

Interview with Rufus C. Phillips II

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

RUFUS C. PHILLIPS, III

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: July 19, 1995

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Q: Today is July 19, 1995. This is an interview with Rufus C. Phillips, III. We are interviewing in McLean, Virginia and this is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Can we start with when and where were you born?

PHILLIPS: I was born in Middletown, Ohio on August 10, 1929.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

PHILLIPS: Yes. My father came from Ohio. My grandfather was a co-founder of Armco Steel and my father had resisted going into Armco so he became a stockbroker in New York. In the depression he lost all of his money on the stock market so we moved when I was about two, about 1931, down to Virginia to a place that was in my mother's family, and had been since about 1815, called Gravel Hill, which is near Appomattox. That is where I grew up. Even though I was born in Ohio, I really grew up in rural Virginia.

Q: Where did you go to school?

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PHILLIPS: I went to Yale. Two of my uncles had gone to Yale. First I went to a prep school in Virginia because the schools weren't very good in Charlotte County, and that was Woodberry Forest. I entered Yale in the fall of 1947, graduated in 1951.

Q: What sort of courses were you taking at Yale?

PHILLIPS: I took American history and psychology.

Q: I was at Williams taking essentially Civil War history at just about that same time. While you were at Yale these were exciting times. The war was just over, the UN was getting into place and the Marshall Plan, etc., were you picking up any ideas about...?

PHILLIPS: Well, I think half of our class were veterans and I think we were all influenced very, very strongly by World War II and the growing Cold War. And, of course, in the summer of 1950, the North Koreans invaded the South. I remember a group of us talking about how we felt about this as if we ought to do something. Of course, we were in school and wanted to finish. In the spring of 1950 a number of us were contacted by a CIA recruiter. CIA was recruiting people because there was a feeling that maybe the balloon was going to go up in Europe and we would be back in a replay of World War II. The general question was, "would we be willing to jump behind enemy lines?" The answer, I think, for most of us was, "yes." A group of my class and very close friends went directly into paramilitary training in the Agency. I did not. My father persuaded me to try law school, which I did for a half a year and got bored.

In the meantime, a friend of mine had gone through paramilitary training and had actually gone over to Korea and subsequently was lost over Manchuria. His name was Jack Downey.

Q: Jack Downey's name came up yesterday in an interview I was doing with Chas Freeman who said he was in law school with him when he came back after 19 years.

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PHILLIPS: I was a fraternity brother of Jack. I was, if not his closest friend, one of his closest friends. When that happened I just felt that I should get out of law school. I took up an offer of Agency recruitment and went into paramilitary training myself in the summer of 1952. I was supposed to go to Europe, but there was a big training operation there of emigres and the whole training base was blown, so I had no particular assignment. I decided to go into the US Army, volunteer, go through OCS. The Agency had an arrangement whereby they said I could be picked up again, detailed back to the Agency as a military officer, although there was no guarantee.

I went through basic training at Indiantown Gap, and then through OCS in the summer of 1953. I was assigned to Korea and went there in 1954. It was from Korea that I got picked up and reassigned to Ed Lansdale's operation in Vietnam in the American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG).

Q: I take it you weren't in Korea very long.

PHILLIPS: I was in Korea for three or four months.

Q: At that time the war was still on...

PHILLIPS: No, the war was over.

Q: You said you were assigned to Ed Lansdale's operation. Could you explain who he was and what you did?

PHILLIPS: He had been sent to Vietnam. When he was in the Philippines acting as an advisor to Magsaysay, he had been asked to go over and take a look at Vietnam. Of course, all of this is in his autobiography. He went around with the French and looked at the guerrilla situation there. When the Geneva Conference took place in 1954, he was called back to Washington and asked if he would be willing to go to Vietnam. So he did as Chief of what was called the Saigon Military Mission. The Agency had two local stations.

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One station was a normal station inside the embassy, and the other was a special group in the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). General O'Daniel was commander of MAAG. He had just been assigned out there. Lansdale had requested some help and the Agency scoured the Far East for anybody who was in uniform. Some reservists were put back in uniform. He got a whole group of people there, none of whom were particularly suited for what he wanted them for, except for the then Major Lucien Conein, who had been in the OSS, had been in Vietnam, had both a paramilitary background and Vietnam experience. The rest of us, by and large, were people who had had some paramilitary training, which wasn't really what he needed at that point because there wasn't going to be a war. He put some of us into an entirely different role. I was assigned to begin to work with a Vietnamese Army psychological routine unit, which was a combination psy-war company and troop information unit. That is what I began to do. Just about everything I did out there was an overt rather than covert activity.

Q: You must have been sitting down and reading the book trying to keep one chapter ahead of the book?

PHILLIPS: Well, I remember when he told me that he wanted me to work with the Vietnamese psychological warfare unit, I said, "I don't know anything about psychological warfare." He reached into his bookcase and threw me this book by Paul Linebarger, which was THE book written on psychological warfare after World War II and said, "Here, read this."

Q: Before we move on, how did you see Lansdale's operation and how did it fit into the mission there?

PHILLIPS: He had a very broad charter. It was literally, "Ed, do what you can to save South Vietnam." In my opinion, he was a real political genius in terms of conceptualizing what might pull South Vietnam together. It is hard now, I think, to realize what South Vietnam was like then. The French had just lost the war and were completely discouraged.

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The South Vietnamese had been excluded from the negotiations. Diem had just been appointed by Emperor Bao Dai as Prime Minister. He had come to Saigon and found that he didn't even control his own palace guard who belonged to the Binh Xuyen who were a gangster sect in Saigon. They had actually bought control of the police force from Bao Dai. So you had the Binh Xuyen who were riding around in uniforms patrolling the streets of Saigon, who were the police, but who also controlled all of the gambling, vice and the opium trade. The army was commanded by a General Hinh who held the rank of brigadier general in the French Air Force. He was Vietnamese, but very susceptible to French influence. The French establishment resented Diem because he had always refused to cooperate with the French and was known to be anti-French. They wanted to maintain their control over the way things were being run. They tried to do this through the Binh Xuyen. Initially they tried through the army, where they had some real influence with General Hinh.

The other thing that was really complicating things was that there were so many refugees coming out of North Vietnam who had to be resettled. The government was completely disorganized. The French had never given it much responsibility. It was a facade of a government. The French controlled all the gasoline supplies for the Vietnamese Army, for example. Most of the logistics for the Army had been provided by the French. All of a sudden after Geneva, the Vietnamese were nominally in control but had little or no means, and certainly no experience, in actually accomplishing the tasks of government.

Ed tried to help the Vietnamese attack their problems on a number of fronts. One was to help them organize and set up some kind of a special commission to handle the refugee problem. Through MAAG, we were able to get special CAT (Civil Air Transport) flights and the Navy participated in moving these refugees. We were able to get supplies in and to help the Vietnamese build refugee camps. MAAG was very effectively involved in that. There was a volunteer medical operation called Operation Brotherhood which provided

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a lot of Filipino doctors who came in and took care of many of the refugees. Operation Brotherhood was a combined brain child of Lansdale and of a group of Filipinos.

Another problem was that the Viet Minh were scheduled to evacuate areas in the South that they controlled and move at least their regular troops back up north. The question was, "Is there anything to fill this vacuum?" Lansdale saw that a plan was needed on the Vietnamese side which the Americans could support both with tangible economic aid and military assistance to reoccupy these areas and to reestablish government. So that became what we called the National Security Action Program. We helped draft and Diem promulgated a National Security Act whereby the Vietnamese Army was put in charge of these areas for a certain period of time. Eventually they would become civilian areas.

So, these operations, using elements of the nascent Vietnamese Army, had to be mobilized, organized, trained and then deployed to reoccupy various areas. One of the real problems was a psychological one with the Vietnamese. They didn't think they could do anything, because they had never been allowed to do anything on their own. They had very little self-confidence. They had never really organized anything themselves, being used to the French telling them what to do or doing things for them.

One of the ideas that Ed came up with was to use the Philippines as a way of generating self-confidence in the Vietnamese and giving them ideas about what they could do and how they could address some of their problems. In September 1954, we got a group of younger Vietnamese together who came from a couple of ministries, from General Hinh's staff and from the presidential palace to go over in a group to the Philippines to see what Magsaysay was doing, and how they had dealt with the Communist Huk problem, not only militarily but mainly in a civilian way. And also how they were resettling the Hukbalahaps, the communists, who had surrendered.

I took this group over as their escort. This was rather a unique experience because I didn't know anything really about what had been happening in the Philippines. It was

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very exciting for me personally, and I think very exciting for the Vietnamese, because we saw, contrary to communist propaganda, that in fact the Filipinos were running their own affairs. They were responsible for all of these operations, not the Americans. I think the Vietnamese picked up both ideas and a lot of confidence out of that. We were able to bring some Filipino advisors to Vietnam later to help them. The head of the Philippine presidential guard battalion, Colonel Valeriano, came over to help Diem organize his own security force and get rid of his Binh Xuyen guards.

In addition, of course, there was the whole political situation. All of the political parties in Vietnam were basically underground parties. They had never been out in the open, never worked with each other. They had lived a clandestine existence because the French had tried to eliminate them and, of course, in the post-war struggles the Viet Minh had tried to eliminate them and in fact did eliminate a number of their members. So, everybody relied on secrecy and nobody was used to dealing with each other out in the open. It was very difficult for them to do. The standard feeling they had about each other, unless they knew someone almost from childhood, was automatic distrust. Yet they had to begin to work together. Lansdale got involved in trying to get Diem together with a number of local leaders and personalities. Most successful was his helping Diem to achieve a relationship with Trinh Minh The, who was a dissident Cao Dai leader who was widely respected because he had fought both the French and the Viet Minh. His troops were brought into the Vietnamese army as sort of an auxilliary force. This helped tip the balance between various quasi-religious and religious sects of which there were the Binh Xuyen, who weren't religious at all, the Cao Dai, who were religious but who were divided into factions, and the Hoa Hao who were another Buddhist offshoot, further down in the Delta, who also had two dissident factions. The French had paid and subsidized a number of troops which came from the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao and had some control over various factions. So, it was a struggle between Diem trying to line up some of the cleaner elements and the French maneuvering other elements and the whole natural scene of mutual suspicion.

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It was very, very difficult to try to keep some semblance of government going in South Vietnam during this period.

Also, I should mention that General Hinh was himself involved in trying to pull off a coup against Diem. It eventually aborted, and he left the country going into exile in France, because the Americans wouldn't support him.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the United States had come in to be the big brother at that point?

PHILLIPS: No, not really. We had come in, but you have to remember that we came in very small numbers. I guess you could say that we wielded an influence which was disproportionate to our numbers, but most of the Vietnamese, regardless whether they supported Diem or not, wanted the French out of power. This was the real struggle that went on between nationalist Vietnamese all of whom supported Diem in that part of what he was trying to do, and other elements who still felt primary allegiance to Bao Dai or to the French, either because they were directly on the payroll or were influenced by the French colonialist element which was still in defacto control in this French establishment in Vietnam. When Diem succeeded in overcoming the Binh Xuyen in the spring of 1955, he became immensely popular in South Vietnam because he inherited the nationalist mantle as the person who succeeded in getting the French all the way out of Vietnam. Well, this of course put the Americans in a rather difficult position. We were working at the time in a joint military mission called TRIM which was headed by General O'Daniel, but had a French deputy commander. The idea was to combine the French and the American military missions. In this way the Americans would have some ability to get at the training of the Vietnamese. Before that the American military advisory group was the military advisory group to the French, not to the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese were a subsidiary element of the French army. Once Diem came, of course, the situation changed. General O'Daniel and the US as a whole wanted to have some direct influence and contact with the Vietnamese. The way, at least initially, was through a joint military mission. The problem

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was, of course, that there was a lot of dissention inside of the military mission. It was funny in a way. What was called the National Security Division of TRIM, was set up to assist Vietnamese national security operations, which were basically reoccupations of territory by the Vietnamese army. Lansdale was the head of it. He had a deputy called Romaine Des-Fosses, who was a very nice person, very decent, who had been in Vietnam 17 years. Under Des-Fosses, there was a group of French intelligence officers whose job was to do nothing but to watch us. So it was really a bit strange. I didn't spend too much time at headquarters because by October, November, 1954, I was already down in Soc Trang, with some elements of the Vietnamese army, who were then forming to go in and reoccupy the Ca Mau peninsula, the far south of South Vietnam. So, I spent most of my time out in the field.

Q: One person you haven't mentioned is the ambassador. Who was our ambassador at that time?

PHILLIPS: It was Donald Heath, who was replaced in 1955 by Frederick Reinhardt.

Q: These were both Europeanists.

PHILLIPS: Well, Heath was but he had a lot of sensitivity and feeling for the Vietnamese. He had very good relations with the French, but he, I think, was very perceptive and actually quite sympathetic to what Lansdale was trying to do. It was a very, very difficult period because the French were our allies in Europe. It started out being a European driven policy basically and I think that is why we came, as much as anything, to the aid of the French in the early years of the Indochina war. Then all of a sudden we found ourselves at loggerheads with them during the 1954-55 period. It was rather painful.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about your impression of the group of South Vietnamese you were working with?

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PHILLIPS: I worked with a variety of people. I worked with a number of the military, some of whom had been Viet Minh earlier and then had come into the Vietnamese army having abandoned the Viet Minh cause. Some of them had been trained by the French from the very beginning as officers. So they were a mixed group. I found a number of very intelligent, very, very dedicated people. Probably the most capable officer I worked with was Le Van Kim, who was then a colonel. He was in fact the Army Chief of Staff. He had actually grown up in France, although he was completely Vietnamese, and had been trained by the French. At the beginning of World War II, after France fell he was interned and then was eventually repatriated to South Vietnam. There later he joined the nascent Vietnamese army when the French decided to put Bao Dai back on the throne and create a government in South Vietnam. He was an intellectual, extremely bright and a very, very able army officer.

I spent a lot of time with Kim and became the liaison between TRIM and a two division operation which he was in charge of to reoccupy InterInnerzone V in Central Vietnam. InterInnerzone V stretched from the southern part of Quang Ngai down to town of Qui Nhon, so it was all of Binh Dinh Province and about half of Quang Ngai Province. This was a zone that the Viet Minh had controlled for about nine years. The French at one point had invaded the area in something called Operation Atlante for about six months. They had brought some Vietnamese units with them and made some inroads but then left. So, really the area had enjoyed almost uninterrupted Viet Minh rule for nine years. It was kind of a sanctuary. The Viet Minh had agreed, as a result of Geneva, to pull their regular troops out of this, and other zones, and to leave sections of InterInnerzone V beginning in the north and going south in successive stages. So the Vietnamese, under their national security directive, organized a force to go in and reoccupy that area, using some lessons learned from the reoccupation of Ca Mau for which the troops had not been very well prepared. In the case of this operation, Kim set up education and indoctrination classes for all of the troops in terms of how to deal with the civilian population and what to do, which actually resulted in a very successful reoccupation. There were two divisions of troops who went

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in. It took about six weeks to progressively occupy the entire area from north to south. During that time there was not one single incident between a civilian and Vietnamese soldiers. The Army's morale was extremely high. It was interesting, the attitude of the civilian population. They had been told by the Viet Minh that the Vietnamese army troops were going to come in and rape and pillage. But when it became apparent that they were not going to do that, that they weren't stealing anything, and that in fact they were helping people by rebuilding bridges and so on, the attitude of the population changed. The operation started to generate a lot of enthusiasm. Part of that was because frankly a lot of the people were tired; the Viet Minh occupation had been very, very hard on them. They had been deprived of medical supplies and the Viet Minh way of running things was pretty heavy-handed. So, we got a tremendous psychological boost out of this operation. About a week or ten days after it was finished, President Diem came up to Qui Nhon, I have photographs of this, and had a tremendous reception. A really enthusiastic crowd of people greeted him there. Part of it was because the word by that time was spreading throughout South Vietnam, that he was defying the French and defeating the Binh Xuyen.

One of the things back then was that the American presence was very, very minimal. When I went out in the field I went out in civilian clothes. I did not go in military uniform. If I was asked, I was just there as an observer. I was not an advisor. It was all very low key. I think those of us who really knew the Vietnamese understood how important that was. This was something we didn't understand later on, certainly not at the top, that it had to be the Vietnamese doing things for themselves. Otherwise our side was not a viable alternative to the Viet Minh, who played on Vietnamese nationalism.

Q: What was the feeling when you were there in 1954? Was it that the Viet Minh or communists were out of South Vietnam and just a matter of reestablishing the government or were they getting ready for another round?

PHILLIPS: We knew that they had left a stay-behind cadre. We knew, in the case of Binh Dinh, that they actually forcibly evacuated about 14,000 young men between the ages of

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about 10-14—just took them right out of their families and that they had given orders to their soldiers to try to marry as much of the female population as they could and possibly conceive a child before they left. Those were the instructions. We knew that there was a network left behind, that there was going to be a coming struggle at that level as to who was going to control the rural areas and basically the rural population of Vietnam. I don't think any of us had any illusions about that. I don't think this was universally perceived or adequately appreciated. Certainly the economic aid mission policy became focused on development in the cities, on trying to industrialize South Vietnam so they could start import substitution.

One of the persons I worked with a little later in 1955-56 was a guy named Kieu Cong Cung who was a very interesting person. He had become a Brigadier General in the Viet Minh army, was one of two or three leaders who led the early resistance in the south against the French and the British, when the Viet Minh broke out of Saigon and went into armed rebellion. But he never joined the communist party. About 1953, he was in North Vietnam and because he refused to join the party the Viet Minh were about to arrest him. So he and his wife and an infant child fled, walking all the way from practically on the Chinese border of North Vietnam to South Vietnam evading the Viet Minh all the way. Evading the French, too, of course. Then, he had settled on a farm in South Vietnam and did nothing for the remaining period of the war against the French until Diem came. At that point he surfaced and volunteered to go to work for Diem. Diem wanted him to develop a group of younger people to go out and work in the villages. The idea was a village self-help program. We called it civil action, the Vietnamese had a different name for it. So he was given some support and a fairly free hand to start recruiting people.

We asked the aid mission if they would provide support and not only that, Diem asked them for community development advisors. The aid (ICA) program didn't want to have anything to do with this operation. Ed argued with Ambassador Reinhardt about it pointing out that there was a vacuum in the rural areas which needed to be filled and that this was critical to the future of South Vietnam. The Vietnamese had to carry their program largely

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on their own, unfortunately without much tangible assistance. Eventually, Civic Action became more of a propaganda operation than one of tangible assistance to people. A type of communist denouement operation. If it had had some real economic assistance attached to it, I think it would have helped to stem the communist insurgency which started up again.

Q: What was your role in this?

PHILLIPS: I was gradually given more and more responsibility because I was able to work with the Vietnamese. I became in effect, first as a second lieutenant and eventually as a first lieutenant, the only contact between the Military Assistance Advisory Group and two divisions of the Vietnamese army in the InterInnerzone V reoccupation. I held an advisory role which later would have been occupied by a US brigadier general. After that I was given a series of responsibilities. One of them was to assist in the reorganization of the Vietnamese army and to set up what was called a G-5 bureau in the army, both at the general staff level and on down. The other was to help Cung organize Civic Action.

Q: G-5 in military parlance would be what?

PHILLIPS: Psychological warfare and troop education. I worked on that, setting up training courses in psychological warfare having learned, I suppose, a fair amount about it. I also acted as an informal advisor from Ed's shop to Civic Action in terms of how it was being set up. Initially we were able to get some Agency funds to help get it started. We wanted to turn the thing over to the economic aid program as I said previously, but they weren't having any of it. I continued to do things like that. I was very close to Nguyen Dinh Thuan, who was in the secretariat at the presidency, and eventually became the Secretary of Defense in 1961. I did a lot of odd jobs which were almost all overt. The only really covert activity I got engaged in—this has been pretty well written up—was a psy-war effort against the Viet Minh. One of our people had been working with a VNQDD journalist and writer. The VNQDD was the oldest nationalist political paper in Vietnam. They had been

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decimated by the communists when the communists assassinated a lot of political leaders in the North. That journalist was an interesting guy. He was what you might call a “bomb thrower.” His idea was, “give me a gun and I will go shoot some Viet Minh and failing that maybe I can go shoot some French.” He was a good writer too. Lansdale had the idea that if we could find a good Vietnamese writer, maybe we could write something like Tom Paine's “Common Sense,” but for the Vietnamese. This was to try to give them an idea of a political cause they could rally around. What was the South's political cause? What kind of rally cry could they, would they respond to? He (the VNQDD writer) did turn out a piece which had some success in this regard.

Later I learned from him that he had a lot of friends who were astrologers in South Vietnam, and of course astrology is very, very influential there. I suppose this was the most unique thing that I did in South Vietnam. I started working with him to put out an astrological magazine for the 1955 Vietnamese New Year in which we would give some predictions from Vietnamese astrologers that would be in Diem's favor and against the Communists. He did a heck of a job on this thing. It was sold out in two printings and we got back more money than we put into it. So, I worked with him on that, but it was a sideline.

Q: Did you find yourself as you were getting this on-the-job-training that the Vietnamese did not want to do things the French way no matter what?

PHILLIPS: I think our attempt was to try to elicit from the Vietnamese what was their way. In other words, let's say we knew that one of the big problems was that government had to be restored to an area. We looked at what the French experience had been, what the Vietnamese experience had been and then we had a dialogue with the Vietnamese to try to get them talking about their own ideas. I suppose what came out was sort of a melange of ideas which we helped to organize. In other words how do you organize an activity and staff it with Vietnamese ideas of what to do practically on the ground, what do you say to people, how do you get popular support, etc. We couldn't supply these answers, they

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had to supply them. I think the process was a common one but it was one in which the Vietnamese felt that results were their ideas and not our ideas. We weren't there trying to sell American ideas.

Q: When you were up in what we called II Corps did you get involved in the working with the Montagnards?

PHILLIPS: No, I didn't have much to do with the Montagnards in those days because inner zone V was all along the coast. Later in 1962-63 I had some contact with the Montagnards. The Montagnards were basically not very sympathetic to the Viet Minh. The French had been fairly effective in working with them, mainly because the French liked to play the Montagnards off against the Vietnamese and vice versa. So, the situation with the Montagnards was that there really was not a lot of Montagnard support for the Vietnamese on either side. They were more of a passive group.

Q: How did our MAAG mission under General O'Daniel operate and did you have any contact with him?

PHILLIPS: First of all there was this joint military mission, TRIM. That was an uneasy relationship with the French. O'Daniel wanted to try to help the Vietnamese army with logistical support in terms of these reoccupation operations, in terms of help in settling the refugees. He was able, I think, to do that and he wanted to begin to do some training with the army. He was able to start some training programs. Then he left in 1956 while the Vietnamese army was still a territorial force. The decision was made when General Williams came, at the beginning of 1956, that the Vietnamese army was to be converted to a conventional army to oppose an invasion from the North. Lansdale didn't think, and I don't think any of us who had been out on the ground thought, that this was the right idea. I think this policy was driven from the point of view that the US didn't want to have our forces being a blocking force in case there was an invasion from the North. So, therefore, we had to train the Vietnamese army to fulfill this function. Unfortunately it took them

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away from their territorial role in which they had been placed as a result of the pacification program and as a result of successful operations against the Hoa Hao, some of the Cao Dai and the Binh Xuyen. We were not happy about it. However, that became US policy.

What happened then was that we left a vacuum out in the countryside. The civil guard was supposed to fill this vacuum but it didn't. At least we had the army dispersed and it was pretty local and had more discipline than anybody else did. It could, I think, have been converted into an effective local defense force—not purely local, but one with which you could insure both local and general security against larger forces. Instead, they were pulled out and formed into divisions and positioned (to a considerable extent towards) the 17th Parallel. That was another error in my opinion and our opinion at the time, the way we tackled that problem. The US just didn't see the security problem in South Vietnam clearly. I think that distorted some of what we wound up doing. Other considerations were driving what we were doing.

Q: You stayed there this first time until when?

PHILLIPS: I was there until November, 1955. I got out of the Army and went back as a civilian with the CIA in 1956.

Q: Was this again dealing with Vietnam?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

Q: Did you find when you got back home that there was too much theory and not enough practical experience? When you came back you must have been one of the few people who had had field experience.

PHILLIPS: There were still a lot of things that were going on. Vietnam was adopting a constitution, they were going to have elections, Operation Brotherhood was still there out in the countryside, the Vietnamese army did need some reorganization but not the one

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it got. So, I went back to be a part of that. One of my jobs was to try to get Civic Action turned over to our regular aid agency, because the basic idea behind Saigon Military Mission was that it was something temporary to deal with an emergency and that the regular US establishment ought to take over. But I don't think, with all due respect, that the regular US establishment was very attuned to the situation. Everybody was coming with their own particular program and point of view and you were dealing still with a pretty revolutionary situation there. You had a national government which still didn't have any effective government out in the countryside. Diem was criticized for abolishing the system of elected village chiefs. His idea was that these would be replaced by future elected village chiefs, but in the meantime there would be a reorganization and some civic action at the village level to try to push the communists aside and encourage popular support.

Q: Had things by the time you left in 1956 been more or less turned over to the civilian agency at that time equivalent to AID?

PHILLIPS: There were a number of developments which were not very heartening and I think which reflected a kind of made-in-Washington conceptual approach. It wasn't just that we were reorganizing the army with very little thought, except in theory about how to provide security in the countryside. I mean, if the Civil Guard had been trained and ready and had taken over this function, and then the army had been withdrawn and retrained in units, it might have made some sense. But there was no transition. So the Civil Guard never got on its feet and became the subject of a lot of wrangling, which you probably have heard about from other people, between USAID (the Michigan State people) and General Williams as to who was going to train them, etc. Well, the fact is they never really got put on their feet and never got trained and therefore there was a vacuum out in the countryside. So far as any real community development effort at the village level this was another vacuum which was not filled. I think that the US had an opportunity, and Diem had invited us in, to participate in this thing, to have community development advisers involved in this thing, but we didn't take him up on it. Gradually Civic Action became more purely political in nature. The mistake that was made was really a political one. The decision

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was made: "Okay Diem is in power and let's just support him in whatever he wants us to do." There was a decision made to fund through the CIA the Can Lao party which was a secret political party put together by Diem's brother Nhu to provide support for Diem. The feeling was that you couldn't trust all these other Vietnamese so the way to go about this was to set up your own secret political party, recruit members into it and think that this was going to provide the basis of support for Diem. Everybody had to swear loyalty to Diem. Lansdale fought this. We fought it in regard to the army. I got involved when we found out that Nhu wanted to put the Can Lao into G-5. We brought it to General Williams and he talked to Diem about it. Nhu hadn't said anything to Diem about it and it became quite an argument and they didn't do it, not at least while we were there. So what happened? Well, a lot of the other political parties, the Army and other religious groups were alienated by this process. Lansdale argued with Diem about it, but the US was giving the money so this was what happened.

What happened was that instead of a unifying political process, you had a divisive process which was very ill-suited to the situation in South Vietnam. It was a lousy decision. Then, when the decision got called into question later on, the Agency withdrew its support which created a problem of confidence between Diem and the Americans.

Q: When you were in Washington did anybody really talk to you about it?

PHILLIPS: I remember talking about Civic Action to the coordinating body of the National Security Council about Vietnamese army and Civic Action in South Vietnam for about an hour. But that is the only time I had any real contact with who, you might say, were policy makers. Of course, I was a pretty junior guy. I know that Lansdale had plenty of discussions at a very high level. I think he personally argued with both Dulles brothers about the Can Lao decision. Basically the policy became one of a very conventional approach on the aid and military front, and was to build up a personal political party for Diem on the political front. I think these efforts went awry. If you look at some of the decisions that were made, for example, on the constitution. Lansdale got involved and got

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a constitutional expert from the Philippines to come over to help the Vietnamese write their constitution. He wanted to have some checks and balances in the way the government was set up. There were two arguments used against this. One was that it would make Diem less effective and make it very difficult for him to run the government. The other was that it was just transferring an American idea to Vietnam. I remember a lot of discussion about this but it wasn't just transferring an American idea. I know from some discussions with Lansdale personally that he felt that the Vietnamese would never learn how to run a modern government in even a semi-democratic way unless they had to deal with people, unless they had to deal with a supreme court, unless they had to deal with a legislature. Then they would learn how to compromise and how to talk to each other and how to negotiate. But if left to their own devices, it didn't make any difference if it was Diem or some other Vietnamese, the only tradition they had ever had was autocratic, secret, and revolutionary and this was the way they were likely to behave. They would fall back on what was familiar to them.

I think again we missed the boat. We became obsessed with, "Let's get on with it. Diem is our man and everything is stable. We just have to back him and get the economic aid program going, get the army ready to confront the North Vietnamese at the 17th Parallel and we have the problem solved." But the problems were a lot more complex than that. It seems to me, and I don't want to speak just from the benefit of hindsight, that if you looked at the history of Ho Chi Minh and the whole Vietnamese communist movement one should have known that this was going to be a never ending struggle, that they were going to be back and in the same way they worked before which was to start from a rural base. So, it seems to me that what was going to happen there was fairly predictable in terms of what you were going to be facing.

Q: In these oral histories I want to stick to you. So you were back in Washington dealing in Vietnamese affairs?

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PHILLIPS: Yes, but very limited. I would talk to some people in the Agency and got some exposure to the staff elements of the National Security Council. But then I went right back out again.

Q: When did you go out again?

PHILLIPS: I went out in January, 1956 having returned to Washington in November, 1955.

Q: And you were there for how long?

PHILLIPS: I was there until November, 1956.

Q: What were you doing there?

PHILLIPS: I was in a variety of roles. I was helping Civic Action get organized and recruiting people and trying to see if I couldn't get the economic aid mission involved in Civic Action. I was involved in the reorganization of the Vietnamese Army, and the formation of the G-5 organization. I wrote the staff plan for that. I arranged for some training for the South Vietnamese. I helped a Vietnamese friend of mine who subsequently became Vietnamese Ambassador to the US, Bui Diem, who was a Dai Viet, get some money to make a motion picture. I acted as sort of a catalyst in that process. Bui Diem had come up with the idea of making South Vietnam's first premiere movie, which was going to be about a Viet Minh captain who defected because his parents were caught in the land reform of 1953-55 (which actually occurred) in North Vietnam. Some of the story was pieced out of actual events and some of it was made up. Somebody had written a book about this and he wanted to make it into a movie script. I prevailed on Charlie Mertz, who was head of USIS's film unit, to provide some film raw stock. I talked to the Acting Secretary of Defense, Thuan, and persuaded him to put up some Vietnamese money for the movie. I helped Bui Diem assemble the necessary support and he produced the movie. The sad part of it was that after the movie was produced and it was all set for the premiere, Nhu found out that the guys who were mainly responsible for producing it were

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Dai Viets and he canceled the money that they were going to be paid by the Ministry of Defense and forbade the Acting Secretary from going to the reception. There was quite an uproar. We finally got the money out of Defense to help pay part of the cost, but this was a little example of the realism of Vietnamese politics at the time, and also the effect of Nhu's increasing influence. Although, I don't think we saw that completely clearly at that time.

Then I spent about two months in the hospital with hepatitis at Clark Field. I think those were mainly the things that I did.

Q: What did you do after leaving Vietnam?

PHILLIPS: I came back to Washington and was asked by Des Fitzgerald to go up to Laos to start Civic Action there. Everybody was very concerned about Laos and the fact that Souvanna Phouma had come in as Prime Minister. There was a truce with the Pathet Lao and an agreement that the Pathet Lao were going to come into the government and stand in the next National Assembly elections. The Army was supposed to be integrated. In the meantime, of course, if South Vietnam was governmentally something of a vacuum out in the countryside the Laotian government didn't exist. The CIA Station Chief was a guy named Milt Clark. He had gotten some ideas—these were really Lao ideas—in talking with the then Laotian chief of staff who was almost illiterate, named Ouan. He had been in the Lao Issara, which was the Lao resistance movement against the French, and had left because of increasing communist influence. His ideas amounted to taking some of the Laotian army, training them to go out to be medical workers and other aid workers in the villages. It was something like what the Pathet Lao were already doing. Because I had been so involved in working with the Vietnamese army and so involved in helping Vietnamese Civic Action, I guess I became the American expert on Civic Action. So they asked me to go up to Laos to start a Civic Action program there, which I did. It was headed by a colonel in the Lao army named Oudone Sananikone, who was detached from the Lao Army and served under the prime minister (then Souvanna Phouma).

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Q: How long were you in Laos?

PHILLIPS: I was in Laos off and on from 1957-59.

Q: Did we have an embassy?

PHILLIPS: Yes, we did have an embassy.

Q: Did it play much of a role?

PHILLIPS: The embassy was pretty active, in fact it became even more active in 1958 at the time of the National Assembly elections. There was something called Operation Booster Shot which the Embassy was very much involved in. Horace Smith was the ambassador. It was an attempt to provide some support for non-communist Lao politicians in the elections. It worked simultaneously on various fronts. The ambassador and the head of the CIA Station were actively involved trying to encourage all the non-communist Lao politicians, most of whom were heads of families and traditional rivals, to get together and put up a common list of candidates. Well, that turned out to be a fiasco because a lot of them couldn't agree with each other. The Pathet Lao ran a single slate while there were multiple slates on the other side with the results you would imagine, the Pathet Lao won. These were not all the seats in the assembly, by the way, but a supplementary set of seats.

We had a nascent economic aid program in Laos, but it was pretty much confined to Vientiane. Not much was happening outside the city limits. There were a couple of road building programs but they hadn't gotten off the ground. The idea behind Booster Shot was how could we come up with an almost instant village aid program. We did have by that time some Civic Action teams out in the countryside working in various areas. I was asked to help conceptualize what could be done. What would the villagers think was effective economic assistance on behalf of the government. The idea was that the non-communist candidates were supporting the Lao government, therefore, if the government could do

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something out in the villages this would have some effect on how the voting Lao public might view the government and government candidates.

It didn't quite work out that way but I will tell you about the program itself. The kinds of requests we were getting from villages were mainly to put tin roofing on schools and wats (Buddhist temples) and in some instances provide material for dams for irrigation. There were basically two elements involved in the school and wats requests, some cement and some roofing, and then the villagers would do the work themselves. The way the plan evolved we were to distribute to the villages cement and tin roofing which would be distributed through the Civic Action teams. Then, supposedly the government candidates would be on hand to try to take advantage of this.

Well, the program actually achieved something. I don't know how many wats were roofed (they were all called schools by the way in case there was any congressional criticism of our supporting a religion), but there were hundreds. A lot of cement was distributed and used. Things did actually happen. A lot of supplies were bought in Thailand and brought in and distributed. We distributed them by truck whenever possible and by C-130s, without US Air Force markings, to villages without roads. Sheet metal and cement were airdropped with parachutes all over the place. There were actually two bulldozers dropped up in Phong Saly Province to construct an airfield which actually got built.

This didn't have much impact on the elections for two reasons. One was that the nationalist candidates were divided and there were too many of them. Secondly, they couldn't get the notion in their mind to go out and campaign while all this was happening in order to connect with it. There is a story I will tell about this one candidate who was very well known and ran in Vientiane Province against Souphanouvong who was Souvanna Phouma's half brother but who was the leader of the Pathet Lao. Souphanouvong won the election handily. This particular candidate, Oun Sananikone was his name, was really enraged because he had particularly campaigned in a village which had been helped but the village voted against him. So he went up there and apparently convened the village

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head man and this entire village, where the wat had been roofed and lots of things had been done. He berated them and said, "Look what I did for you. This wat over there has been roofed and this bridge was built and this school was repaired with cement and I was responsible for that and you didn't vote for me." The people looked at him and said, "But you didn't ask us to vote for you."

So, it didn't have much of an effect on the elections. It did have one effect though which was sort of unintended and that is that before Operation Booster Shot I don't think the Lao ever took the Americans very seriously, because although there was a lot of activity in Vientiane and inside the economic aid mission with talk about grants, nobody ever saw much of anything happening. For the first time they saw lots of things happening. It was a tangible demonstration that the US could really produce something. The result was that I think they became over convinced about what the US could do to help them. They were terribly disappointed in the 1959-60 period when we did nothing after the North Vietnamese invaded Laos.

My role in Operation Booster Shot was that I became the on-the-ground organizer of all this development effort as part of the election campaign. Then I went on working with Civic Action thereafter.

Q: Did you find as you got involved in this that there was a dichotomy in the way AID and the CIA did things in this kind of activity?

PHILLIPS: Yes, there was a dichotomy in the sense that the traditional AID programs were so cumbersome and took so long to implement that they hardly ever responded to real problems. In other words, you might start something, crank it into the AID mill and maybe something might happen 18 months or two years later. If you wanted to distribute medical chests out to the provinces you might get them two years after your teams had already been out there. This was a real problem. I remember seeing the Vietnamese Commissioner of Civic Action, Cung,—when I went through Saigon in 1957—going up to

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Laos. He had gotten American aid in the beginning of 1956 to agree to buy some limited supplies that would go into villages, some tools and stuff like that. When I saw him, he said, "Congratulations." I said, "Why?" He said, "The first shipment of aid supplies for my village teams have arrived." I said, "A year later?" He said, "Yes." I said, "What were they?" He said, "vingt mille siseaux" (20,000 scissors).

The difference was this, with what were called unvouchered funds, even though the accounting system inside the Agency was very strict, you were able, once the program was approved, to go into the market in Hong Kong and buy 20,000 scissors and get them to wherever you wanted them in less than a month. There was no way that AID, following all its conventional procedures, seemed to be able to move in less than a year or a year and a half. The problem was that a lot of these needs, as they developed, were not ones that you could wholly foresee. This was a very fluid situation, if not revolutionary, in which the local teams needed something to work with soon, not in a year and a half. I think at that point, that the Agency was involved in a lot of overt programs using basically covert funds to be able to purchase things and get them to wherever they were needed. This was viewed as a stop-gap operation and was never liked by the more conventional Agency (CIA) people.

For example, a lot of the support for Operation Booster Shot...all the stuff that we could buy locally and a lot of the sheet roofing was purchased in Hong Kong and flown to Laos and dropped were purchased using the covert funding mechanism. The funds were taken from the US defense budget, transferred to the Agency and then Agency procurement methods were used to buy this stuff, including purchases on the local market in Thailand. The kip (Lao currency), I remember was about 100 to 1 and they only produced it in bills of 500s. We were buying thousands of dollars of cement which could be bought across the border in Thailand but paid for in Lao currency. So, I would go and get, literally, huge cartons of kip and go down to see Oudone Sananikone at his house. He would have drawn up lists and gotten prices and I would count out the kip. He would send out his procurement people and they would come out with the receipts and the goods. I would

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check the goods, then take all the receipts and staple them together, bring them back and make a report. That was how most of the cement and sheet roofing was bought.

The only other time I saw something like this done was in Vietnam in 1962 where USAID created a local 10 million dollar piaster fund which was then used to support the strategic hamlet program. It was in local currency but USAID controlled it. We had a tri-partite committee out at the province level, and jointly with the province chief the committee controlled all of these expenditures. But generally, the way things were programmed on the AID side, and I don't blame them, it was just inherent and basic in the way the thing was being run. It was so clumsy, so cumbersome and so time consuming that it was almost impossible to respond very quickly or even in a very sensitive fashion to a particular requirement. Lots of things happened to the road program in Laos, for example. By the time you got a road approved it was no longer a priority but another road was for different reasons.

Q: I am an old bureaucrat myself and this must have enraged the AID people. Here, the CIA if they needed something could go out and buy it, but they had to go through all their procedures. I would think this would have caused all sorts of friction.

PHILLIPS: It created quite a bit of friction. It varied with the individual. There was a Deputy Director of AID in Laos named Mike Adler. Mike had been in Greece during the early Point Four program when we were helping the Greeks to defeat the communists there. Things were a lot more informal then. He was very action oriented. His attitude was that if there were things which needed doing and we can't do them and you guys can, be my guest. Attitudes varied widely. I got a lot of cooperation from two guys in the program office. Initially they thought I was some kind of a spook, a creepy kind of a guy. But we got to know each other and they realized I wasn't hiding anything about what we were doing, so they began to like me and trust me. They could see that things were happening. After all that was the rationale for our being there in the first place. So they became quite supportive. On the other hand I had a real run in with a community development guy who

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came out and whose approach to the whole notion of trying to help in village development or help the villages help themselves, was: first this is really an anthropological problem and we have to get a group of anthropologists here to study Lao culture and how the villages are configured in order to decide what the most effective way of helping them is. Here you are going off half cocked because you don't have an anthropological background and I do and I can appreciate different cultures and want to preserve elements of Lao culture, etc.

The outcome was that the Lao got so mad at him as he went over to try to tell them that he was the guy who really knew what was going on and I didn't know anything and therefore he should take over the whole Civic Action effort that they just cut him off. It was sad. I wouldn't say he was typical. We had some problems which I encountered when I went back out as Assistant Director in the USAID Mission in 1962 in Saigon. Similar problems that we had with some of the AID people. Part of the problem was that each AID division had its job, its assigned responsibility. If you somehow cut across those lines that had to do with something they were responsible for, then there was a tendency to guard that jealously and to try to wall it off. It didn't make any difference whether they were doing anything or not, they just didn't want you doing something in their field. This was one of the things that I think prevented AID from ever having a very successful approach to community development and, secondly, killed any spread of the JCRR concept from Taiwan. This was the old Joint Commission for Rural Reconstruction. It was very successful in developing the rural areas of Taiwan. That idea never went anywhere inside of AID because it ran across objections from the agricultural division, the public works division, etc. What the JCRR did was to cut across all of those divisions. It was doing something in all of those fields, but doing it on a decentralized basis out in the rural areas. I suppose in terms of the philosophy of the approach that followed when I went back out with AID to Saigon in 1962, it was very much shaped by my earlier experience in Vietnam and subsequently in Laos. This was that the problems you were trying to help the locals solve had nothing to do with divisions between agricultural, social work, education, etc. They were all in fact bound together and had to do with how do you improve life at

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the village level, and with education, health, agriculture, etc. at that level. You couldn't separate them into discreet programs coming down from the central government.

Q: Why don't we pick this up next time with how you saw the North Vietnamese excursion into Laos and then move on to what happened to you subsequently. How is that?

PHILLIPS: Okay.

Q: Today is August 15, 1995. Was it an invasion by the North Vietnamese?

PHILLIPS: What happened was this. There was an accord in 1957 by which there were general assembly elections and Pathet Lao divisions were to be incorporated into the Lao army. This was very difficult to do and took a lot of negotiation. Finally two units came in. But they had been so indoctrinated that it was apparent from talking to defectors that the North Vietnamese had a number of North Vietnamese Lao speakers as well as Laotians they had trained and indoctrinated who really were the cadre that formed the basis of the Pathet Lao movement. These units had been so indoctrinated in a picture of what the Royal Lao army and government was like that they couldn't believe that the Americans weren't running everything as they had been led to believe. They couldn't believe, for example, that the Lao army had tanks and was actually driving them themselves. There were some very curious incidents. They had been told that if you see tanks they are not real tanks but made out of papier-mache or phony materials. So they actually came up and hit the tanks with rifle butts and were surprised that the tanks were made of steel. Then they would question the Lao who were driving the tanks who were showing how the tanks could move. They said, "But, you are not Lao, you are American." The Lao guy who was probably just a sergeant would say, "What do you mean I am not Lao, I am talking to you in Lao." It was as if these guys had been sequestered, like Rip Van Winkle, and had just woken up, that this was some world they didn't recognize at all. So, there was very tight and very close ideological control over these units. They didn't really want to let the Royal Lao Army officers have anything to do with these units and insisted that they be allowed

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to have their own barracks apart from the rest of the army. This went on for a while. At one point, and I have forgotten exactly what provoked this, one of these units took off into the brush. The Lao army tried to get them back dropping leaflets but they didn't return. The unit headed up toward the North Vietnamese border. The North Vietnamese used this as a pretext to send in some units in which they had some Lao speakers and began occupying part of Sam Neua Province and on down into the rest of Laos along the North Vietnamese border which extends down to the South Vietnamese border. And, of course, this coincided with the development of their own guerrilla campaign in South Vietnam. It wasn't completely clear at the time, but it should have been obvious to those who were looking at it from a more detached point of view, that what they were trying to do was simply take over this area, occupy it, and then construct their own trails which became the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam. I left about the time that this occurred. It was very frustrating to me. It was at the time that the Eisenhower administration was ending and Kennedy was coming in.

Q: This was in 1959.

PHILLIPS: I came home in 1959 and by that time the North Vietnamese were already coming in. They got the International Control Commission in to supposedly inspect and, of course, they didn't find anybody but Lao speakers. You couldn't put your finger on anything except that there were defectors that you could talk to who could explain how the units were put together, but nobody was interviewing the defectors, certainly not the ICC.

Q: Which is Polish, Indian and Canadian. The Indians were trying to mediate everything and stay out of trouble.

PHILLIPS: Yes. They didn't want to get into any controversy. The result was that the North Vietnamese were able to come in further and further and control the whole border area. Then you get into the Kennedy years and you know what happened there.

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Q: Let's stick to your experiences. You left there in 1959 and then what did you do?

PHILLIPS: I came back and went to work with my father in an engineering firm which designed airports. That is what I did thereafter except for two years when I went out to Vietnam in 1962-64 and started the Rural Affairs program which eventually became CORDS.

Q: Let's go to this 1962-64 period. In the first place how did they get you back?

PHILLIPS: Well, what happened was that counterinsurgency became the doctrine. MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) had its counterinsurgency program and there still was a Military Assistance Advisory Group there. MACV was originally set up to command the air units and other American units that were directly involved, but it rather quickly took over the strategic planning function, although all the advisors on the military side remained directly dependent on MAAG. MACV was trying to train and organize the Vietnamese army. Within Vietnam the Vietnamese had started carrying out a pacification program. There had been something called Operation Sunrise, but it hadn't been very successful. It involved a lot of resettlement. Subsequently with the assistance, as a matter of fact, very key assistance of Lou Conein who was working for the CIA station, a better approach was started. He had been there before in the 1954-55 period and he went back and dug up the old records of what we called pacification back then. He helped the Vietnamese draw up a pacification plan for one province, Phu Yen, which would combine military with civilian elements and would involve not resettlement but a gradual extension of security and some rural assistance to the population.

Q: Where was this province?

PHILLIPS: Phu Yen is in central Vietnam south of Qui Nhon. What happened was that AID had no rural assistance program. The previous director had left. A guy named Bill Fippen was there as acting director. He was very frustrated because there was no

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AID organization out in the countryside that was equipped to support anything that the Vietnamese were doing, any kind of rural development effort. AID was asked, and I think probably Mr. Bell, who was the director, probably got asked by Kennedy, "What are you doing out there?" And they weren't doing anything or much of anything they could talk about. So the search went out for somebody to go out and look at the way the AID mission was structured, and to come up with some kind of program for AID. They got hold of my name. I think that Ed Lansdale was probably the source of my name but I am not sure. Anyway, I got a call from a guy named Rod Poats who was the Deputy Director for the Far East at AID. He asked if I would come in and talk with him. So I did. He said I had been suggested to them as a possible candidate to go out to Vietnam and do a study on how to organize the AID mission. I asked what were they doing now and they asked me about my background, etc. He came to the conclusion that I was a candidate for doing this. I said that I needed at least one other person to go with me and would like Bert Fraleigh who was in Taiwan working for AID. I told them that he was the best pure AID guy I knew, that he knew more about rural development in Asia than any single person that I knew. I said that I thought together we could really survey what they were doing and what the Vietnamese were doing and come up with something. So in June 1962, I went out for about a month and met Bert out there. I went out to the provinces, talked to high level officials in the government including Diem, because of my previous experience. Even though I was relatively young, I was a recognized friend and had entree into almost any level of government. I discovered that the Vietnamese had something going called the Strategic Hamlet Program that the US side didn't understand very well. It had some interesting elements in it, although it also had some things wrong with it. There was a lot of forcible resettlement in some areas without compensation. Some of the security things they were doing and the idea of having hamlet elections made good sense, and the idea of trying to focus on a hamlet by hamlet approach, and on hamlet development. But they had no resources. None of the popular government programs were reaching the countryside. Moreover, they had a financial system which imposed a pre-audit requirement on the province chiefs. In other words, if you wanted to go out and buy ten sacks of cement to

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help somebody build a bridge or a dam, you had to get prices from three suppliers, send the prices to Saigon, get the purchase approved and only then could you spend the money even though you had the funds available. Well, it usually took over a month to do this. By the time authorization came back, the price had changed so you couldn't buy what you needed. It was an unbelievable system. The government simply wasn't functioning properly. Most of the agricultural programs were focused on research stations, but nothing was reaching the farmer.

So, out of talking with the Vietnamese and looking at the resources available, we developed a program which supported the strategic hamlet concept. We decided to do this on a province by province basis because the provinces in many instances were so different and their needs were so different. We determined that it was necessary to put an AID provincial representative out into each province. We created a separate office within AID with plenty of independent authority to support rural development in each province in South Vietnam. There was an opportunity to establish a piaster fund from US funds (ten million dollars), which could be used to kick off rural development in support of the strategic hamlet program. We decided the way to make that fund function was for a plan to be developed for each province. There would be a tripartite committee in each province which would decide and approve all expenditures of these funds. The funds would be programmed against certain activities, but there would be a miscellaneous activity account so in case you had a natural disaster of some kind or a plane dropped a bomb and destroyed a school you could rebuild the school and not have to go back to Saigon for approval.

We set up these provincial committees, which were composed of the province chief, the USAID provincial rep and the American military advisor. In some cases we were not able to get provincial reps out into the provinces very fast so the military advisor wore both hats. In effect the US had control over these funds and the Vietnamese agreed to it. I went to Diem personally with this program. I said, "This is the way that I think we can really get

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some effective assistance out there.” He agreed with it. The ten million dollar piaster fund was established and used effectively.

Q: What was your impression of Diem at that time?

PHILLIPS: That is a long story. Let me tell you how I came back. I developed this program and presented it to the Vietnamese informally as well as to the Americans and everybody liked it. The Vietnamese said, “This is wonderful, but you have to come back.” I said, “I am not promising to come back.” The same thing happened on the American side, they wanted me to come back to run the rural affairs office. The position in AID/Saigon was called Assistant Director for Rural Affairs. I came back to Washington. My father didn't want me to leave because he was getting older. I really got asked to go back in a way that I couldn't refuse. The request came right through Mike Forrestal at the White House. So, I said, “Okay, I will go back and run this program.” I went back in September with my wife Barbara, and our two infant children, and we started staffing up. We started sending people out into the countryside.

You asked about Diem. Diem was a very complex person. He was shy, diffident and self-confident at the same time. He had a tremendous intellect, an encyclopedic knowledge of every province in Vietnam and practically every Vietnamese family. If you mentioned somebody and said, “I met this province chief and he seemed to be doing a pretty good job, Mr. President,” he would say, “Oh, yes, his grandfather was so-and-so, his father was so-and-so,” and he would give you a half hour history of the man's family. So he was something of an academic. He was a passionate Vietnamese patriot, he detested the French and, of course, had resisted the French. He tended to see their hand in things where they probably weren't involved at all. You could accurately describe him as sort of a Vietnamese mandarin type. He had a tremendous amount of energy. You had to have tremendous patience in talking with him because if you brought up, say, the Montagnards and were talking about a certain Montagnard problem you would get a chance to present your idea but then he would say, “That's good but I think that we need to do this because

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of this,” and then you would get maybe a two hour history of the Montagnards in that particular province. It used to be mind numbing for some of the diplomatic reps who had to go over and talk to him because he felt, probably rightly so, that most Americans didn't understand much of anything about Vietnam and therefore he felt obliged to explain it at tremendous lengths. I think for a lot of Americans it became very mind numbing. I was younger, knew a fair amount about Vietnam and something about his personality so I just let him go on until we got through whatever was on his mind, and if there was something I wanted to bring up I would do so.

I think he, despite the influence of his brother Nhu who was inflicted with terminal paranoia, trusted us and what we were trying to do because, even close to the end he seemed to retain these feelings. This was in 1963 after it was reported that I had been critical of what the Diem government was doing back in Washington. Diem still seemed to have confidence in what we were trying to do with the Strategic Hamlet Program. One example of that is that we started producing reports on the program beginning in May 1963. We called it a summary report of the situation in the provinces. It was a status report on the Strategic Hamlet Program. We did this report in English and in French in order to give Diem a copy he could read. We didn't pull many punches and he took it. The general American idea was that you couldn't go in and tell Diem anything critical. Well, that was not true, it depended on how you told him something. Whether it was constructive criticism or not.

There was an incident that occurred in the spring of 1963. I had gone to look at this one province in the Delta because our provincial rep had reported to me that the province chief was doing some things that he thought were wrong. The province chief had developed a theory that the way to protect his province and his hamlets was to get everybody out to build these huge mud walls stretching from hamlet to hamlet. There was no way that you could patrol these walls. Furthermore it involved a tremendous amount of “voluntary” labor on the part of the local population. So I went to inspect these things. Hell, I had been in Vietnam long enough to know that the people were not happy with this. I could detect

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disgruntlement among some of the local officials as well. Nobody would say anything overtly but you could tell that this was not a happy situation. So, I came back and wrote up a report about it. I sent a copy of the report to AID Mission Director, Joe Brent and a copy to Colonel Hoang Van Lac, who was chief of staff of the hamlet program. Apparently it produced a hell of an explosion on the Vietnamese government side, I heard afterwards. My report went down to the province chief. The province chief claimed that I had come down there and was interfering with his program and telling him what to do. He tried to make Vietnamese nationalism an issue. He denied that he was building the walls. Well, they had a big meeting and they called him up to this meeting. Lac was very clever. He had gotten the Vietnamese Air Force to take some aerial photographs of the province. When the province chief denied he was building these long walls, Lac just pulled out the aerial photographs, and that guy was ordered to stop the walls that day. Subsequently he was removed. And he had been a favorite of Nhu and Diem. I don't know what this tells you about Diem, but the notion that he was impervious to advice or impervious to ideas, is not true.

You have to understand that we were working in a very constructive context. We were able to get things started that the Vietnamese, themselves, didn't believe could be done. When we started a pilot program in central Vietnam of teaching Vietnamese families how to raise a new breed of pig that grew about three times as fast as the pigs they were used to we were changing about ten centuries of practice in raising pigs. We had them building pig pens. We had them inoculating the pigs. We had Vietnamese farmers doing all kinds of things that they had never done before. The guy who was in charge of this—we had one Chinese guy from Taiwan and a young IVS (International Volunteer Service) guy named Harvey Neese working in it. They started out working with poor families. They didn't go out and pick a capable farmer, they picked the poorest families they could find. Once everybody else saw this was successful, the demand went sky high. So, we started out with the idea that we were going to have 500 families raising pigs but it was so wildly successful that Diem said, "We have to increase this to 15,000 families." Everybody said

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it was impossible except Bert (Frueigh), Harvey (Neese) and one guy in the agriculture ministry and the people in central Vietnam who said, "If you can get us the pigs, we can do it." And we did it. In about three or four months we reached 15,000 families. All of a sudden people who never had had any cash in their pockets for generations were going to market with pigs and starting to build better houses for themselves. This was the kind of stuff that we were doing. That put what we were doing in a very, very positive context. So I think the relationships that we enjoyed and our ability to work with and to have some influence over what the Vietnamese were doing, and coincidentally to try to get rid of dishonest province chiefs and get better province chiefs, was becoming successful. But the whole thing came a cropper because of the political difficulties stemming from the Buddhist crisis which spiraled out of control, and you know the rest of the history.

Q: Were you trying to get Diem and Nhu out into the field?

PHILLIPS: Early on (in 1954-56) with some personal persuasion by Ed Lansdale, Diem got out into the countryside a lot more. One of the things that put a crimp into that was that when he went up to the highlands about 1959, some guy tried to assassinate him. This incident generated concern for his security and restricted his movements. He didn't like it. And then the visits were openly formal. The Vietnamese, like Chinese, are much more formal people than say Filipinos, so they don't go easily into a democratic political mode that we find more natural. I went with Diem on a couple of trips, but the whole thing was too organized, too cut and dried, much too formal. There wasn't enough outreach, in part because the province chiefs were scared of making a mistake and would get everything over organized so that no mistakes would be made.

Q: What about the American representatives out on the provincial level? You are trying to push something that is not something that would come naturally to either the civilian or military type of program. Where did you get your people?

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PHILLIPS: The people came from a variety of backgrounds. Some of them were in the AID mission and volunteered. Some heard about what we were doing and were doing other things. There was a guy by the name of Dave Hudson who was a news stringer for NBC. He came in and volunteered saying he wanted to work. I asked what he wanted to do and he said, "I want to go to the toughest province you got." I said, "Okay, great. You are going to Ca Mau." We took people like that. We wrote a Provincial Representative's Guide, a compendium of the programs we had, some inspirational pieces about what counterinsurgency was all about, what we were trying to do in Vietnam. It had a brief piece that Diem had written earlier in his career about democracy in the villages in Vietnam and this sort of stuff to try to orient our people in terms of what was the purpose of our being there, what were we trying to achieve in helping the Vietnamese. And then we said, "Look, you just go out there and listen to the province chief and this is the program and these are his problems, and we will help you." I had four more senior guys as regional representatives who circulated around their regions acting as backstops and problem solvers. Then I would go out to the provinces, or Bert would go out. There was a constant back and forth in terms of how do you deal with this situation and that situation. Of course, it was great where you had good province chiefs and not too good where you didn't. We tried to move some people around where they could function more effectively. We put some good people in where the province chiefs were not too good to try to help them. It was a mix and match situation. I recruited three guys who had worked for Tom Dooley in Laos. I had one young guy who had been in the army, was part Hawaiian, had worked in the cane fields in Hawaii and knew how to get along with Asians. We wanted people who could understand Asians and would feel at home in Asia. We picked up about eight IVS guys, young college graduates who were already in Vietnam. They had learned Vietnamese and were all agricultural graduates mainly from the mid-west, who had come out and had started working with the Vietnamese helping to improve agricultural techniques. They were on contract to AID. I talked to them, Bert talked to them and about seven or eight volunteered to come over and work for us. I sent them to the provinces. I had guys out in the provinces who were 22, 23 years old and had never run anything in

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their lives before. Most of them were absolutely splendid because they would listen, they would respond to problems and the province chiefs understood that they were conduits through which they could get support and assistance. They developed good working relationships with most of the province chiefs. And they understood the agricultural programs we were trying to carry out, so they were very good.

Q: Did you have any Foreign Service officers?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I had two Foreign Service officers who had been trained in Vietnamese and this was part of their training, to come and work for us. One of them was Dick Holbrooke and the other was Vlad Lehovich.

Q: Holbrooke is now Assistant Secretary for European Affairs.

PHILLIPS: Yes, that is right. He was also Assistant Secretary for Asian Affairs. As I said, we had a very wide variety of people.

Q: What about the American military? How did you find them?

PHILLIPS: I found a lot of understanding at the provincial level. These were captains and majors who were relatively young guys. They were listening to the Vietnamese and very quickly acquiring the perspective of what were the real problems from the province chief's point of view. So, to them we were a godsend because it was obvious that this was not just a military situation. To begin with, if you were sitting there as advisor to the province chief, you commanded very scant military resources. You depended on regular Vietnamese Army forces at the Corps or Division level which was supposed to protect you.

Q: We are talking about a period when American forces weren't many.

PHILLIPS: We had no American forces, we had advisors. We had advisors at battalion, regiment, division and Corps level.

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Q: Of the Vietnamese army?

PHILLIPS: Of the Vietnamese army. And then we had advisors to the province chiefs and most of the province chiefs at that point were military officers because you had an insurgency problem in practically every province.

Of course there were some military who didn't get it. Who were just so rigid in their thinking that they couldn't really cope with the role. We had problems at the Corps and Division level getting understanding. There were two parts to the military structure, there was MACV, which was the military advisory command which had J2, J3, J4 staffs—this was kind of a super level. Underneath, there was the Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG). The structure stayed that way until eventually MAAG was combined into MACV. But then, the advisors who were out with the CORDS and provinces came under MAAG. But, within MAAG there was a separation of structure too. There was a structure that supported the guys out in the provinces and that was the one that we worked with most intimately. There was a guy named Colonel Carl Schaad who was responsible for MAAG support of the Strategic Hamlet program. He is here (in McLean) and you might want to interview him and get another side of this thing. They were very responsive. They were involved in the day-to-day stuff that we were involved in. There was a coordinating group headed up by Bill Trueheart, the deputy chief of mission, which included Schaad, myself and a couple of other agency representatives. We met regularly and discussed programs...what was the military doing; what were we doing...and tried to coordinate our efforts. There were a lot of things that the military were doing which involved US Air Force bombing and some of the advice given to the regular Vietnamese army which never fitted in with what was called the pacification program.

Q: Were you involved in the Phoenix program?

PHILLIPS: No.

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Q: Did you have a problem being an alumnus of the CIA with the station or other people?

PHILLIPS: What we were doing was so open that I don't think there was much of an undertow of suspicion on the part of other Americans. At one point, because I had been in the Agency, when word got back that I had been in this National Security Council meeting in Washington, and that I had said we were not winning the war in the Delta and had in effect taken on the US defense establishment, word somehow got back on the Vietnamese side and I guess reached Nhu that I was attacking the Vietnamese government and what they were doing. I don't know how all that leaked back. I had spoken in this meeting about the fact that Nhu was a real liability and somehow should be gotten out of the country. This was after the raid on the pagodas. When I got back, he (Nhu) started having articles published in the newspaper he controlled (Saigon Times) that I was going to replace John Richardson as the head of the CIA station. But that was his paranoia. I don't know what he thought he was doing. I wrote Diem a letter about the articles and said that they were not true and that I would like to come talk to him about them. He gave me an interview and I went and complained about them. I said that they were wrong and explained what I had said and what had happened. He took it, and apologized for his brother.

Q: When was this NSC meeting?

PHILLIPS: This was in 1963 when the Buddhists crisis really got bad. This was when Lodge came out and replaced Nolting. Lodge came right after the raids on the pagodas. The US was really shocked by this. There was this famous cable that came out and gave Lodge direction, as Lodge interpreted it, to sponsor a coup against Diem. A coup was cranked up, but then it died because the Vietnamese generals were not ready to move. Then Kennedy sent Joe Mendenhall from State and General "Brute" Krulak from the Marine Corps, who was on McNamara's personal staff, to do a survey of what was going on. They came back and I came back at the same time, not because of this meeting, but because my father was very ill, in fact he was dying. I came back to see him and talk to my mother about what to do. Coincidentally, I was corralled by Mike Forrestal and Roger

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Hilsman into going to this NSC meeting. I didn't know all the internecine struggles that were going on in Washington. I had some inkling that there was a whole dispute about what to do about Diem, etc. I understood from the Vietnamese end of the thing that the government and Diem's regime was in very, very deep trouble, that there was going to be a political change or a coup one way or another, that Nhu had some ambitions about pulling a coup of his own, that even the most loyal supporters of Diem were getting very skittish about what was happening. The whole thing was coming unglued. So I was pushed front and center after Krulak gave his report and after Mendenhall gave his.

Kennedy said, "Did you two guys go to the same country?" It wasn't just that Krulak had gone to the Delta and Mendenhall had gone to Central Vietnam. Mendenhall was talking about the politics. He had been anti-Diem for a long, long time. He had talked to a lot of dissidents. So all that came out. Krulak went down to the Delta and got a bunch of military briefings. I had gone to one of those damn briefings up in Bien Hoa just north of Saigon where they carried out an operation in the Iron Triangle in which the Vietnamese Army had run a bunch of tanks over the place and hadn't encountered anything. Nothing came out of this operation. I happened to go to this meeting at which the division advisor, Colonel Miller, gave this incredible briefing to Krulak about how it was a great victory. Afterwards I went up to Miller, because I knew him, and said, "How the hell can you tell a guy like Krulak what you just told him? You know that is not true." He said, "Well, that is the way they wanted it presented."

The other thing that happened to me just before I came back was I got a call from our provincial advisor down in Long An, a province just south of Saigon, that strategic hamlets were being destroyed. The Viet Cong were coming into a lot of the hamlets at night, getting the people to take down all of the barbed wire security fences, take the roofs off their houses and the Vietnamese Army wasn't providing any security at all. So, I went there to find out what was going on. I sat down with the military advisor, and Earl Long, who was our provincial rep. They briefed me. More than a hundred hamlets had been invaded by the VC. I asked what was the problem. They said, "Well, the troops are in the

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barracks because everybody is afraid of a coup so nobody is providing any security. As a result, the hamlet program is being destroyed here.”

I had just come out of that context, and here I was in this NSC meeting and Mendenhall is talking about the problems in Central Vietnam and about the political side and Krulak is saying, “I don’t know about that, but we are winning handily, particularly in the Delta.” And I had just been in the Delta.

So, I was presented by Mike Forrestal. Kennedy knew who I was. I started to talk about what I thought was going on in Vietnam. I thought to myself just before the meeting that if I had a chance to speak I would tell the President everything I knew as honestly as I could about what was going on. So I talked about the political situation, about Nhu, about the problems with the government. I felt we had to get Nhu out of Vietnam and had to disassociate ourselves from Nhu. If we could, we should isolate Nhu, I said, and I offered some ideas about that. But first, I took on Krulak. I said at the beginning, “I’m sorry to tell you Mr. President, but we are not winning the war, particularly in the Delta.” And then I talked about Long An.

Well, this created an uproar. The whole time I was talking McNamara was sitting there beside the President shaking his head. Then I got into a verbal match with Krulak for a while and argued about the situation. He said, “You don’t know anything about the military. This is a war.” I said, “This is a political war and we are losing it.” This was the kind of argument that went on. At the end Kennedy asked me if I had any recommendations. I said that I would recommend that he send General Lansdale back to Vietnam as soon as possible. I said, “I don’t know if he could salvage the situation or not. If there were a coup he could at least help pull things together. I talked to Ambassador Lodge about it and I think he would favor it. We need somebody who can talk to Diem. That is my recommendation.” Kennedy took notes the whole time I was talking. At the end he said, “I want to thank you for what you had to say, particularly for your recommendation about General Lansdale.”

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Of course, nothing happened. I saw the thing as a looming disaster. Lodge had started using me as one of his eyes and ears because I knew so many Vietnamese. I would go talk to Thuan, who was secretary of defense, he was an old friend. He would confide in me all of his fears and I would write a memorandum and send it to Lodge. Little did I know that a lot of these memorandums were being transmitted back to Washington and people were reading these things and saying, "Look at this. We have to do something about this." I didn't understand the politics of Washington in terms of this contest that was going on between Harriman and elements in State on the one hand and McNamara and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Taylor, on the other. I didn't know the background of that telegram (the "Hilsman telegram"). The situation remained unresolved through a series of NSC meetings. One of the interesting things that occurred was, of course, eventually President Kennedy sent McNamara and Taylor out there again to look into the situation. Taylor confirmed everything that I had said about Long An. In the meantime, the Long An MAAG sector advisor got removed in disgrace because apparently he wasn't suppose to tell me what he did. McNamara was saying, "How come I didn't know all of this?" Then somebody showed him our provincial reports, that I alluded to earlier, and he said, "This is amazing." Apparently as a result of his reading our report he turned to somebody and said, "We have to have a reporting program that tells us these things." This resulted in the development of a system designed to fulfill McNamara's predilection for statistics.

Q: Hamlet evaluation.

PHILLIPS: Yes, exactly. That was an outgrowth. Our reports were about one paragraph long (per province), although some provinces might merit half a page because they were particularly complicated. But they were an evaluation and an assessment, not a statistical anything. We didn't believe that statistics meant anything. Of course, McNamara's focus was entirely on statistics. He thought these reports were really interesting apparently and apparently didn't realize these reports existed. He wanted to know how come he wasn't getting them. Well, of course, they were just disseminated within the Mission out there to

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try to keep people informed of what was going on. But they were so different from anything he had seen that I guess he became fascinated with the idea that that was where the real information was.

Q: I have had those briefings when I was in Vietnam too. These briefings are rehearsed so you never get a spontaneous briefing. The military is trained to put forth the positive view. This is what we are doing and this is what we are accomplishing. It almost goes against the grain to come up and say we are losing here, we are doing this, we can't get this. You have to see these things in positive terms. It is almost built into the system.

PHILLIPS: Only really good or great military commanders understand that the system is biased this way, and start asking questions. They go out and actually talk to the grunts on the ground. Then they understand. This is like what happened when General Abrams took over from Westmoreland after TET. Then mini-TET occurred. He went out and got these still optimistic briefings, told the American commander that it was not a goddamn victory, we got our ass kicked and don't give me this bull shit. If we had had Abrams there from the beginning, instead of Westmoreland, I think we would have had Vietnamization a lot earlier.

Q: When you came back to Vietnam after the NSC meeting, how was what you were saying received by the embassy?

PHILLIPS: Well, I think Lodge felt what I said was factual. MACV was in a state of shock because they had been filing all these optimistic reports and then somebody had gone back to say that that was not the way it was. They were angry and I was persona non grata with them for a while. In fact, when McNamara and Taylor came out I didn't participate in any of the meetings. I just let all our guys go and speak for themselves. So it certainly affected my relationship with the top military level like General Harkins, etc. While I was still in Washington, Harkins came to a party given by the Truehearts and said

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to them, "I am going to get that goddamn Rufus Phillips." Phoebe Trueheart, Bill's wife, replied sweetly, "but General, he doesn't work for you."

Q: This National Security meeting took place when?

PHILLIPS: It was September 10, 1963.

Q: So the clock is ticking. Can you tell your perspective on the events that came in the fall?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I think it was probably one of the most depressing periods of my life. On the one hand it was obvious that the situation could not continue the way it was. In effect the Diem government and Diem and Nhu, which I blame mainly on Nhu, had really lost the confidence of their own military and a coup seemed inevitable. The question was, was Nhu going to organize his own coup and kill some of the military or was the military going to organize a coup against Diem. Because I had some friends like Lou Conein, who were very much involved in the coup, I could sort of follow in a very general way what was going on. It was really distressing because you could see the Vietnamese government falling apart. I knew a number of the military pretty well. One was a key staff person both in the coup and afterwards, General Le Van Kim, an old personal friend from the 1955 days. I knew he was very competent but I didn't think the General knew much about politics or had any ideas of how to run a government. They knew what they didn't like and there were a lot of things that Nhu had done that they didn't like. Many thought that the strategic hamlet program was really bad. They were against the irregular forces that the CIA had helped finance in Central Vietnam, which were controlled politically by Diem's brother, but in fact were providing very effective security for the hamlets. I saw us heading for a train wreck. It seemed to be out of control. I saw Diem in late October, the day before McNamara saw him and it was really to talk about Nhu and about this newspaper business as much as anything. We talked about that and then we talked about the strategic hamlet program. We were still making some progress in the countryside in terms of the development effort. But, obviously it was being hurt because the army was

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paralyzed. Where there were effective local security forces they were able to maintain security, but where there were not, the Viet Cong were beginning to invade a number of hamlets.

Diem looked at me quizzically and said, "Is there going to be a coup against me?" I looked at him and just wanted to cry, and said, "I am afraid so, Mr. President." That was all we said about that. To this day I am affected by memories of that because after the coup occurred, which was several days later, I went to the palace and the two seats that we had been sitting on in this waiting room were riddled with bullet holes. And I had just been there a few days before.

Q: For the record this was early November when Diem and Nhu were both taken out of the palace and killed.

PHILLIPS: Well, actually they went out by an underground route, took refuge in a church and informed the coup leaders that they were there. The idea was that they were supposed to be taken to the airport and flown out of the country. For some reason, the plane was delayed, we couldn't get a plane there. I don't know why because supposedly that had been all set up. What actually happened apparently was that General Minh (Big Minh) decided to have them killed. This was not a decision of the revolutionary committee. He sent his own man in this armored personnel carrier with personal instructions to kill them. That guy was then subsequently arrested about four months later and assassinated in prison. But, I have talked to General Tran Van Don and General Kim about it. Both of them came to the conclusion that Big Minh was the guy who decided to do this. It was not a decision that he shared with anybody.

Q: Where were you when this happened?

PHILLIPS: I should tell you that in the meantime I had decided to come back home. My father had died in October. So I made a short trip for the funeral and arranged for my family to come back because I had to take over the family business, at least temporarily.

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I then went back to wind things up and that was when the coup occurred. I returned to Vietnam in late October and the coup occurred in early November and I stayed for about two weeks after that.

So far as the coup itself, I was having lunch with General Stilwell when he got a telephone call that the coup had started. Since my family had left, Lou Conein had asked me to go over and stay with his family because he was concerned about what might happen if there was a coup. So I did. He had gotten a couple of Filipino friends to guard the house. So there were about three or four of us with AR-15 rifles there in case the house got assaulted, because Lou's wife and two small children were there.

Q: You were actually only a couple more weeks in Vietnam, did you see a noticeable affect on the program you had been administering during that time?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes. There was the new revolutionary committee. I went to talk to them and spent time with General Kim and with Bui Diem who was an unofficial advisor to them. I went to see General Big Minh. I was very intent on salvaging what we were doing, and on saving the committee structure. I explained that there were a lot of things wrong with the strategic hamlet program, but they shouldn't disband it. I went to see Vice President Tho and I talked to him about it. I wrote a series of memoranda to these guys. Their initial impulse was to demolish anything that Diem might have been associated with. I said, "I don't care what you call it, call it by another name, but you are going to have to be doing the same thing because the basic program and approach is right." I also talked about the security issue. I said, "You guys have got to come up with a way of providing effective security for these hamlets." Well, they were so preoccupied with the political problems, with establishing their control, with chasing down and throwing in jail former elements of the Diem regime that I could tell the attention span was not all that great. I could get through to Kim, he understood what I was talking about, but everybody else was preoccupied.

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And Lodge, himself, was sort of fascinated by the fact that there was this big revolution which he didn't really understand. I went to see him the day after the coup, after it was known that Diem and Nhu had not only been assassinated but were buried in unmarked graves. I asked him to go talk to the junta to give Diem a decent funeral. I said, "Look, this guy is the first president of Vietnam under the first constitution of Vietnam. They are not just killing a man, they are killing a symbol. He did a lot of good and the Vietnamese people know it and even though he was killed he ought to be given a decent funeral. Otherwise the Catholics are going to be terribly unhappy and we are going to hear from them sooner or later. This is going to be real trouble." Lodge didn't understand any of it. He said, "Well, he is gone, dead and forgotten. You know, the same thing happened to me when I ran against Kennedy and lost the election in Massachusetts, the next day nobody knew who I was." I said, "I am sorry, Mr. Ambassador, this is not Massachusetts, this is Vietnam, this is different." I felt exhausted, sad and not very optimistic because I could see that the military who had taken over really didn't understand politics, and didn't understand how to get out and establish a sense of confidence. I knew that Minh had a charismatic personality but he was not very smart. He really needed somebody to tell him what to do. Lodge decided it was his role to tell Minh what to do, but he had no concept of how to do this in a Vietnamese context. So, they frittered away what psychological opportunity they had and then, of course, they were replaced by General Oanh in about six months.

Q: Well, you left pretty much right after that, didn't you?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I left on November 21, 1963. I was en route when Kennedy was assassinated.

Q: Did anyone tap you for your knowledge or insights when you came back?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes. I continued as an AID consultant without pay for quite a while and then I was a consultant to State. I helped Ambassador Unger when he set up the Coordinating Committee. I participated in all kinds of meetings. Lodge wanted me to come back

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to Vietnam and run the Rural Affairs program and I engaged in an extended indirect negotiation with him through Mike Dunn, who was his chief assistant. The conditions for my coming back were that I would do so only if Lansdale came too. The reason was, I didn't want to go through another political disaster. I didn't want to go through the situation again where we were developing a really good economic development program, that was tied in with the security effort, was focused on giving the Vietnamese people a stake in something that they might think was worth fighting for, when the whole political core in Saigon was rotten and there was nothing there to inspire anybody to fight for anything. Having gone through it once, I didn't want to go through it again. I said, "We have to help generate a political cause that holds up hope for the Vietnamese people, and there is only one guy that I know that understands this in the Vietnamese context and could help the Vietnamese to bring this about, and that was Lansdale. If he goes out there, I will go, if he doesn't, I won't." After a while those negotiations broke down.

Q: What was Lansdale doing?

PHILLIPS: He had retired at that point. His official retirement day was the day Diem was assassinated.

Q: Had he been playing any role up to then?

PHILLIPS: Marginal. McNamara had really marginalized him.

Q: They were two different types of people, two different approaches?

PHILLIPS: Yes. You can see that in his book where he gives Ed one line and says that there was nobody who knew anything about Vietnam except Lansdale, but he was a relatively junior officer who was not a "geopolitical expert." That was it. That was McNamara talking about the fact that there were no experts to tell him anything about Vietnam. Ed was a senior officer. He was in charge of special operations in the Pentagon.

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McNamara gave him 12 minutes when he came in. That was it. That is as much of a comment on McNamara as anything I know of.

Q: During this period when you were advising did you find yourself marginalized too?

PHILLIPS: There were several things that occurred. One was that I was helping a guy named Stoneman, who was the AID guy in charge of backstopping Vietnam, recruiting people for rural affairs, which continued. But Rural Affairs ran into trouble when a guy named Killen was sent out as AID Mission Director. He was one of these people who felt that if he didn't invent it it must not be any good. He tried to destroy it, the program, but it survived him. What happened there is another whole chapter. I helped recruit people, participated in meetings and did that sort of thing. I spent time informally with Senator Hubert Humphrey and his staff and after he became vice president he became the sponsor of the idea of getting Lansdale back to Vietnam. I was involved in the planning for that. Even though I was still running my engineering business, I took a month off in 1965 and went out with the Lansdale team and helped them get set up and informally tried to backstop some of what they were doing back here. In 1966 and 1967 I went out to Vietnam every year to try informally to help the Lansdale team, in addition to running the engineering business.

Q: On these trips that you were making back, what were you seeing, and how was the program going?

PHILLIPS: Before I went back in 1965, I had been receiving a lot of correspondence from Bert Fraleigh, who kept me informed as to what the Rural Affairs was doing. Also Colonel Bohannon was keeping me informed. He had been Ed's assistant in the Philippines in the Magsaysay era, and had been in Vietnam helping Ed in the 1954-55 period, but I had hired him on contract to help set up Chieu Hoi, which was a surrender program. The idea was we would model it on the program that Magsaysay had used against the Huks in the Philippines. So, Bo came over in the fall of 1962 and stayed on through 1965. I

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helped to recruit another guy who had worked for Ed in the Philippines, Mark Huss, who went out to Vietnam at the end of 1964. He became the principal liaison between Komer and the Vietnamese Revolutionary Development staff (the same Hoang Van Lac that I had worked with earlier). Mark also kept me informed. Lac was the one continuity on the Vietnamese side through all the government changes and everything else. So I gained through correspondence a pretty good notion of what was going on. Very quickly in 1964, I began to get impressions that things were going to hell in the provinces. Security was deteriorating. Then Oanh came in and it didn't get any better. Things were just not going anywhere at all. And, of course, the situation deteriorated militarily, the North Vietnamese were putting in regular units and we started to intervene with regular US forces. By the time I got back in 1965, we had 150,000 troops on the ground and it was becoming an American war.

I had thought somehow the thing could be turned around, but not with the emphasis that was being given to fighting the war as an American war. Vietnamization came too late. It should have been started at the beginning.

Q: Vietnamization began about 1969, I think.

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: Okay. I thank you very much.

End of interview