

## Interview with Frederick Ernest Nolting Jr.

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AMBASSADOR FREDERICK ERNEST NOLTING, JR.

Interviewed by: Ted Gittinger, LBJ Library

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*Q: Ambassador Nolting, would you begin by telling me if there was anything that could be considered a legacy that Ambassador [Elbridge] Durbrow had left for you to inherit?*

NOLTING: Yes. I think the legacy was one of some tension and misunderstanding between the American mission and the government of South Vietnam under President [Ngo Dinh] Diem. There had been pressure on Diem to get rid of his brother [Ngo Dinh] Nhu-

*Q: Oh, that early?*

NOLTING: That early, before I got there. There had been disagreements on other matters, but for the most part Ambassador Durbrow, who is a friend of mine and helped me a great deal in our brief meeting in Honolulu on my way out there to succeed him, felt, I believe, that these disagreements were minor compared to the over-all question of trying to establish stability in South Vietnam. So that one of the things that I was instructed to do was to try through conciliation to gain the confidence of the government in the intentions of the United States to stick with them. That, of course, was greatly reinforced within two

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weeks of my arrival by Vice President Johnson's strong stand and strong statements in the communique that came out of his visit there.

*Q: That was the visit when he referred to President Diem as the Churchill of Asia I think, wasn't it?*

NOLTING: Yes, and in several toasts as the Franklin Roosevelt, referring as he did in context to the recent elections of Diem, which were in April of 1961, in which he got about 90 per cent of the votes.

*Q: That's fairly usual in that part of the world, isn't it? I think —*

NOLTING: Well, yes. Yes. But the charge which was leveled—these were United Nations supervised elections, whatever that might mean; it surely doesn't mean everything that it implies. But [it means] at least certain supervision of the fairness of the elections. Nevertheless, most of the press interpreted the elections as another indication of an undemocratic system on grounds that no other democracy and no other candidate for president had ever gotten that percentage of the vote.

*Q: Who was chief of MAAG when you arrived? Was that General—?*

NOLTING: General Lionel McGarr.

*Q: McGarr, right.*

NOLTING: A very fine man in my opinion. He was a military person and perhaps, how shall I say, not as diplomatically inclined as some military men. But I liked General McGarr very much; I have a high regard for him. He was, however, transferred and I remember General [Maxwell] Taylor telling him so in rather brutal terms.

*Q: Do you recall the occasion for that?*

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NOLTING: Yes, it was at the time of the Taylor-Rostow mission.

*Q: That would have been the fall of 1961.*

NOLTING: Fall of 1961 or late summer. It was a question of visiting, of having an appointment with President Diem. General Taylor was staying with us and Walt Rostow was, too. General McGarr was there when the cars were going to the President's office, and as I recall, General Taylor turned to General McGarr and said, "General, we won't be needing you here," which was rather abrupt.

*Q: Do you have any insight as to what was behind that?*

NOLTING: Well, I'm sure the decision had been made that General McGarr would be transferred, but so far as I know he hadn't been previously notified.

*Q: It seems to me that he would not have served what would be considered a normal tour of duty in his station at that time. He came in late 1960 I believe, so he would have been there just over a year.*

NOLTING: I've forgotten when he [came]. Yes. He had a very good record and experience in Korea. I believe at the time his second-in-command—(Interruption)—was then Charles Timmes, who was I believe major general at that time. Wonderful person, very good, had an excellent touch with the Vietnamese, both military and civilian, and did a great deal in the training field particularly. Charlie was himself a man of all trades in the military and was excellent. He and General McGarr overlapped. When MACV was created and Paul Harkins came in, General McGarr left, was succeeded in effect by Harkins at a more elevated level, and Charlie Timmes stayed on as the head of the MAAG.

*Q: The advisory effort, is that accurate?*

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NOLTING: Yes. Military Advisory Group. You see, we had had a MAAG there since 1954, and then it was elevated to MACV in 1962.

*Q: Right. Of the many stories that appeared in the press and in books and various sources about alleged dissension within the U.S. Mission over the Diem regime, its viability, Diem's suitability, have any struck you as being particularly meritorious or with substance, or are they all, to your mind, meretricious?*

NOLTING: You mean the criticisms?

*Q: Yes, sir.*

NOLTING: Well, I hate to brand everything, including stuff I haven't read, as being wrong and incorrect, but I can answer that question in general terms. In my opinion the criticisms were for the most part 90 per cent unfounded and incorrect. Does that answer your question?

*Q: I think it does, especially when combined with what you've said in your Kennedy interviews, yes, I think it does. The Taylor-Rostow mission, which came in the fall of 1961—and there has been much commentary about that particular thing—they recommended a number of steps, two of which seem to have aroused more controversy even though they were not adopted. One of them was that a contingent of U.S. combat troops, I think combat engineers, be introduced into the Delta under the rather transparent cover of flood relief.*

NOLTING: Right.

*Q: But everybody knows that combat engineers are also infantrymen.*

NOLTING: And they were supposed to be a self-contained unit.

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*Q: Right. The other was that we should look more closely at military punishment or retribution against the North for its support of the insurgency in the South. Now, these were not adopted at the time. The President did not accept those.*

NOLTING: President Kennedy—

*Q: That's correct.*

NOLTING: —turned them down, yes.

*Q: Were you consulted about these two measures?*

NOLTING: Not on the force, the engineers battalion in the Delta. That was added after Max Taylor and Walt Rostow left Saigon. We had conferred on many, many things to be in their report in Saigon or elsewhere in Vietnam, because we toured the country. In Saigon, as I recall—excuse me, in Honolulu, they stopped to write up all of this for their report to the President.

*Q: Or was it Baguio? Wasn't it Baguio?*

NOLTING: Maybe it was Baguio, yes. They added this provision for the self-contained American combat-engineering force. I was not consulted on that. When the word got back after they'd gotten to Washington, I was very dubious about it. I cannot recall whether I commented directly to Washington on it, but I think I did. My general comment was that the parts of the report that had been discussed in Vietnam I was in thorough accord with, this new addition I was not. And I'll tell you the reasons for that. It stemmed back to a conviction which I had reinforced often with other people and particularly with President Diem, that American combat forces would lead to a shuffling off of responsibility by the Vietnamese Army and by the Vietnamese people onto the much stronger, better equipped Americans. Diem didn't want that. He said often to me, "If we can't win this struggle on our

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own with our own manpower, but with your valuable support in materiel and advice, it won't be a viable victory." He did not want American combat forces. That was one reason.

The other reason I think was because it was a thin cover. After all, as you know as a veteran of Vietnam, there was a flood in the Mekong practically every year, and this wasn't anything unusual. To try to bring in American combat forces contrary to the agreements, Geneva Accords of 1954, was to me to invite an international argument on just who had violated what and so forth. Up to that time it was clear that the violations of the 1954 Accords on Vietnam were principally, if not altogether, on the side of the North Vietnamese. It didn't seem to me to make sense to do this. The other question about—what was that?

*Q: Retribution against the North.*

NOLTING: Retribution against the North I took an equally dim view of, although there were plenty of reasons for wanting to do it. But there were operations that were going on, sponsored mostly by the CIA, to bomb or to drop saboteurs, Vietnamese saboteurs, in installations of the North which were being used against the South. Most of those had been unsuccessful, most of them had been counterproductive. Instead of stepping them up, for the most part we tried to weed out those that were not working and left some that seemed to be working. But there were more losses really on the part of brave South Vietnamese people going up and being dropped and being captured before they had been able to accomplish their missions than the reverse. In other words, the weight of the thing seemed to be against continuing some of those operations.

*Q: What about bombing? Was that discussed?*

NOLTING: Bombing of the North was not discussed, so far as I recall, at that time.

*Q: Okay. Did you see Colonel Lansdale at this time? I understand he accompanied—*

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NOLTING: Ed Lansdale?

*Q: Well, it would have been Brigadier General Lansdale I guess by that time.*

NOLTING: Yes. I saw him once in Vietnam, but I had many conversations with him before going to Vietnam. That was in April 1961. I was very much impressed with Ed's knowledge of the country and his subtle touch with respect to this kind of situation. I know that President Diem was very admiring of him and on occasion he would say, "I wish I could have a conversation with Colonel Lansdale on this subject," on one subject or another.

*Q: He did accompany the Taylor-Rostow mission. He was part of that. (Interruption)—Lansdale's feel for the situation when you talked to him? Was he optimistic, pessimistic? How would you describe it?*

NOLTING: I would describe it as being fifty-fifty between optimism and pessimism, rather enigmatic about means, but supportive, very supportive. This was important in the task force in Washington of which he was member.

*Q: This is Mr. [Roswell] Gilpatric's task force?*

NOLTING: Gilpatric's chairmanship. Very strong on supporting the constitutional elected government. Lansdale had faith in President Diem and was one of those I think who was most influential in persuading the task force that the United States was taking good risk in our own interests in supporting the South Vietnamese cause under the elected government.

*Q: He had visited Vietnam for President Kennedy I think in early 1961. Did you have any knowledge of that one? It was in the spring.*

NOLTING: Yes, I did. Do you want to cut this?(Interruption)

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*Q: Do you remember any of the points that General Lansdale was pessimistic about?*

NOLTING: Not specifically. I think he was optimistic about the government, relative to other Southeast Asian governments. I remember his saying once, "Sure, there are a lot of criticisms that can be leveled against this government in South Vietnam, but compared to the others in Southeast Asia, it's a beaut," or words to that effect. I think he was probably pessimistic on the grounds of the staying power of the United States, on grounds of the persistence, absolute implacability of the communist movement in Southeast Asia, not only in Vietnam but throughout Southeast Asia. I think he felt that there was a political aspect, as there was in the French war, that had to be carefully surveyed so that we would not enter into a situation where we wouldn't stay the course and other factors of that sort. My impression was that he felt that in a divided Southeast Asia, and particularly in South Vietnam, the sentiments of the people were anti-communist. They hated the Viet Cong. But it was a situation in which you couldn't expect a clear-cut victory or even a clear-cut decision in a short while and that this was the kind of situation which the impatient American public and the volatile American political situation was ill-equipped to cope with.

*Q: Let me address one of the points you just made.*

NOLTING: I am not trying to put words in his mouth, but that's my impression. I'm not quoting him.

*Q: Fine. It was his impression then that the South Vietnamese people on balance were anti-communist. If I do not misjudge you, that was your opinion also after you had been in country for a time.*

NOLTING: Yes, after traveling over some forty provinces. I spent six months just going all over the country when I first got there. It was my strong impression that the majority of people, by far the majority—I'm talking about the peasants who were the majority of the people—were anti-communist, some of them extremely so, most of them anti-communist

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firmly. Some of them because of family divisions [were] on the fence, but certainly by far the majority were anti-communist.

*Q: Now the obvious question which follows from that is from where did the Viet Cong derive what everyone admits was their astonishing staying power and tenacity, if this was true?*

NOLTING: The Viet Cong you're talking about?

Q: Yes.

NOLTING: Well, I think it was partly fear of reprisals. I think it was partly dyed-in-the-wool training in North Vietnam of those who were sent back to their native provinces, that is, those who went North in 1954 and then were infiltrated back to their provinces, to their native villages. I think it was partly ideological, but not all that much. I think it was partly a feeling that the government wasn't doing enough for them.

*Q: Let's dwell on that for a second, because this is what a lot of people have dwelt upon. To what extent were Viet Cong successes based on genuine grievances among the people?*

NOLTING: I don't think they were based on genuine grievances for this reason, because they themselves created the grievances. The grievances were mostly such things as not being able to get their rice to market, or not having enough schoolteachers, or not getting mail deliveries, simple things. The reason for those grievances were that the Viet Cong had blown up the bridges and had murdered some schoolteachers and had terrorized others, and had, for example, made the anti-malaria teams' job—which was finally successful, thank goodness—much more difficult by terror tactics. So, I don't think that the genuine grievance theory, even though some ill-informed and naive people may have taken it seriously, was the government's fault. It was the Viet Cong's fault, and it was

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they who tried to make it worse, who tried to stimulate the feeling that “the government has deserted you, join us.”

*Q: There's a point there I want to come to later, but I think it comes in a little later. One of the most publicized and one of the most famous incidents, where all of the disparate, conflicting opinions about Vietnam come into focus, were made to come into focus, was concerning a battle that was fought around New Year's in 1963.*

NOLTING: Ap Bac.

*Q: Yes, sir. Or as one general said, “oh, my aching bak.”*

NOLTING: That was Paul Harkins.

*Q: I'll take your word for that. What recollections do you have of the furor that arose over the battle at Ap Bac?*

NOLTING: My recollections are that—I've thought of that a lot of times and I don't think it was all that serious. I don't think the South Vietnamese army ought to be indicted for cowardice. I think there were some snafus, I think a couple of the Vietnamese commanders were at fault. It was a battle, but it wasn't that big, as you know. I think the ARVN mishandled it, they didn't move in when they should. I think it was blown out of all proportion by the American press. The worst thing that happened was Colonel [John Paul] Vann's spilling his guts to the American press and having it spread all over the headlines that the South Vietnamese Army, despite all that the Americans had done to train and supply them, were basically cowards and they couldn't win. I don't believe that.

*Q: What about allegations that—?*

NOLTING: Please, let me say something more on that, Colonel Vann, who is now dead and whom I admired except for this particular outburst, which I thought was very ill-

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advised, later gave his life in Vietnam. I don't want to speak ill of him. But I think that interview, I've forgotten whom he gave it to, was emotional and not fair.

*Q: There were allegations at the time that President Diem had put out the word to South Vietnamese units that he did not want casualties. What do you know of this? Is it true, and if it is, why?*

NOLTING: I don't remember any flat-out orders to anybody to avoid casualties. I do remember President Diem's discussions with me and others saying that the more casualties that could be avoided, not only on the side of the South Vietnamese Army, but on the side of villagers, fence sitters, and even Viet Cong, the better, the quicker the pacification of the country could take place.

*Q: I see. There were allegations that the ARVN was not exhibiting enough initiative because of a presidential order not to press battles.*

NOLTING: Honestly, I don't recall anybody saying to me or intimating to me, including President Diem or Paul Harkins after his many talks with Diem, or Nguyen [Dinh] Thuan, who was the effective minister of defense. I don't remember anybody giving me the impression that they were giving orders to hold their punches to their military. They were saying be careful about whom you shoot up, and we were saying that, too. And this I think is the important point. The idea then was pacification. It wasn't wiping out dissenters; it was bringing them over. The Chieu Hoi program was an example of it. The idea was pacification, the word was pacification, both in Vietnamese and in French and in English. The trouble was, again, that as hard as we would try in Saigon, and the government would try there, to talk about their pacification program, I don't remember a single case in which a reporter didn't translate pacification into "war". This was an enormous psychological error as it affected this country as well as Vietnam.

*Q: It was a conceptual—?*

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NOLTING: As a conceptual thing, right.

Q: *Okay.*

NOLTING: Does that make sense?

Q: *Yes, I think it does. What position did you try to get President Diem to take during the Buddhist crisis? Did you give advice on how he should try to handle that business?*

NOLTING: Unfortunately that was one of my big mistakes, big misfortunes. I think I've gone into this before, I'm not sure with whom. The incident that triggered this was in Hue and it was around the first of May 1963. There had been an investigation, there had been very little if any agitation in the meantime, and we were scheduled—my wife and two children, who were then there—to meet our other two children in Greece for a long-delayed vacation. After waiting around for two weeks to see what, if anything, was going to develop from this, nothing did, and we left Saigon on the twenty-third of May, as I recall, and went on this vacation, which was to end with consultations in Washington. I was on State Department orders. Well, during that period all hell broke loose in Vietnam. The burnings, Thich Tri Quang, the most venerable of the Buddhist bonzes was burned or burned himself.

Q: *That wasn't Tri Quang, was it?*

NOLTING: No, no, I'm sorry. Thich Quang Duc. Tri Quang was—

Q: *The militant.*

NOLTING: —a very different character.

So for six weeks there I was not at my post. I had speeches to make about Vietnam at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and elsewhere, which were already laid on. So your question was, what did I have to do with it? I regret to say I got back too late to do

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anything about it. The thing was out of hand. This I will never cease to blame the State Department for and my deputy, because they both knew exactly where I was every day and could have notified me if they had wanted me back as a mediator, which I think I could have been.

*Q: Why didn't they notify you?*

NOLTING: Well, we're still on the record, and I'll tell you why. Because I think the person principally in charge of this in the State Department, Averell Harriman, wanted me out of there because I thought that President Diem was the best bet for achieving the United States' interests. I think he wanted me out of there so that Diem would have enough rope to hang himself.

*Q: Is that what he did?*

NOLTING: Well, I think he made a lot of mistakes that I think I could have helped him to avoid.

*Q: What would you have done?*

NOLTING: Well, that's a hypothetical question, all right.

*Q: And you have the benefit of hindsight. I know that, too.*

NOLTING: Yes.

*Q: But would you have advised Diem to conciliate the Buddhists?*

NOLTING: Yes, yes. Surely, in the beginning, because the Buddhist leadership had not been taken over by Thich Tri Quang, who was in my opinion a communist agent and who was branded later on as such by President [Nguyen Van] Thieu. At the height of the rioting

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in late 1963 he was glorified in this country as an upholder of the rights of the Buddhists, given asylum by [Henry Cabot] Lodge in the U.S. Embassy.

*Q: What about the less militant—who was the other, Tri Quang's sort of rival for leadership of the Buddhist movement?*

NOLTING: I was looking up the name the other day and I can't remember at the moment. There was a group—and I can find them out for you and supply them if you want—of about four older Buddhists who had come to an agreement and compromise with the government, and that was undermined by Tri Quang and his group. There was a set of negotiations that went on for some six weeks. I had this from Bui Van Luong, who-

*Q: Would you say that name again, sir?*

NOLTING: Luong, L-U-O-N-G. First name was Bui, B-U-I. Middle name Van Luong. Okay. He was minister of the interior. He did the investigation at Hue. He came up with a report which I considered to be an accurate and objective report. Diem considered it to be so, and that's what he was going by. Nguyen Thuan, who was perhaps the most effective member of the cabinet, urged Diem to compromise with the Buddhists on the basis of this report. Diem tried to do so. Thuan was on the negotiating committee and so was Luong. They came to what seemed to be a satisfactory agreement.

*Q: What was the basis of the agreement?*

NOLTING: A reaffirmation of religious toleration, freedom, number one. A settlement of the flag incident, that the Buddhist flag could be flown, as indeed it always could be. But at Hue they had insisted on putting it ahead of the Vietnamese national flag, and that caused the incident. Money for the pagodas. There had been all along substantial contributions by the government to the pagodas. This was reaffirmed. Let's see, what were the other conditions? Well, the usual statement, which Diem said rather scornfully was totally unnecessary, that there would be no religious discrimination or persecution. There had

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been none, as I said often over there and later. Of all the things that divided that country, one of the things, thank God, was not religious dissension, because the whole spectrum of religions, from Buddhism to ancestor worship to Christianity to the Hoa Haos and the other sects, was transcended by the philosophy of Confucius, and Confucius stood, as you know, for religious toleration. Nearly all Vietnamese were Confucian in that respect.

Well, all of this I think could have been resolved. But I think what happened was the United States all of a sudden began to hammer the table on hotheaded instructions from Washington, burned into action by the American press, to get on with it and tell this guy to apologize and eat crow and do things that he couldn't possibly afford to do as president of the country, which also would not have done any good. Because by that time the Buddhist movement had come into the hands of those who had only one objective, and that was the overthrow of the government. Well, that objective was the exact objective of the Viet Cong. So they were absolutely parallel on that. Whether they were united is a question which I've never been able to determine.

*Q: What role did the raids on the pagodas play in all this?*

NOLTING: They played a crucial role, in the American minds, American government minds. When Lodge and I were conferring in Honolulu on his way out and my way back—this was about the twentieth of August 1963—that was when the news came of the raid on the pagodas.

*Q: Can you describe the effect it had on you when you heard the news?*

NOLTING: Yes. I was shocked and so were others, because my last action there in Saigon was to get a statement out of President Diem, which the State Department had been demanding, that there would be reconciliation or the strongest efforts at reconciliation with the Buddhists.

*Q: Diem had agreed to this?*

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NOLTING: He agreed to it. The way he put it was rather interesting. He said—this was rather typical of his way of doing things—”my policy of reconciliation with the Buddhists is irreversible.”

*Q: That could be kind of a cryptic statement, couldn't it?*

NOLTING: Well, what he was trying to say, of course, and he never said these things very well or appealingly to the American point of view, was, “Look, there's never been any lack of conciliation and I'm not thinking about admitting that I've been persecuting. I'm just saying that my policy of reconciliation with the Buddhists and all other religions is irreversible.”

*Q: So what led to the raids?*

NOLTING: Well, I sent Diem a personal telegram from Honolulu when I heard about them. I said, “This is the first time that you've ever gone back on your word to me.”

*Q: You were hurt personally as well as shocked professionally.*

NOLTING: I'm awfully sorry I sent that because later on I saw his minister, my good friend Nguyen Thuan, in Paris. He escaped after the overthrow of the Diem government. I said, “Do you remember this personal telegram?” sent when I was no longer ambassador. He said, “Yes, I took it to the President, and the President read it and shook his head and said, 'He doesn't know what the provocation was.'”

*Q: What was the provocation?*

NOLTING: Well, the provocation was continued packing of arms in the Xa Loi and other pagodas, continued riots proclaiming the overthrow of the government—not a change in government but the overthrow of the government—and a total unwillingness to compromise on the part of Thich Tri Quang and his militants on anything.

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*Q: Some critics have suggested that all Diem had to do was make a gesture towards [conciliation]. Some symbolic act would have pacified the whole business.*

NOLTING: Well, I surely don't want to be in the position of saying that this was skillfully handled by the Diem government, or by the Americans. The only skillful people in this were these upstart Buddhist militants. Incidentally, that general association of Vietnamese Buddhists was a new organization. There had never been any such hierarchy. The Buddhist bonzes in the provinces were their own bosses. They did their own funerals, their own marriages, weddings and so forth. I had numerous letters, when I got back from this ill-fated vacation, on my desk from bonzes, some of whom I'd met in outlying villages, some of whom I didn't know, saying "count us out so far as this general association of Vietnamese Buddhists is concerned. We have nothing to do with them, we don't know who they are, and we don't subscribe to their policy or their slogans of overthrowing the government."

*Q: Sir, I hope this doesn't seem impertinent. I don't mean it to be.*

NOLTING: Sure.

*Q: Some people would say or suggest out of hand, that this is Mr. Nhu speaking and this isn't the Buddhists at all. This is Mr. Nhu playing his propaganda organ. Did that thought ever strike you?*

NOLTING: You mean the Buddhist movement was Nhu's invention?

*Q: No, no. The letters that you got from the bonzes in the countryside disclaiming-*

NOLTING: It's conceivable, but it never occurred to me.

*Q: I don't know why it occurs to me. I have no reason for suggesting it.*

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NOLTING: It's conceivable, but I don't think so. I had no opportunity to answer them or to go further into it because I was about to leave Vietnam and there were so many pieces to try to pick up that I didn't answer those letters. So far as I know, like all of my papers [they] were left in the Embassy in Saigon and I don't have any official records of this, nor of anything for that matter, because in those days one tried to abide by the rules of the Foreign Service, which were that you didn't take official papers with you, ever. I notice, incidentally, and this can be on the record now, that most of the Kennedy advisers and the people in Washington kept records of secret, top secret papers and used them extensively in their writings. (Interruption)

*Q: When the Diem government fell, the press carried accounts of vast joyous, spontaneous demonstrations in the streets of Saigon. How do you square that with—if I read you right—your belief that by and large the Vietnamese people approved of Diem?*

NOLTING: It's very hard to square that. I do not believe that the majority of the Vietnamese people or even the majority of the Saigon people, who were much more volatile and inclined to take any dramatic event as a reason for celebration, were joyous over this event. On the contrary, I think the majority were shocked and it was only the hotheads stirred up by I don't know what elements, but certainly some of them were Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers, who indulged in these acts. I could understand that Madame Nhu would have been a target.

*Q: Why?*

NOLTING: Because she was unpopular and [so was] Nhu, brother Nhu, whom some Vietnamese called Bobby Nhu, in imitation of Bobby Kennedy. The Saigonese wits would refer to him as such. I can understand that they could be targets. While I was there I never heard from any oppositionists—with two exceptions, which I'll mention later—words of criticism against President Diem. That is to say, I've never heard anybody accuse him of being unjust or cruel. I have heard people say that they thought some of his policies were

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not the best, but in terms of integrity and the reputation for honesty and trying to do good for his people, I never heard anybody say a word against him. This was not true of his brother Nhu and it was not true of the Archbishop—

Q: *[Ngo Dinh] Thuc, was it? -*

NOLTING: Thuc, or of Madame Nhu.

Okay. The two exceptions that I mentioned were two generals who were at our home some months before this happened. One was General Don.

Q: *Tran Van Don?*

NOLTING: Tran Van Don, who was a cultivated man, and General Kim.

Q: *K-H-I-E-M?*

NOLTING: I think they were brothers-in-law. Sitting on the sofa one evening after dinner, they lit into President Diem and said he was unworthy to be president of the country.

Q: *What was the burden of their objections to him?*

NOLTING: Mostly that he was incapable, and that stemmed from their feeling that he interfered too much with the military running of the country.

Q: *They were unsatisfied with the way the war was going?*

NOLTING: Yes. But they went beyond that in saying that this man is really, you know, he's no good. He's a bad character.

Q: *Morally you mean?*

NOLTING: Well, just incapable and no good and a bad political leader and so forth.

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*Q: So they were after his competence, not his personal—?*

NOLTING: More after his competence, yes, but it was shocking to me. I said, "Gentlemen, you are my guests and I am an accredited diplomat to the government which happens to be headed by your president, who was elected." I gave them the reply which not only I but my predecessors had always given to the dissident generals. "You have a chance to run for president next time. Don't give us this stuff about revolt and supporting a revolt. Why don't you do your duty as military men? The United States is not going to get into this question of a coup d'etat." In fact, President Kennedy had promised President Diem on two occasions not to interfere in the internal affairs of South Vietnam.

*Q: That reminds me of a question. There was a coup attempt in 1960 before you came in the fall of 1960. November as I recall.*

NOLTING: Right.

*Q: There are stories that President Diem and Mr. Nhu suspected that the CIA was involved in some capacity in that coup attempt. Do you recall anything of that nature?*

NOLTING: If they suspected it at the time, I saw no evidence of it two years later. Neither of them ever brought that up. When I got there Bill Colby was the mission station chief for the CIA. He was close to Nhu—I mean, close in the sense that they conferred often. President Diem also liked him and admired him. I certainly did. I don't think there was any hanky-panky going on behind my back in this regard. In fact, Colby was not only a friend but one of my most trusted advisers and members of our task force. He was later succeeded after about a year of my tenure by John Richardson, who was in my opinion equally trustworthy, forthright, and he also continued the connection, frequent talks with Ngo Dinh Nhu. So through those channels I never heard anything about suspicions of the CIA in connection with the 1960 coup. No, I don't remember any accusations of that sort.

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*Q: Fair enough. I have a question concerning the lines of authority within the U.S. Mission. Now, you testified very fully in your Kennedy Library transcripts about the cooperation which you got from General Harkins and that there was seldom if ever any conflict about jurisdiction and so on. Is it fair to say that this largely resulted from the fact that your personalities meshed very well?*

NOLTING: Yes, I think so. I think the seed of conflict or noncooperation had certainly been sowed earlier on when, under the influence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and perhaps Bob McNamara, the secretary of defense, there was issued a directive which seemed to split the mission.

*Q: Was this the letter of appointment which gave General Harkins—?*

NOLTING: It was the letter of appointment and the description of MACV.

*Q: Do you know who wrote that letter?*

NOLTING: I don't know, but I have a strong suspicion that it was instigated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff or by McNamara or Max Taylor. Perhaps Max Taylor. I took the issue back to Washington, not because I had any feeling of jealousy with respect to an ambassador's position but because I could see only trouble. In every joint meeting you had of the military and State Department and AID and CIA and so forth, all of us, the question of who would chair the meeting, who would write it up, who would have the right to dissent and so forth might cause trouble. I went back to Washington on this issue, talked it over, and didn't get anywhere with [Dean] Rusk. Rusk said, "Oh, forget it, Fritz. You can get along with Paul Harkins." I hadn't met Harkins at that time.

The person that backed me on this was Averell Harriman. Since we couldn't get any satisfaction vis-a-vis the Defense Department or any positive position out of the Secretary of State, Harriman and I went over and saw President Kennedy. He immediately said, "This is wrong. It has to be rewritten to make it clear that the ambassador is in overall

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charge.” I said, “Mr. President, I hope you don't think I'm fool enough to try to run or intervene in military matters of training or logistics or anything of that sort which I don't know much about. But the problem is that there can be misunderstandings down the line, there can be emergencies in which somebody has to come up with the U.S. position.” And President Kennedy said, “You're absolutely right.” Max Taylor was in the room. He said, “Max, rewrite that directive and get this clear: the ambassador is in over-all charge.”

Well, in about two or three weeks there came through another directive which was still fuzzy as the devil. It was a little bit in the direction of the President's decision but hadn't changed the original directive that much.

*Q: But this was of no practical import as far as your and General Harkins' positions?*

NOLTING: It turned out not to be, no.

*Q: But it could have been?*

NOLTING: It could have been, yes.

*Q: Were you aware that this ever got satisfactorily worked out?*

NOLTING: It never did on paper.

*Q: Not during your tenure at least?*

NOLTING: Not during my tenure, no. One thing I might add to that—it might be of some interest—was that McNamara gave me a ride back in his plane as far as Honolulu from those meetings in Washington. I remember we were sitting together having dinner on his plane, and we got on the subject again. I said, “Bob, I hope you understand what this was all about.” He said in effect, “Sure I do, but let me tell you that on this one the Joint Chiefs are absolutely adamant.” That's why I mentioned the chiefs. “They said no four-star general is going to be under an ambassador.” And I said, “Well, it's not a question of

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being under anybody, it's just a question of who has the over-all responsibility. If you want to tie the can to your tail and let me out of there, that's fine with me, but I can't have the responsibility from the President and not have the authority. And I'm not going to misuse that authority with respect to military matters." Well, McNamara's quite frank, and what he said in effect was, 'Look, on this one the Joint Chiefs have got me over a barrel. I can't do anything about it.' He may have been speaking as well of Max Taylor.(Interruption)

*Q: One point I would like to clear up a little bit is that in the meetings that were taking place in September 1963 where there was so much agonizing going on, I'm not sure if you were party to all of these or not. I think you were in some of them and not in others.*

NOLTING: In NSC meetings in Washington?

*Q: Yes, sir. There was one famous meeting at which Rufus Phillips, among others, gave testimony and-*

NOLTING: It surprised me!

*Q: —it was pretty pessimistic.*

NOLTING: It surprised me very much, because Ruf Phillips was one of the most can-do members of our mission out there. He came late. He had been only six months or so out there.

*Q: Of course, he had been there earlier, had he not?*

NOLTING: I believe he had been there earlier, but my overlapping with him was only maybe six months or a year. He was a very, I thought, good and effective member of the AID. And his pessimistic testimony in one of these NSC meetings surprised the hell out of me. I couldn't believe my ears. Similarly John Mecklin's. I could understand John because

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he had been brainwashed by his roommates, David Halberstam and—what's the other fellow's name?

*Q: Neil Sheehan.*

NOLTING: Neil Sheehan. And also he was discouraged and disillusioned because his wife left him out there and so forth. But I was surprised by Ruf Phillips. I've seen him since and I've asked him, and he said, "Oh, did I go that far?" and I said, "You just ruined it,"

*Q: Did you ever come to a reconciliation of why he testified? You had no inkling I gather that this was coming?*

NOLTING: No, I didn't.

*Q: What did he say? What was the burden of his remark?*

NOLTING: I can't remember fully, but I think the essence was that the economic aid was not taking hold,, the people were not getting the benefits of all this effort and money, and our side was losing the struggle.

*Q: Didn't he have something to do with strategic hamlets? Wasn't he very deeply involved in that?*

NOLTING: I think so, from the point of view of supplying materials, barbed wire and roofing for the houses and so forth.

*Q: Did he have anything to say about that program that you recall?*

NOLTING: You know, it would be reaching into my memory. I think now that you've suggested it, he did. My impression is he did say the strategic hamlet program was a failure, or words to that effect.

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Q: *That's pretty strong.*

NOLTING: I'm not sure. You'd better get it from Ruf.

Q: *All right.*

To paraphrase story after story that appeared in the press and sometimes, many times perhaps, from military advisers in the field, if I can paraphrase it, why aren't our Vietnamese as good as their Vietnamese?

NOLTING: Yes.

Q: *What is your reaction to that statement?*

NOLTING: I think they were as good. Now, I wasn't in the battles as you were, later on, and I don't know what your opinion or others who were—

Q: *My opinion is unimportant.*

NOLTING: —who had them on the flanks. That's what's important. But, you know, I think in counting them up, there were as many good battles, instances of heroic and successful military actions in which the South Vietnamese were successful, as there were debacles like Ap Bac, which we have mentioned earlier. I think, maybe I'm prejudiced on the subject, but I think it was the disastrous ones, the bad ones from our point of view, which hit the headlines, and very seldom the good ones. Or if they did, they weren't featured because, why, we expected to be winners. We didn't expect setbacks, even from our allies at a time when we were not engaged as combatants.

Q: *What about the accusations that were being made that too many operations were being launched to avoid contact rather than make contact? You heard a lot of that, too.*

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NOLTING: I did. I don't think it was true. We mentioned earlier trying to avoid casualties, trying to avoid the killing of innocent people, while you're trying to root out the terrorists. This was a strong feeling which we promoted in the mission out there, which our government promoted through us. It was certainly shared by President Diemand members of his cabinet. In some cases, he had to reprimand his generals for attacking villages which were *comme ci, comme ca* with respect to their allegiance. We had to limit—and I remember having personally to pass on this—the weight and number of bombs to be dropped on any target. These were bombs that we had supplied the Vietnamese Air Force, mostly for their T-23s. I think they were two hundred and fifty pounders, and they could do considerable damage to a Vietnamese village, as you know. Whenever they took off on a bombing sortie, it was cleared through us as to where they were going and where they were going to drop for this very reason, that we didn't want to put the fence sitters on the side of the Viet Cong.

*Q: The advisers in the field probably objected to the delays that would be attendant upon that kind of a process, wouldn't they?*

NOLTING: I suppose so. I wouldn't be surprised. But I don't remember there being many delays. It wasn't a complicated process. For that matter, there weren't that many T-23s and there weren't that many bombs. But we did try, and so did the central Vietnamese government try to limit the amount of bombing. In certain cases there were free drop zones where if they were overloaded or had to get rid of their bombs they could drop them. These were wooded forest areas. This rule was put in because on several occasions in trying to get home on a little bit of gas, they'd drop bombs and sometimes they'd hit an innocent village. It was nobody's fault, but it had to be cured, and the way to cure that was to say you can only drop them in these free zones.

*Q: Right. Did President Johnson ever discuss any of this, anything regarding Vietnam with you after he assumed the presidency?*

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NOLTING: After he assumed the presidency, I wrote President Johnson a letter or two the purport of which was to say, "Mr. President, you have inherited a situation which I regard as a political vacuum in Vietnam. That is to say I don't predict any good things for the military junta as political leaders. And if that judgment is correct, then I would hope that you would not get too close to or embrace any of the military leaders." I saw him once or twice after that, and once I recall particularly, which was at the time of General Harkins' return when we were invited by President Johnson to come for some medal that he gave Harkins.

*Q: This would have been the summer of 1964, I guess.*

NOLTING: Yes. I remember his saying to me then, "I had your letter and I agree with you." But what had happened in the meantime was that McNamara had gone out and given great hugs to everybody from Big [Duong Van] Minh to General [Nguyen] Khanh, and that had sort of set the pattern, it seemed to me. One thing I'd like to ask you. Can I?

*Q: Yes, sir.*

NOLTING: I never understood, as much as I agreed with and admired Johnson's views with respect to Vietnam in the early days when he was vice president—and I'm not talking about later on, because I had nothing to do with that and no inside information. But his views up to the time that he inherited the presidency I thought were good, sound, and well advised. They did not prevail with Kennedy so far as the overthrow of the Vietnam government was concerned. Kennedy went the other way, or his advisers took the bit in their teeth and went the other way, whichever way you want to put it. But anyway, Johnson was against that.

Then after the coup in Vietnam, he inherited the presidency, and a lot of things occurred which I don't understand. Not in chronological order, but the one I understand least is his reappointment of Cabot Lodge as ambassador after Lodge's first term of about eight

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months and his return to the Republican National Convention, in which I think he hoped to be nominated. The only explanation I have for that is that President Johnson wanted, as maybe President Kennedy wanted also, to have a good thick piece of Republican asbestos to shield him from Republican heat. Can you tell me whether that's true or not?

*Q: I believe it. Yes.*

NOLTING: And maybe because he thought that the man who had been instrumental in putting the generals in power could deal with them.

*Q: I can't say that I can confirm that from what I have seen, but it certainly sounds plausible. (Interruption) All right, sir, go ahead.*

NOLTING: I would like it on the record that from my point of view, Vice President Johnson, both in his visit to Vietnam in early 1961 and in the other meetings that we had in 1963 in the NSC on the subject of the withdrawal of American support from the Diem government, I thought Vice President Johnson was absolutely right. I thought his judgment was sound. Like all of us, he was not completely satisfied with the way things were going in Vietnam, but he judged that it was better to keep on the course that we were on than to jump from the frying pan to the fire. And the frying pan was cooling; it was getting better rather than worse, in my opinion.

Therefore, when he inherited the political vacuum created in South Vietnam by the overthrow of the constitutional government and the immediately deteriorating situation, with the strategic hamlets beginning to be wiped out, with the province chiefs not knowing what to do, with everybody getting cross signals from the military junta, with disillusionment in particular in the countryside because of the overthrow and because of their respect for President Diem, when he inherited this mess, what I can't understand is why he didn't do something about the advisers of President Kennedy who had created it. They were principally Averell Harriman, whom he kept on, Cabot Lodge, whom he not only kept on but reappointed to the ambassadorship out there. [I can't understand] why

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he didn't insist that Dean Rusk get into the act earlier and have the State Department take some positive remedial steps if possible. In other words, why he carried on with the old team when it was perfectly obvious to me and from what he said to me that he didn't approve of their previous actions? This I don't understand, and this is why I could never feel in my innermost bones that we were going to be successful in Vietnam, after the coup. It seemed to me that there was a certain poetic justice in this thing; that we had an albatross that we never shed. It would have been possible for President Johnson to say we made a mistake, we should never have done this, but now we're in it we're going to see it through. That would have been one possibility. That to me would have cleared up my doubts and misgivings and I think would have had a lot to do with American public opinion, and I know it would have had a lot to do with Vietnamese morale.

You asked a while ago about the rejoicing in the streets in Saigon after the overthrow and the assassinations. That didn't last long. There's now, or there was before Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City, a large and growing body of public opinion in South Vietnam who really venerated President Diem.

*Q: What is your source for that, if I may ask?*

NOLTING: A number of articles that I've read and correspondence with Vietnamese friends.

In other words, there was a possibility, I think, of our cutting this albatross off of our necks. I don't understand why President Johnson tried to bull it through the way he did on that score, which is a psychological-sociological-political point. Nor do I understand why he tried to bull it through in undeclared, limited war, unfinanced by taxes. Those are the questions that linger in my mind. But on the question which is to my mind important to history because there is such a blank with respect to it, that is the influences which brought about the American government's complicity in the overthrow of President Diem, Lyndon

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Johnson was absolutely right, and it's extremely ironic in my view that he should have inherited this tremendous blunder of his predecessor.

*Q: That's very well said.*

End of interview