inadequate and you needed overhead. If we were going to have a lieutenant general in Saigon, eventually a four star man, he ought to know something about Thailand. So the question of giving the MAAG chief, in an expanded role, some influence over the situation in Thailand, which bore directly on Viet Nam, was one of the factors calling for a new organization which eventually absorbed the MAAG and evolved into the headquarters in its present form.

HACKMAN: Can you remember throughout this whole period any obvious problems in getting this coordination at that level and also among the ambassadors--I guess Kenneth Young is in Thailand; Winthrop Brown is in Laos; and then Viet Nam--trying to get those people together to work together?

TAYLOR: Well, they never had a formal arrangement for coordination until I became ambassador in Saigon and initiated the establishment of the SEACORD [Southeast Asia Coordination Group] group, which are the three ambassadors who meet periodically to talk things over. I would say up to that point they had not done much to assure coordination. There was considerable interest, of course, as to what was going on in neighboring countries but no formal tie-in to provide a pipe for information and the constant exchange of views.

HACKMAN: Any feeling of resistance on that or just hadn't been . . .

TAYLOR: No. It just hadn't been done, and it's strangely hard to get old habits changed.

HACKMAN: You talked briefly about Robert Kennedy's 1962 trip to the Orient and his interest in what we could do with students and labor groups, particularly. But he also made a stop in Viet Nam. Can you remember what impressions he brought back from that trip?

TAYLOR: No, I don't know that he seemed to be impressed particularly about the Viet Nam situation. At least in our discussions, it was some of the other stops that he'd made which provided the topics. I think he came back, I believe I mentioned in a previous interview, tremendously impressed with the magnitude of the problems of Asia, tremendously pleased, I think, to find how the Asians seemed to respond to his kind of approach. And, of course, it was a great personal success, and his many contacts were extremely valuable, I'm sure, to the President and American foreign policy. But I don't recall that he bore down particularly on the things that happened in Viet Nam.

He was very much impressed with the problem of Indonesia, for example, talked at great length on that. But Viet Nam in '62, you see, was a fairly quiet place. The increase of our advisory effort and so forth was making things move rather well and '62 was a rather quiet year. A lot of positive things were being done. The situation had got under control and it wasn't on the front burner any more. By '62 Washington's interest had swung back to NATO and then to the Missile Crisis.

HACKMAN: Can you see any of his ideas later on on Viet Nam possibly as a result of this trip?

TAYLOR: No, I don't know that. . . . I would just say that throughout this period, as far as I could observe, he was completely alligned with the President's policy.

HACKMAN: How did--we talked about the Special Group last time--but how exactly did the Special Group focus on Viet Nam? Was Viet Nam, say. . . . Well, some people have looked at Viet Nam as sort of a laboratory of a testing ground for some of these techniques. Did the Special Group see it that way?

TAYLOR: The President saw it that way. In the directive setting up the Special Group he specifically mentioned that he wanted us to realize that we were going through a very painful experience in Southeast Asia from which we should derive a maximum of instruction. Hence he insisted that the military rotate senior officers through Viet Nam. The Pentagon set up a program to assure that the most promising officers below General officer grade got out there, either in command or simply sent out on

tours of instruction. Similarly in the other departments; for example, the question of police training was very, very high on the list of our concerns elsewhere in underdeveloped countries; hence let's learn from the police problem in Viet Nam. So Viet Nam was a kind of laboratory--I don't like the word laboratory because it suggests something originated for the purpose, but certainly the fact that being there we should learn from it, was in the President's mind, Bobby's mind, all of our minds as we sat around the conference table.

HACKMAN: Are there any particular things that you can remember that were. . . . You talked about police, but other things that were. . . .

TAYLOR: Yes. Economic aid and also communication of the government with its people. One of the great problems still in Viet Nam is to get the Vietnamese leaders to talk to their own people. It is a question of giving them at least the mechanical means of radio and television and then, having given the mechanical means, hoping that they will find Vietnamese who know what to communicate with the mechanical means. So there were many activities all across the board, in the military, economic, psychological, political, social fields. There are many matters which were isolated for specific study.

HACKMAN: What kinds of things on the military side, you as a military man can. . . . What kinds of things were you particularly interested in seeing whether this would work in Viet Nam? Are there things like that? Lifts or. . . .

TAYLOR: Well, first there was the broad problem of laying a logistic base in a completely undeveloped country that would allow us to use the advanced weapons which might have a pertinence to the problem there, and specifically light aircraft and helicopters. And so the engineering aspect was very important at the outset and no one's ever given General [William C.] Westmoreland and his people credit for the fact they've remade that country, so if the war ever stops, we'll

have a relatively modern Asian country in a fairly short period of time. So it was really the task of enabling the theater to utilize the kind of weapons that we knew would be of importance, generally those of modern fire power and mobility. And then the question of intelligence, how to find out where the enemy are, what they're doing. Tremendous efforts were made in improving the sources of information, and that was slow going.

HACKMAN: Can you remember types of things that were attempted that conclusions were drawn from fairly quickly-- "These will work." "These won't work."? Are there things that are tried that really don't work?

TAYLOR: No, because it. . . . It's hardly bright ideas or gadgetry that would change a situation like that. It was getting the Vietnamese to do certain simple things, just simple things. But the enormous effort of getting them out of the ambush habit, of being willing to go down this one road today and get shot up and go down the same road the next day and get shot up. So that it was rather putting simple training devices into use and getting a reaction out of hundreds of thousands of half trained Vietnamese troops, which was a prime requirement. Of course, in these days we're talking about now, the American participation was only advisory, and the best we could do was to try to find out those things that could be done by the Vietnamese themselves in the time limits that were available.

HACKMAN: Can you recall talking to Robert Kennedy about the strategic hamlet program?

TAYLOR: Not as such.

HACKMAN: Where does that idea really come from? Some people . . .

TAYLOR: From Diem. He felt that the only way to control infiltration, which resulted from the unsolved, unsolvable problem of the open frontier, was to get what he called a cordon sanitaire along the frontiers or in many key areas by pulling back the inhabitants and making

a military zone, a free fire zone we'd call it now, and thereby getting the protection. So that was his concept and he was convinced it would work. As a concept I thought it might have worked had he had the ability to explain it to his people, to get them so they wouldn't resist it, and then had the administrative skills necessary to carry out a very highly involved program with minimum disruption of human life. There were so many things in Viet Nam that so obviously should be done and were so terribly difficult with the incompetent officialdom through whom you had to work.

HACKMAN: What impact on you and I guess on American policy did your trip out in September of '62, before you took over as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, have?

TAYLOR: In '63, Now that's the . . .

HACKMAN: '62. You took a trip out just before you became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, didn't you?

TAYLOR: Yes, that was really just to update my own understanding of the problem. I'd have to get my own notes out to reply in detail. As always, you brought back new concepts or new appreciations, from such trips, but I don't recall anything of any great importance. The great decision points in our Viet Nam policy, if I may just tick them off, I would say were first, '54, [Dwight D.] Eisenhower's response to Diem's request for help. The next big date was in '61, our decision to go ahead and redouble our advisory efforts, recommit ourselves, if you will, but still keeping out our own combat forces. The third one was '63 when we knowingly or unknowingly, wittingly or unwittingly contributed to the overthrow of Diem and the consequences of it. And then that led to the next one which was Johnson's decision in '65 to open the air war against North Viet Nam and also to bring in U.S. ground forces. So I would think in the period we're talking about, the only critical point of decision was that of '61.

HACKMAN: Can you remember ever any conversations while you were in the field, '61 or particularly '62, with Vietnamese military leaders about the possibility of an overthrow of Diem at that point?

TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. In '61 I called on [Duong Van Minh] Big Minh, whom I'd known before, and on General Le Van Ty. And on return trips also, I'd always talked to several of the senior people who I'd known. It's always an uncertain source of information to deal with a foreign officer or a foreigner under those circumstances. All I could get out of Minh in '61 was he was very unhappy about the local situation, that he didn't like the way Diem was running the country. Well, it was a known fact that Diem had given him an important position, namely, commanding general of the field forces, and then maneuvered all around him, so he really had no power whatsoever. So he was clearly disgruntled, clearly unhappy, but you could say that about almost anybody. One of the characteristics of the Vietnamese, unhappily, is their disloyalty to each other.

Alex Johnson had never been in Viet Nam till he went to Saigon about two weeks before I reported as ambassador. And he sent back a famous cable. He had just made his round of calls of the senior ministers and he was aghast at how they would talk about each other. If he was talking to the Minister of Defense, let's say, he would warn Alex that, "When you go to talk to the Foreign Minister, be careful of that guy. He's not so reliable. I think he has some Cao-Dai associations or some Can-Lao friends, or he plays footsie with the French." They were constantly talking about each other. So the fact that generals were talking against Diem really didn't mean too much unless they meant business. And you never knew when they meant business because, with that background of dissatisfaction and unhappiness, it was very difficult to know when you were actually getting the truth from these people.

HACKMAN: Did you ever get the feeling during '61, '62, up to mid-'63, that in your conversations with any of these people, they really meant business in terms of being ready to take action to overthrow Diem? At what point?

TAYLOR: At no given moment. When Bob McNamara and I were out there in October '63, there were, as always, many rumors. But this time the fact that the American government was showing dissatisfaction with Diem

gave reason to believe they were probably about to do something. But, although when I talked to the ones who were making the biggest noises, they would say, "Oh, yes, we can't stand this much longer," they still weren't moving. Even after the famous August 22 cable that told the General, in effect, that the U.S. Government would welcome a change, they still couldn't get together. And by the time we got--Bob and I were out there in October--although it was getting close to the November first coup, there was still no sign that they'd really coalesced and overcome all suspicions of each other.

Incidentally, my whole career as ambassador was under a cloud because of Big Minh. After my call on him in '61 I played tennis with him--he's a good tennis player--and our picture that got taken on the court was printed all around the country and in the United States. Well, this was observed by many Vietnamese who decided that Taylor and Minh were bosom pals. So, when I was made ambassador, Prime Minister [Nguyen] Khanh, who was our white hope at the moment, was convinced I was coming out to throw him out and to put Minh in office, and that didn't make for good initial relations--which steadily got worse from that time on.

HACKMAN: What's your time schedule? I've been here an hour.

TAYLOR: Well, I'm going to have to break off here fairly soon.