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CYRUS R. VANCE ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW III

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By Cyrus R. Vance

to the

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ACCESSION NUMBER 74-260

INTERVIEW III

INTERVIEWEE: CYRUS VANCE

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLIAN

DATE: March 9, 1970

Tape 1 of 1

March 9, 1970

M: This is a continuation with Mr. Cyrus Vance and the date is March 9, 1970. The only subject which we have remaining is Viet Nam, which is a pretty fair one remaining. To begin with I suppose it's good to sort of qualify you--how close as Deputy Secretary of the Defense Department were you to Presidential decision-making on Viet Nam?

V: I would say I was quite close to Presidential decision-making. I of course did not participate in all meetings that the President had with the Secretary of Defense and/or the Secretary of State. I did participate in a number, and I did participate in some of the more important decisions which were reached in connection with Viet Nam.

M: You did attend the National Security Council regularly?

V: I would say most meetings I was present.

M: What about the Tuesday luncheons?

V: No, I only attended occasional Tuesday luncheons.

M: From the vantage point in the Defense Department where you served right through the Johnson years, was there a discernible policy break on Viet Nam from the beginning of the Johnson Presidency?

V: No. I could not say that I saw any discernible break. The Viet Nam policy seemed to evolve; it was affected by the changing factors which were occurring in Viet Nam, and indeed seemed to be more responsive to the local situation than to anything else. But in terms of your immediate question, I could not see any marked break with the assumption of the Presidency by Mr. Johnson.

M: When did it become apparent from the Defense Department's view that things were going to get much more serious in Viet Nam than they had been previously?

- V: 1964 and 1965; really in late 1964 and early 1965. It was quite clear that the United States was faced with a major decision . The indications were that if the United States did not become more deeply involved even to the point of putting in ground forces that all of Viet Nam might be--or that Viet Nam might be split in two by what appeared to be a drive which was being prepared and mounted by the North Vietnamese and NLF forces. So I think the really critical time came in the early 1965 period.
- M: Before that late 1964 period when you mentioned things really fell apart on the ground and made it a serious proposition here, the Tonkin retaliation had already occurred. You are listed as one of the first briefers of the President at the time of that affair. Why has it occasioned so much confusion and criticism?
- V: Because the facts were fuzzy themselves at the outset. There are two Tonkin situations, and I think people tend to get the two confused. But as I think most people now know, the United States was conducting intelligence operations in the Gulf of Tonkin.
- M: These were definitely not support of South Vietnamese covert operations?
- V: No, these were not. There had been some support given to South Vietnamese covert operations, but they were unrelated to the particular mission that was going on when the attacks were made. That was indeed an intelligence mission. There had been I think, however, a couple of days before, a South Vietnamese intelligence mission, a covert action, in the North Vietnamese water; and perhaps in the minds of the North Vietnamese these two became linked together. In any event, we all concluded that there could be no question that in the first Tonkin Gulf engagement that indeed United States vessels were attacked by North Vietnamese patrol craft, and that they were fired upon. This of course was reported to the President; and nothing, as I recall it, was done in the first, but when they were attacked the second time then it was felt that it was necessary to take retaliatory action and retaliatory action was taken.
- M: You were one of the first to reach him, I take it, or among the early--
- V: I don't remember.
- M: Was his immediate inclination that we had to retaliate this time?
- V: No. He never operated in a precipitous fashion. He was very careful; he wanted to know what all the facts were before acting, in my dealings with him. And he was not the kind of a person who would say, "Well, we've now got to react." His question would be, "Well, are you sure of your facts? What are the facts? Where are you getting the facts from? How do you evaluate them? How hard do you think they are?" Those kinds of questions.

M: But at the second attack then, you were unable to provide [these answers], when--ever?

V: No. We eventually I think--I've really forgotten the precise sequence of those, and to do it accurately I'd have to go back and check it out. But we finally did.

(interruption)

I've forgotten where we were.

M: On Tonkin. You were able to provide hard information on the second attack at some point?

V: At some point we were able to, and I've forgotten exactly what the point was.

M: So the people who look back on this in the long view are going to be able to find hard evidence of the second attack?

V: Yes. I want to double check this--I really have to go back and take a look at the documents. I was ultimately satisfied before the retaliation decision was taken that there was hard evidence that there had been an attack.

M: The decision to go for a resolution--were you in on the making of that?

V: No.

M: Was there any dissent from any important places as far as you know from the decision to go for retaliation after the second attack?

V: No.

M: That was unanimously agreed upon?

V: I was just trying to think. Was that the time at which--? No, there was not at that case. I was thinking of Pleiku. The Pleiku situation--Kosygin was then in Hanoi. So that there was some dissent at that time. But at the time of Tonkin, there was no dissent.

M: Was there any consideration given to whether or not this was going to be a regular policy of retaliating for particular North Vietnamese--?

V: No, not at that time. That was a one-shot affair determined by the incident that occurred and the facts that surrounded it; and it was not a determination of a policy.

M: You mentioned briefly there the decision to start bombing the North made after the attack on Pleiku?

V: Yes.

M: Was that a decision made after the event, or had it pretty well been decided before that--?

V: No, it was not made until after the event. Indeed I think the facts will reveal that there were several occasions prior to that time where there had been recommendations from the field to conduct bombing operations against the North because of incidents within South Viet Nam--there was an attack on an American barracks; there was an attack on some civilians and servicemen in Saigon; and there were several other occasions where there was provocation which led to a recommendation, and in each case it was turned down by the President.

M: You mentioned that at the time of Pleiku there were people who dissented from that course of action. Was it simply because of Kosygin's presence in Hanoi, or were there some who thought that the whole bombing program would be a mistake to undertake at this point?

V: As I recall it, George Ball felt that the whole idea of bombing would be self-defeating; and he was particularly concerned about the fact that Kosygin was then in Hanoi and felt that at least the bombing should be held up until Kosygin left. As I recall it, Vice President Humphrey shared the latter view.

M: The bombing decision later occasioned a considerable discussion about what it had been supposed to accomplish. Was there general agreement among the people making the actual decision, or helping the President make it, as to what they thought it would accomplish, or what they hoped it would accomplish?

V: In the Pleiku decision?

M: Yes, at the time they started.

V: Well, at the time the decision was made to bomb in retaliation for Pleiku, I don't think that it was generally understood that you were going to enter on a continuous bombing campaign.

M: There was no clear understanding--?

V: That's my recollection. And again, I would have to go back and check the records, and I want to make it very clear that a lot of this is just my best recollection at this time, and it may be very faulty. That's, I think, one of the problems of trying to recall what happened when you don't have the documents available to you, and I haven't looked at them in years, so I really don't--



- M: Anybody who uses oral history without the documents along with it is making a mistake anyway.
- V: My best recollection is that there was no determination at the time of Pleiku that we would embark upon an open-ended bombing campaign. I think it developed after Pleiku.
- M: So there wasn't any genuine consideration then of what was to be accomplished in the long run? There couldn't have been under the circumstance.
- V: That is my recollection.
- M: On bombing targets--this question carries on up through into later times too--the procedure was for the targets to be recommended by CINCPAC and to come back to the Defense Department to you and to Secretary McNamara, and then to the President.
- V: Then through the Secretary of State.
- M: Yes. But ultimately to the President.
- V: And ultimately the President made the decision to approve the targets.
- M: Were there any kind of targets that he typically changed or declined to allow hit?
- V: He was very careful about targets which were adjacent to populated areas, because he meant what he said in saying that he wanted to hit military targets and to keep to an absolute minimum civil an damage and civilian casualties. So that he would press very hard when targets were recommended that appeared to be near populated areas or were in populated areas as to what the casualties might be, and how important the target was, and that type of question. And he also was very sensitive about flights which approached the Chinese border; and it was because of his sensitivity and that of others in the government that a buffer zone was set up which provided that no planes could enter into an area within X-miles of the Chinese border.
- M: In the long run was his influence on targeting such as to restrain what we might have hit, or did ultimately we hit all the targets that the responsible military were suggesting?
- V: No, we did not.
- M: Some were never approached.
- V: A large number were never approached.
- M: It wasn't a matter of him just slowing it down?

- V: A number of them were not recommended by the civilian advisers.
- M: You mean in the Defense Department?
- V: Yes, and in the State Department.
- M: On the troop decision to go up hard and fast in the summer of 1965, was it thought or was it understood when the bombing became more or less a permanent thing that this would ultimately require ground support in the form of troops?
- V: Would you restate your question?
- M: Did people who were enthusiastic about the bombing program, as it became an obviously permanent policy during the spring of 1965, was it fairly well understood that ultimately we would need ground troops in there to support these air actions--?
- V: Are you talking about the bombing of the North or the bombing of the South?
- M: Well, both, but with American planes occupying--
- V: There was no serious discussion about putting ground troops into the North Viet Nam.
- M: No, I meant--
- V: There was some suggestion as to that, but no one really ever seriously contemplated doing that.
- M: What then produced the necessity for the hard and fast escalation of troops in July of 1965.
- V: I think we're getting awfully confused. Escalation of what troops?
- M: Well, the United States put in its first large ground implement--
- V: Now, we're talking about South Viet Nam.
- M: In South Viet Nam in July of 1965.
- V: Yes, they were put in to protect the Da Nang base and the facilities in and around Da Nang--that was the first group of troops that went in. And as I recall it, their mission when they first went in was simply to do that--to protect the large base at Da Nang. Subsequently, their mission was changed, and they were permitted to patrol outside of the perimeters of the base. And then subsequently they were permitted to assist the South Vietnamese in ground actions if

the South Vietnamese got in trouble and needed help from the Americans; and then finally the ground rules were changed whereby they were permitted to go out and conduct operations themselves. But this was an evolution.

M: Was the President involved in such tactical considerations as those?

V: These were policy decisions, not tactical considerations. It was a very major change to say that you were going to go from merely acting as a defensive force within a perimeter to a point where you were beginning to (a) assist the South Vietnamese, and then act independently of the South Vietnamese. These were policy decisions in which he was involved.

M: And did those occasion a good deal of disagreement and debate?

V: Yes, good deal of discussion and debate.

M: Was there a substantial amount of opposition of either Defense or State or Congressional leaders, or by anybody, to those decisions?

V: There was a good deal of discussion, and I think some disagreement--I can't remember how much--but some disagreement as to the gradual broadening of the scope of activity of the military forces.

M: The President was interested in tactical air decisions such as targeting--did he ever get interested in the tactical ground--?

V: Well again, you've got to differentiate between North Viet Nam and South Viet Nam.

M: In the South.

V: But let me just stick with this, because people get this confused. The tactical decisions made with respect to hitting targets in the North were a very different thing from the tactical decisions with respect to air targets in the South. And the reason it was when you started hitting targets in the North, you were beginning to create a possibility that you were going to affect third countries such as the Russians and the Chinese; and the whole problem of world opinion was different when you were dealing with the bombing of North Viet Nam as opposed to the bombing of targets in South Viet Nam. So that with respect to the target selection of air targets in South Viet Nam, the President paid no attention to this--this was left to the military commanders.

M: And the ground tactics in the South the same? In other words, the reason I'm driving at this is that the critics at the time made a big point of the difference between search and destroy, for

example, as compared to something--the enclave theory--or something else. Did the President get involved in that?

- V: Well, the philosophy, yes--on the basic philosophy, yes--of whether or not there should be search and destroy operations. Yes, he would get involved in that.
- M: That's what I was trying to get clear. That wasn't just turned over to the military?
- V: Oh, no. That was a conscious decision. But when you talk about tactics, you talk about whether you hit an area in the vicinity of Hue, or whether you move your forces up to the edge of the demilitarized zone--those are the tactical decisions. He did not involve himself in those, but in the overall broad strategy, he did.
- M: That's what I wanted to get clear, and you're in a perfect position to comment on that. The advice that the Department of Defense gave throughout this period--did the uniform military from the time that troops were introduced in large numbers consistently advise simply the application of greater numbers and more force to accomplish the objective?
- V: There wasn't a single military point of view; there were differences of opinion within the military as there were differences of opinion within the civilians. By and large, however, I think one can accurately say that most military offices wished to see the greater application of force and the more rapid application of force on the theory that if this were done, it would put such pressure upon the other side that they would capitulate and come to a settlement or stop military actions. I think that the great concern of the civilians, and again I'm talking in generalities, was particularly--in relation to the North--that if there was too large an application of force, that one ran the risk of bringing the Chinese and/or the Soviet Union into the war and thus expanding the war, which is certainly contrary to the stated objectives and contrary to the interests of the United States. You've got to go back, on this. I think that a lot of us felt that by the gradual application of force the North Vietnamese and the NLF would be forced to seek a political settlement of the problem. We had seen the gradual application of force applied in the Cuban missile crisis, and had seen a very successful result. We believed that if this same gradual and restrained application of force were applied in South Viet Nam, that one could expect the same kind of result; that rational people on the other side would respond to increasing military pressure and would therefore try and seek a political solution. We did not sufficiently understand the North Vietnamese, nor what would motivate them; and I think that this is one of the great problems that faced us and the whole conduct of the war in Viet Nam.
- M: But there was reasonable optimism in the summer of 1965 that this tactic would work?
- V: It was believed that it should work; as I recall it at the time that the forces were put in on the ground, it was also stated that these well might not be enough and indeed it was most likely that more would have to be put in. But people still believed at that time--

(interruption)

M: --perhaps to finish the sentence that there was a reasonable belief through this whole period of 1965 at least, that this--

V: That this would result in a desire and willingness on the part of the North Vietnamese and the NLF to sit down and negotiate a political settlement to the problem.

M: Some of the current books--particularly I'm thinking of Townsend Hoopes' book, but there are others too--indicate that at some point some fairly serious disaffection arose among some of the civilians in the Defense Department. How early did this begin?

V: I think that in late 1965 and in early 1966 a number of people were beginning to question whether or not the continued bombing of the North was going to have the kind of effect that we had anticipated that it would have. This is one of the reasons that underlay the thirty-seven day bombing pause in late 1965--as I remember it took place just before Christmas and extended over into January. And it was hoped very much that a lengthy bombing pause at that time would lead the other side to come to the conference table. The bombing pause did not produce that effect, and it was again resumed after thirty-seven days. But I think the continuing question lingered on as to whether or not you could ever accomplish the result that we were all seeking--namely, a negotiated solution by a continuation of the bombing program.

And there were honest differences of opinion on this. And people were all trying to find a solution to the problem, so that there weren't evil men and good men--there were men with differing views as to what the best way was to try and bring the war to a conclusion.

M: Is what you're saying though that the disagreement was over the bombing program largely and not over the general desirability of our general commitment to Viet Nam at that point?

V: It centered primarily around the bombing program in North Viet Nam; and secondarily on the question of how important it was to press for a political solution through new initiatives.

M: Did the extent of the nature of this type of questioning get to the President?

V: Oh, yes.

M: It was not blocked away from him? And the people who felt that did voice their questions and not hold them at a private low level?

V: Well, I really don't know all that went to the President, but I know that from time to time differing views were certainly presented to him, and he encouraged differing views.

M: Was there ever a basic consideration of the commitment to South Viet Nam during this period?

V: During which period?

M: During late 1965-1966, for example, in which we really sat down and said, "Is what we're doing there really worth the cost?"

V: Oh, yes. Indeed there was a clear reevaluation in 1966, and again in 1967. The pros and cons every time another troop increment was authorized--and when I say another, I mean another major troop increment--there was a debate as to where we were and where were going and what could one expect and what the alternatives were, and the President insisted upon this kind of a discussion. And these decisions were not taken lightly.

M: Was it true what the press always implied that the military intelligence was always far more optimistic than events later justified?

V: By and large, yes.

M: Why was that? Could you ever isolate the reasons for that?

V: I really don't know what the reasons are.

M: Did the people who operated the Defense Department and the State Department generally find themselves by necessity going along with those optimistic estimates?

V: No, not necessarily, and this is one of the reasons that the Central Intelligence Agency was always asked to express its views so that you could get views of others than the military intelligence people. And of course the intelligence people in the State Department expressed their views; those of State and the Central Intelligence Agency were uniformly less enthusiastic and less optimistic than those of the Military Intelligence Agency.

M: The Defense Department was involved as was the State Department in a number of tries for negotiations. You mentioned the bombing pause a while ago, and you've been listed at least as one who was involved in some of the discussions at the time of the initiative that's called Marigold. Were you involved closely in any of the ones earlier than those? In 1964 or 1965?

V: I was involved in some, and I honestly can't remember which ones I was involved in at this point. There were an awful lot of them, and I did become involved in a number of them.

M: There's a fairly serious one in 1965 involving Ed Gullion, for example.

V: I was not involved in that one?

M: You were not involved in that one? What about the decision to go for the bombing pause at Christmas time of 1965? Was the President enthusiastic about that, or did he resist it, or did he have a clear view?

V: As I recall it, he was somewhat hesitant about it. He questioned whether or not the information which we were getting from some Soviet sources, that in about two weeks we could expect some sort of affirmative response, was an accurate evaluation. On the other hand, a majority of his advisers urged him to do this and he accepted their advice. There were some who advised him against it, but the vast majority of those who were in the government were very much in favor of the bombing pause.

M: Mr. McNamara has always been listed as one of the chief proponents of the--

V: He was.

M: He was?

V: Yes, he was.

M: Was that the general unanimous view of the civilian part of the Defense Department?

V: Yes.

M: What about the resumption? Was there a great resistance to resume then after thirty-seven days?

V: Well, as you can imagine there were some that wanted to continue it longer in the hopes that maybe something would come out of it, and there were others who said, "Well, thirty-seven days is long enough."

M: What was the top Defense Department view of that? Meaning, I guess, Mr. McNamara's and yours?

V: We hoped that it might go on longer, but recognized that it had been very disappointing not to see reciprocal action on the part of the North Vietnamese. I think in hindsight perhaps that one of the things that one would question if it had to be done over again is the sending of emissaries so publicly to so many different countries. What effect this had on the North Vietnamese of course nobody knows. But I think that as you look at it with the advantage of hindsight, one would not do that if one had it to do over again; it would have been a quiet rather than a very

public series of meetings with foreign leaders, urging them to support some sort of a peace conference at the time.

M: Did those of you who hoped that the pause might have continued for a little longer have any information that was hopeful to support your position?

V: No.

M: So that you had really nothing except hope to--?

V: Nothing but hope.

M: In 1966 then, there were several peace explorations--were you involved in the Canadian one with Mr. [Chester] Ronning in the spring through the fall?

V: I was familiar with it.

M: Was there any basis for hope that that one might pay off in some way?

V: I think that everybody hoped that each one of these would pay off, because everybody cared so desperately about trying to find a peaceful solution to the war. And perhaps in many cases we were naively hopeful, but in many of them I think that there was hope. From what I was able to see in the vast majority of them, certainly they were explored carefully and seriously.

M: That brings us to the Marigold one where the charge has been that we allowed military activity to jeopardize a hopeful activity in regard to the talks through the Poles. And you were I believe at the ranch during the time the debate over whether or not to authorize a second round of bombing targets close in occurred. Can you just describe how that debate occurred?

V: No, I can't. I don't have sufficient recollection of the debate. I do recall the discussion took place, but I really don't recall the facts of it.

M: But there was a discussion based on the understanding that what you were deciding was a military policy that might have a diplomatic impact?

V: I'm honestly trying to remember the degree to which any of that was discussed, and I frankly just can't recall. I honestly don't remember.

M: Were there people who were very strenuously opposing the authorization of that second round of targets?

V: Not that I recall.



- M: You would recall it if it had been as spectacular as some of the critics have made it?
- V: Not that I recall.
- M: What about the peace channel that was prominent just after the beginning of 1967, the one that ultimately involved the British--the Wilson-Kosygin talks--and the channel that we had in Moscow?
- V: Again, I was just generally familiar with what was going on but not involved in the day-to-day operations of that exploration.
- M: You left the Department in the middle of 1967--
- V: That's right.
- M: --for reasons of health, primarily. Were there any substantive reasons leading to you wanting to get out of the Department at that point?
- V: No. I had indicated eight-nine months before that I wanted to get out. It was not only the health reasons, but I really had to leave because of financial reasons. I had five children, all of whom were getting along and beginning to approach college age, and I simply had to get back out and earn some money so I could send them to college. And that's why I had indicated back in 1966 that I simply had to leave the government. Mr. McNamara asked me if I wouldn't please stay on at least until the summer of 1967, so I agreed that I would do it. In the meantime my back went bad again. But the primary reason that I asked to get out in 1966 was I simply couldn't afford it any longer. I went down originally expecting to stay four years, and there I was six-and-a-half years later.
- M: Did you know at the time, or did you have the impression at the time, that Mr. McNamara was going to leave shortly after you left?
- V: No.
- M: That was not in the wind in the summer by the time you--
- V: No. He again wanted to leave in five years, but as the Viet Nam war grew in size, he just simply felt he could not leave the government without doing everything within his power to try to bring it to a conclusion.
- M: When he did leave, the press at least speculated that you might be a possible successor. Did Mr. Johnson ever talk to you about succeeding Mr. McNamara?

V: No, Mr. McNamara talked to me about it and asked me if I could or would be willing to do it, and I told him I simply could not do it.

M: So there was something in the speculation obviously?

V: I don't know.

M: You came back in the fall of 1967 in regard to Viet Nam as one of the so-called "Wisemen"--the end of October or early November, was it not?

V: No, I was not there then. I was in Cyprus at that time.

M: That's right, you--

V: People have said that I was there in November, but I wasn't because I was in Cyprus.

M: You couldn't have been, now that I--

V: The first meeting of the wise men that I ever attended was in March of 1968.

M: I see. According to the people who had been to both, was that an essentially different type meeting?

V: I don't know anything about the first one--

M: So you can't comment.

V: I can't comment.

M: The briefing officers at that 1968 meeting were unanimously pessimistic--is that accurate?

V: You know, this is one of the things that has really been a puzzle to me. I didn't see anything unduly pessimistic as opposed to what I had heard in the past about what was said by the briefing officers at that meeting. It seemed to me to be an accurate evaluation of the same kind that I'd heard before. And I really didn't think that they were unduly pessimistic as compared to previous information which I had received. I really think quite honestly that most people came to that meeting with their minds fairly well made up on what they thought the course of action should be with respect to (a) whether more troops should be authorized for Viet Nam, and (b) what should be done with respect to trying to change the course of the war. And I don't think the briefings really had that much to do with it.

- M: But the nature of their advice was different. What was it--just TET that had changed their minds?
- V: I don't know what they advised in November because I wasn't there. It was the advice of the vast majority that the divisions within the United States which were being created by the war, the effect upon our relations with other countries, the effect of the war on our economic and financial condition, were so great that we could not continue on the course on which we were going and that we simply had to turn it around. And therefore the recommendation was that no more troops other than a handful be sent to round out the support of those that were already there, and that new initiatives be taken to try and get peace talks started; and they ran the gamut from total cessation of bombing to a roll back in the bombing, as I recall it.
- M: Was the President's reaction to that advice explosive?
- V: No, not at all. He asked a lot of questions--I frankly couldn't tell what his reaction was to it. It wasn't explosive in any sense of the word.
- M: There certainly is going to be a lot of confusion over that month of March, 1968. Apparently some of the participants do not recall it as the President recalls it--or has recalled it on television. Can you clear any of that up as to--?
- V: I don't know what part you're referring to.
- M: His indication that the request for additional troops was not for immediate introduction of large numbers, and that the State Department's influence was perhaps earlier and more decisive than the Defense Department's in calling for--
- V: You see, frankly I don't know what took place prior to that meeting because I wasn't involved in the government at the time. So all I know is what took place during the two days I was down there for the meeting. So I simply can't comment on what the State Department recommended, or what the Defense Department recommended, or what anybody recommended. All I know is what took place at that meeting. And it was very, very clear that the vast majority there felt that the course of the war had to be changed.
- M: When did Mr. Johnson first indicate to you that he might appoint you to go to Paris as our deputy negotiator?
- V: He indicated that to me when I was in Washington during the Washington riots in April of 1968, and I believe it was on a Sunday afternoon; we were having a conversation, and he indicated that Ambassador [Llewellyn E.] Thompson had to stay in Moscow because of a number of things which were going on, including the possibility of the opening of what have now become the SALT talks, and would I be able to go along with Mr. [W. Averell] Harriman as one of the

two negotiators. We discussed it at some length that Sunday; and, as I recall it, Dean Rusk then had a conversation with me and again explored the matter further; I talked to the President about it again, I believe, on Monday and Tuesday; and on Wednesday when I went back to New York, he asked me if I would call him that night after I had had a chance to talk to my wife and to my partners and let him know whether or not he could announce that I would be one of the two negotiators.

So I did come back to New York on Wednesday, went right from the airport to my apartment and saw my wife, who said that there really wasn't any choice but to say yes, although she didn't like the idea of it; I then went down to a firm meeting which was being held that night and before the meeting took place, discussed with two or three of my seniors the question; and then called the President I believe by 7:30 that night to say that I would be able to go.

M: You indicated one time in one of our previous discussions that you were more carefully, that you were more fully instructed in this case than you had been in Cyprus, or Panama, or other instances. What was the nature of your original instructions, and were they from the President?

V: Yes. The original instructions which we had were instructions in writing; they generally ran along the lines of the San Antonio formula--

M: Let me interrupt here. The San Antonio formula as later interpreted by Mr. [Clark] Clifford?

V: By Mr. Clifford.

M: In other words, the idea that we would not insist on total halt of resupply.

V: Correct. And that we were to seek an agreement along those lines which would then be the basis for a cessation of [bombing].

(interruption)

M: These instructions that you got--you said in writing. Through the State Department, but from the President--

V: Yes, we discussed them at a meeting of the principals, which included the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, Mr. Harriman, and myself, at some length. There were slightly modified before we left for Paris as a result of those discussions. And we had them as our guidelines during the period leading up to the bombing halt.

M: You mean those instructions remained consistent then from--?

- V: There were some modifications that were made as we went along.
- M: Did our position toughen, would you say, during the course of that period?
- V: Yes, I think it did.
- M: It required more from the other side?
- V: It did.
- M: You came home in May, I think, didn't you?
- V: I came back several times.
- M: The private talks began, I believe, through Mr. [William] Jordan--at that level first, then at your level--
- V: Yes, he had one meeting in, I believe, June. Then I started conversations along with Phil Habib, with Ha Van Lau, and Mr. Vuy, and those continued through several meetings. And then we expanded them to include Mr. Harriman and Xuan Thuy, and they were joined by Le Duc Tho on the North Vietnamese side. So that the talks in October involved usually on their side Le Duc Tho, Xuan Thuy, and Ha Van Lau, and Vuy; and on our side, Mr. Harriman, myself, and Phil Habib; and then the interpreters and notetakers on both sides.
- M: Was the other side saying something serious from the outset of those private talks?
- V: They were exploring primarily in the early stages, trying to find out precisely what it was that we were prepared to do, trying to get an understanding of what our position was. We tried to make it very clear that we were prepared to stop all the bombing, provided that certain things would follow the bombing halt. And the problem was--to get sufficient assurances which would satisfy the President that we could safely stop the bombing, and primarily to bring to the table the North Vietnamese, ourselves, and the South Vietnamese, and the NLF. And the major point on which we battled for weeks and weeks and weeks was the inclusion of the South Vietnamese in the Paris talks. And this was the sine qua non as far as we were concerned because we felt that we could never hope to have a political solution unless you had the South Vietnamese at the table, and that meant that you should also have to have the NLF at the table, and that's how we developed--or there was developed the so-called "our side-your side" formula to get around the problem of recognition of four parties as opposed to four entities.
- M: Were you able to get through this whole period answers to important questions from Washington with dispatch and clarity?

V: Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

M: Was the "sometimes no" ever of any importance in the sense that it caused perhaps substantive delays?

V: Yes. And that's why from time to time we would go back to Washington, either Mr. Harriman or myself, to seek further authority or to try to explain more clearly what our views were and to try and understand better what the views in Washington might be.

M: One of the widely publicized occurrences was the military lull in July--that's one of the occasions when you came back. Were you and Mr. Harriman advising at that point that the bombing be ceased?

V: We felt strongly at that point that we should interpret or accept the lull as an action which was both political and military, and that this might be used as a basis for trying to find a proper formula on which to stop the bombing.

M: Did you have some intimation from the other side in Paris that there were political--?

V: No. They never would respond. We tried and tried and tried to get them to say that this either was or was not. And they were very, very cautious and careful about it. We got some indications, through the press and their conversations with the North Vietnamese that there were political implications, but we could never get them to say that.

M: I believe Bill Bundy came to Paris about that time.

V: Yes.

M: Was there an intimation to you that the President might welcome a proposal from the delegation to interpret this lull in political terms?

V: No.

M: That was on your own authority that you advised--

V: This was our interpretation. And we thought that we should convey what our views were to the President and to Washington, and I'm sure that that's exactly what he wanted us to do.

M: You came back then to argue that case--was that the main reason for coming back?

V: I came back periodically anyway--I came back periodically anyway, and this was just one of the things to be discussed.

M: Why did the President indicate that he declined to accept your interpretation of this?

V: There were a lot of people who did not agree with our view and said that this was just an improper interpretation; that there were indications that this was merely a lull during which they were building up for another offensive; and that it had no political significance. I guess he felt that the evidence which they could marshal in support of their position was stronger than what we--Averell and I--could marshal in support of our position.

M: When and under what circumstances did you get an intimation that there was going to be a breakthrough--I suppose in early October?

V: Early October. Then I came back to Washington again and talked to the President and told him that both Averell and I felt that there really was a chance of a breakthrough at this point and asked for further authority which would permit us to make certain assumptions; and to make it clear to the North Vietnamese what those assumptions were and what action we expected them to take; and further that they would understand what the consequences might be if they did not act in accordance with our stated assumptions. We said we thought that if this could be done that we could get ourselves around the semantic problem of reciprocity which had been hanging the talks up for a long period of time. The President said, "Okay, if the Secretary of State will go along with you on this, I'll back it."

I then went to New York where Dean Rusk was, and we discussed this. Dean agreed that we should take this course, and he and I worked out the specific language which laid out our assumptions and the action that we expected them to take, and the caveat that they must recognize that if these assumptions were breached, that one could not expect the President to continue the cessation of bombing under those circumstances. And it was indeed that formula which was used which finally brought about the agreement and the cessation of bombing.

M: Were the Russians playing a constructive role with this part?

V: Yes.

M: And acting as intermediaries?

V: No. We made clear to the Russians what we had told the North Vietnamese, and we asked the Soviets to let us know whether it was clear in their minds that the North Vietnamese understood what had been said and what was expected of them. They came back and told us that they did indeed understand precisely what was expected of them, and what the consequences could be if they breached those assumptions; and thus played a constructive role. This was done both in Paris and in Washington. In Paris it was done primarily through conversations between myself and Oberemko, who was the Deputy Chief of Mission in the Soviet Embassy; and I believe

back here they were done in conversations with Ambassador [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin, which were either between Dobrynin and Rusk, or between [Walt] Rostow and Rusk and Dobrynin. But my recollection is that at both ends--Paris and Washington--there was confirmation of the fact that the North Vietnamese understood precisely what was expected of them, and what the consequences might be if they failed to act in accordance with those assumptions.

M: These were specific requirements pertaining to their activities on the ground?

(interruption)

V: Where were we?

M: The specific requirements that we understood.

V: Well, they were several in number. There were those that related to action on the part of the North Vietnamese and the NLF on the ground in South Viet Nam; and secondly, those relating to the convening of an expanded conference in Paris. We ultimately reached agreement on an expanded meeting which would include the U.S. and the South Vietnamese, and the North Vietnamese and the NLF, to be held on November 6. And this was absolutely fundamental. This was the key to the agreement. Over and above that, the other parts of the unwritten agreement related to attacks on major cities, and the understanding that there would be no attacks on major cities--no rocket attacks on major cities--such as Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang; and the understanding that there would be no movement of troops or supplies through the DMZ, or the firing of artillery across the DMZ, or the massing of troops in a threatening manner on either side of the DMZ, and certain other matters as well.

M: You said the key awhile ago was the meeting that was set up for the four principals. Was the key just the fact that there would be four principals, or that it would take place on a specific future date?

V: The key was that you would get an expanded conference at which the South Vietnamese and the NLF would be present. It was the sensible thing to do because that seemed to be the way to try and solve the political problem--by getting the NLF and the South Vietnamese together and having them, within the framework of the Paris talks, work out a political solution. Because both North Vietnamese and ourselves had stated on many occasions that the political future of South Viet Nam was to be determined by the South Vietnamese--not by Hanoi, or by Washington.

Now, when we could not go forward with the talks as we had agreed we would--indeed had insisted we would--on November 6, then the whole situation changed. And in my mind this is one of the great tragedies in history; that the South Vietnamese doublecrossed the United States, which I clearly feel they did, and would not come to Paris on November 6.



As a matter of fact, it was either two or three days prior to November 6 that the North Vietnamese sent to me what is called a note verbale, in which they agreed to waive all procedural questions if the meetings could take place on November 6. Now, one may say that this was a ploy on their part because they were by that time convinced that the South Vietnamese would not come to the table. I am not at all convinced that that is a correct interpretation. I think it's entirely possible that they meant what they said; that they would have preferred at that juncture to deal with the United States in an expanded conference where they knew the participants, where they knew something about a President, as opposed to another President who would be coming in in January whom they really knew very little about except that he had the reputation of being more of a hard-liner than President Johnson was. Therefore I think that it is not illogical to think, and indeed the Soviets indicated that the North Vietnamese wished to see how much progress could be made between early November and January 20 in the hopes that it could be so far down the road that when President Nixon came in, the shape of it would be molded in such a fashion that it couldn't be changed. How, the Soviets were quite explicit about this in reporting the North Vietnamese position. When indeed we could not go forward on November 6 and it began to drag on, then we got involved in this whole silly hassle over the shape of the table, the speaking order, and that kind of thing which is a great tragedy.

Now some people have said, including the French, "Well, you simply could not have expected the South Vietnamese and the NLF to come and immediately sit down together in Paris--you just couldn't have done it, and you had to have some period of time such as the seventy-some days during which we argued over the shape of the table." Perhaps that's correct--I'm not sure that it is.

M: You mentioned a double-cross? That implies that there was a very clear understanding on at least your part that the South Vietnamese would come at an earlier time?

V: Correct.

M: What occasioned the delay between--what was it, October 9 or thereabouts when--

V: Well, it had been mentioned to the South Vietnamese well before that, but I think it was fairly clear in early October that they understood what we had in mind. And by middle October I believed it was very clear that Thieu had said that he was prepared to go forward.

M: So any delay might have been occasioned by events outside Paris as far as you were concerned. But they did get delayed. The bombing wasn't halted until the 30th of October,

V: The big argument we got involved in during this period of time was how soon would the four party talks have to start. We were arguing under instructions from Washington that the talks had to commence the day after the bombing halt. The North Vietnamese said it was impossible to get the NLF to Paris within twenty-four hours after the bombing would be stopped. And we

asked them how long, and they said it might take as much as two weeks or so because they had to come out of the jungle. We then responded by saying, "Yes, but aren't there other people who are NLF representatives in Europe, and couldn't they come and sit in on the conference until the others got there." The North Vietnamese said that this was unsatisfactory to the NLF, and the NLF would want to have the proper people and simply would not be prepared to get them there before a period of time. So we went through a long argument back and forth as to what the period of time would be and finally agreed that it would be November 6--namely six days after the bomb halt.

M: Do you have any good information as to what got the South Vietnamese offboard at this point? This has been a matter of considerable discussion.

V: No. I know what the speculation is--part of it is that Thieu simply had not built a substantial political base and when faced with the reality of having to come to Paris, that he panicked and went back on his word; another view is that he didn't clearly understand what was expected of him--I simply do not subscribe to that on the basis of the cables that I read coming from Saigon at that time. And a third view is that the initiatives taken by Mrs. [Claire Lee] Chennault and others led him to believe that he would be better off in delaying and not permitting talks to start at an early period. The suggestion is made by some that he was told that he would end up better if there were no talks until the Nixon Administration came into power.

M: But you don't have any firsthand information about any American intervention over there?

V: No, I don't.

M: Once the talks began after November 6--

V: They didn't begin. We settled the table problem--about January 18, as I recall.

M: During the time you were working on the table problem, were you and Mr. Harriman advising that a change be made in the ground tactics in South Viet Nam as a means toward encouraging the talks to go forward?

V: Yes, we had made some suggestions to that effect. And indeed when I came back to Washington around Christmas of 1968, I talked to Henry Kissinger and to Mr. [William] Rogers, the Secretary of State-designate, about the desirability of changing the "all-out military pressure" instruction.

M: Mr. Johnson was declining to do that during this period?

V: Yes. He didn't believe that this was the way to negotiate, nor did Mr. Rusk believe that. They believed that the way to negotiate was to put maximum pressure on the other side. I think some

of us on the other side of the thinking felt that where you have a large country dealing with a small country, that it's not the same as two big countries dealing with each other; that if you wanted to get movement, you had to take an initiative on our side, and the best initiative you could take would be to change the concept of all-out pressure and that this could perhaps bring a response from the NLF and the North Vietnamese. I still happen to believe that that's correct theory. But again, now this was an honest difference of opinion between those of us who felt one way and those who felt another way. And it was not a question of, you know, good men and bad men--it was an honest difference of opinion.

M: You said, I believe, in our first conversation that toward the end of the Johnson years he sometimes did sit around in informal, long conversations and talk about Viet Nam. Do you have any particular insights based on those conversations of how his thinking evolved over the long, hard period concerning this major issue?

V: Let me put that aside for a second and come back to it. I might mention one rather interesting and slightly amusing part of the settlement of the problem on the shape of the table. After I came back from my visit to the United States and my visit with the President in December of 1968, we got further flexibility in trying to solve the shape-of-the-table problem, and increased pressure was put on Saigon to go along with a settlement of this problem so that the four-party talks could begin. And I went over, after talking to Mr. Harriman, to see if we could elicit the support of the Russians. I talked to Mr. Oberemko about this, and he said that he would like to take it under consideration and would be back in touch with me promptly. As I recall it, I talked to him on a Saturday, and the next Monday he asked to come over and see me, and said he would bring along with him his colleague, Mr. Bogomoloff (?). Mr. Bogomoloff was a rather slight man, very spare and thin, and quite small. Mr. Oberemko then said that he had talked with his Ambassador and had a suggestion to make which he thought might be able to solve the table problem. I said, "What is it?" He said, "Well, the North Vietnamese had been insisting upon a round table, and we had proposed a round table with two rectangular tables abutting the round table." He said that that was as unacceptable to the North Vietnamese and the NLF as a straight round table was to us; and that perhaps the way to solve the problem would be to move the two rectangular tables slightly away from the round table. I said that made sense to me, but it had to be a very, very slight distance. And I said, "What do you have in mind?" And he said, "One Bogomoloff width." So we measured Mr. Bogomoloff, who was really quite thin, and as a result of that, that is how we determined the spacing between the round table and the two rectangular tables.

M: That's just the working of high diplomacy--measure a diplomat. Are there other things about the conference--?

V: No.

M: That's the kind of thing that's outstanding for this type of compilation. Do you want to go back to that question regarding Mr. Johnson?

V: What was the question again?

M: You mentioned--I believe the first time we talked--you said occasionally you talked with Mr. Johnson informally and these long monologues that he had, and toward the end of the Administration he sometimes did deal with all aspects of the Vietnamese problem in those conversations. And I just wondered if you had developed any sort of an insight or something from hearing him as to how his position evolved--

V: I think that will all probably come out in his memoirs, and it's perhaps best to have it from him rather than my view of it.

M: Have you talked to him about Viet Nam since he has been out of office?

V: No. I've written him several times, but we have not had a chance to get together; he writes me and I write him, but we haven't talked about Viet Nam.

M: You are listed as the principal author of the recent Democratic Party policy statement on Viet Nam--

V: I was not. That's not correct. I actually was never in on the development of that policy, I wasn't present at the meeting at which it was adopted. I have my own views. I agreed, with many of the things in there, and I disagreed with some; I have my own views about the way that we should proceed to try and get a settlement which I have been urging for a long time here, and they differ slightly from what was put forward in the Democratic policy paper.

M: It was well to get that authorship thing straight anyway, because I've seen you listed as the principal author of it.

V: Where have you seen that?

M: Probably in the provincial press out where I live.

V: No, the author of it was Mr. Harriman. My views are somewhat different on this. What I have been proposing is a program under which we would put a political-military package on the table in Paris. And the first order of business in the political package would be the negotiation of the stand-still ceasefire. Then I would key the withdrawal of the U.S. troops to the effective date of the ceasefire, so that you are getting something in return for putting a finite date on the withdrawal of troops--namely, the agreement with respect to a ceasefire. And I would say that what you ought to propose is that all troops be withdrawn within a finite period of time such as

twelve months, for example, after the effective date of a ceasefire. I would also couple it with a proposal for both local and countrywide elections to be conducted under the aegis of a joint electoral commission which would consist of representatives of the Saigon government, the NLF, and that broad middle spectrum. So that in over-simplified terms, that essentially is a three-point program--the first step of which would be the cessation of all search and destroy operations plus a cutting back substantially on B-52 operations. This would then set the climate for the proposal to be made in Paris of a political-military package. And even if you did not get acceptance of the political-military package, in my judgment it might be possible to get reciprocal action as a result of the cutting back of the B-52 operations, and search and destroy, and thus cut down the level of fighting in Viet Nam. But then I would propose this political-military package which would include a standstill ceasefire, which means that all forces would stand in place; that neither would take political or military advantage pending the elections; there would be free movement of civilians; that this standstill ceasefire would be policed by an expanded ICC, and perhaps a joint military commission such as they had in 1954; that the withdrawal of forces would continue but total withdrawal would be hooked to x-months after the effective date of a ceasefire. With respect to elections, as I have indicated, I would propose that elections be held within a period of time to be negotiated, and that the negotiations be conducted under the aegis of this joint electoral commission. I would also have as part of the package a proposal for massive economic and technical assistance to both North and South following the resolution of the conflict and political settlement.

M: You proposed that while you were still negotiator--?

V: No, I've proposed that since I came out.

M: That's all since then then.

V: Yes.

M: Do you want to add anything on Viet Nam, or anything?

V: No.

M: Final chance to tell your side to history here. You think that will wrap up what you have to contribute.

V: I don't know where this story got out that I was involved in the preparation of that recent proposal.

M: I really think I heard it on national television.

V: Did you?

M: I'm not sure.

V: Rollie [Rowland] Evans had a column that I saw that indicated that I had participated in it along with Nick Katzenbach, but certainly in none of the Eastern press--Rollie Evans' column was the only one that I saw that indicated in any way that I had been involved in it, and that was just simply wrong.

M: That's good to get that on the record anyway.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]