

GENERAL SAMUEL T. WILLIAMS

Interviewed by: Ted Gittinger

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Q: General Williams, what had been your assignments in the four or five years prior to your going to Vietnam in November of 1955?

WILLIAMS: Well, I can answer that specifically. In 1950 I was with Headquarters Army Field Forces at Fort Monroe, Virginia, as deputy G-3. The commanding general was General Mark Clark. A most outstanding officer. I went to Korea from there in 1952 and took command of the 25th Infantry Division. General Van Fleet, one of the best in our army was 8th Army commanding general. I stayed with that elite division and that assignment up until the time I left Korea, which was shortly after the armistice in July of 1953. However, the last couple of months of that assignment I was on duty with the 2nd Korean Corps, actually on loan. I still retained command of the 25th Division and [was] assigned to the 25th Division. But I turned command over to my senior general officer in the division, an artilleryman by the name of Louis Heath, while I went over and acted as deputy corps commander for the 2nd Korean Corps.

Q: Was that General Kwon, General Chung Il Kwon?

WILLIAMS: Yes. He later became chief of staff of the Korean army and I think later became an ambassador to the United States, though I'm not too sure about that. Later when I was in South Vietnam he came down and visited me there. Yes. There should be a picture here someplace on my wall. There's Chung Il Kwon right there and General Le of the Vietnamese army and myself and I forget who that admiral is-

Q: The admiral from Thailand.

WILLIAMS: Thailand, yes. Looks like four big fat frogs there. We were having a dinner party in Saigon when that picture was taken. From Korea I went to assignment in Sendai, Japan to command the 16th United States Army Corps.

Q: Those were occupation troops.

WILLIAMS: Yes. After about six months General [Maxwell] Taylor, then the 8th Army commander, asked that I return to Korea to command the 9th U.S. Army Corps Group. So I went back to Korea to command the 9th Corps Group. Then near the end of my second Korean tour, shortly after that, although still retaining command of the 9th Corps Group, which was three or four American divisions and one Korean corps - Korean 5th Corps if I remember correctly - I went up to General Taylor's headquarters as his deputy 8th Army commander. 1954 I came to San Antonio as deputy 4th Army commander.

The commanding general 4th Army at that time was Lieutenant General I. D. White, Armor. When White was ordered to Korea to become commanding general of the American forces in Korea and to get his fourth star, I became the commanding general of the 4th Army here at San Antonio.

In 1955 I received a message from General Taylor, now chief of staff, U.S. Army. He wanted to know if there was any cogent reason why I shouldn't go to South Vietnam to relieve, or to replace General Mike, or Iron Mike, O'Daniel.

Q: Excuse me, Sir, you called him Iron Mike.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: And I have heard you called Hanging Sam.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me why or how you acquired that nickname?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I was stationed at Camp Swift, Texas, in command of the 378th Infantry, the 95th Division, and a soldier, a truck driver, picked up a nine or ten year old girl that lived in Bastrop - Camp Swift, Texas is outside of Bastrop, or was - and he raped a child and in doing so was so vicious that he tore her body about six inches. We were all quite perturbed about that because we had some colored troops at Camp Swift, and Bastrop was not used to colored soldiers and we were all on edge about that, being fearful the rapist might be black. Frankly, I was quite relieved when I found out he was a white soldier out of my regiment and not some Negro soldier.

But anyway, he was quickly apprehended. We had conclusive proof that he was the man who committed the murder. A court martial was convened and I was a member of the court. We heard all the witnesses pro and con, and then they brought in two men to testify that the soldier was insane. After the defense had put up these two psychiatrists to testify that soldier was insane, the prosecution brought in two other psychiatrists to prove that he was sane. Well, we were dragging on there and wasting time. Then pretty soon they brought in two more, which made six psychiatrists, and I asked, "What are these two people for?" I wasn't the president of the court, I was merely a member of it. The president should have asked the question. They said, "These two gentlemen are going to tell us what the other four meant when they were testifying here." And speaking too quickly and probably not very smartly I said, "Well, we don't give a damn what the psychiatrists say, the man is proven guilty and we're going to hang him and we might as well get this trial over as quick as we can." So we got it over as quickly as we could and we sentenced the man to death.

The news got out, and people started calling me Hanging Sam. Terrible nickname. But by God, it's been in the army for an awful long time and to some a name of endearment. Now, a lot of people thought it was because I was at Nuremberg and had the Nuremberg Fourth Enclave at the time of the execution of the war crime criminals. But I had that name long before I was at Nuremberg.

Well, now to come back to finish your question, Taylor sent me a message and wanted to know if there were any cogent reasons why I shouldn't go to South Vietnam to relieve Mike O'Daniel, who was due for relief. Mike had already retired once, he was on retired status then, and he had been out there for a couple of years and Department of the Army thought there should be a change. I said there was no particular reason I shouldn't go, except for the last ten or twelve years I had spent most of my time either in Europe or Korea or Japan and outside the United States. The Department of the Army came back and said that I would go on such-and-such a date.

So I went out to Vietnam in October of 1955 and relieved General John O'Daniel. He came back to the States and retired for a second time. That's what I did the last four or five years before I went out to Vietnam. I went out there presumably on a two-year tour. In other words, I was supposed to come back in 1957, but my tour was extended several times. There was a provision in regulations at that time, whether the same regulations hold true now or not I don't know, whereby the President could retain beyond retirement age four general officers. They asked me if I would stay on beyond retirement age because I had already passed my sixtieth birthday and had possibly thirty-nine or forty years service. I said yes, and so my tour was extended once or twice, I think, I'm pretty sure, partly at the insistence of President Ngo Dinh Diem. My relations with Diem were very pleasant. Later I received notice that I would retire on the thirty-first day of August of 1960. I did, and came back here to San Antonio to establish our home.

Q: When you were getting ready to go to South Vietnam, were you given any special briefing, any special instructions either from Washington or did perhaps General O'Daniel give you any special briefing or advice when you arrived?

WILLIAMS: Well, first, I was sent to Washington and was briefed by everyone that you can imagine up there, all the G-1, 2, 3, 4s, the Adjutant General, and so on and so forth, the Chief of Staff, or people in his office, and was also sent over to the State Department to be interviewed there. I understood that I was to go to the State Department to see if they would be willing for me to be the chief of MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] in Vietnam. Seemingly that amounted to little. I went to State, was in a waiting room, then I was taken to another room, all was very casual. Someone, I don't remember now who it was, came in and sat down and we talked for a few minutes about this and that, nothing of importance. I remember one question he asked me, he asked if I spoke French, and I told him no, that if I went out to Vietnam I would have to rely on French interpreters. He didn't ask me if I could speak Vietnamese. Of course, I couldn't, but they didn't ask me that question. We sat there and chatted pleasantly for maybe five or ten minutes, like you and I were doing here a few minutes ago. Finally I said, "Well, I came over here to be interviewed prior to my being detailed to South Vietnam." He said, "General, you have just been interviewed. We hope you have a pleasant tour out there. Good morning," so forth, got up and walked out. Now that was my State Department briefing. But the other people in Washington, including the G-1,2,3,4 of the Army were very thorough, in fact, so much so that in the one, two, or three days I was there I couldn't remember half of what they told me.

There was one thing they did tell me that I found of particular interest later. The G-2 of the army at that time was an old acquaintance of mine. He picked me up in one of those offices at the Pentagon and took me to the G-2 offices, the Army Department G-2, which was his office. We went through a series of doors which were unlocked in front of me and locked behind me. He was with me all the time, he was a major general, the G-2. Finally we came to a very small briefing room and sat down. A major got up and started to brief us on conditions in Vietnam. What he told us, I can't recall, although I was drinking it all in as much as I could.

But I remembered distinctly, he said, "Now the CIA is going to try to infiltrate your group, and if you get any idea at all of any CIA infiltration, let us know instantly." I said, "I'll sure do it." Later on while I was at Washington I was briefed by the CIA and they told me they had eleven people in MAAG. I thought, Jesus God Almighty, these people with the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. And it turned out, now you mentioned [Edward] Lansdale, Lansdale had a section of eleven CIA men in Saigon at the same time this major in the army G-2 was saying if you detect one CIA man, let us know instantly.

Q: I want to come to that. What was your general impression after all of your briefings? What kind of an assignment did you think this was going to be?

WILLIAMS: Hell, of course, I left Washington with mixed feelings, but I had no apprehensions about the job at all because I had served with, or had had contact with, a lot of foreign people. I had not only fought the Germans in two wars, I had been in the army of occupation in 1919 also, and I didn't leave Germany until 1949 or 1950 after the last war. I had been used to getting along with the Germans, both civilian and police and with the Red Army and the Czechs. I had had quite a bit of experience with the Koreans, and I had a good rapport with them and President Rhee. When I would go in the lines in Korea with my division, if there was a Korean division on my right or on my left I made it my business to cultivate the division commanders and the regimental commanders of those Korean units, and so I got to know them pretty well. I got to know many of them damn good as a matter of fact, and that's one reason undoubtedly that when the 2nd ROK Corps got in trouble in June and July of 1953, General Taylor called me on the telephone about five or six o'clock one morning, at my CP, and told me to go over to the 2nd ROK Corps. I had gone over there and stayed a couple of weeks. That was in June. One day when he came by the 2nd ROK Corps I told him, "I'm not needed here any longer. These people can now take care of themselves." He said, "All right, you go back home." So I went back to the 25th Division.

Then one morning in July, again along about daylight, he called me on the phone and he said, "Your friends over to your right are in trouble. Get over there as fast as you can go." I said, "I'll take off in five minutes." I did, going by helicopter. I took my aide de camp, Lieutenant by the name of George McBride, and started him out with my "shotgun" man and a Korean sergeant I had as an interpreter. They went by jeep and I went by helicopter immediately to the 2nd ROK Corps. The 2nd ROK Corps was under heavy attack and pretty serious situation, not too bad initially, but - well, there's no use going into that last big Chinese offensive, I don't think you want to know about that.

Q: Was that the Kumsong salient?

WILLIAMS: That's right, that's right. They hit the 2nd ROK Corps with a Chinese army, and we had an awful hard time. That wasn't so much the fault of the 2nd ROK Corps, but on the left of the 2nd ROK Corps was the United States 9th Army Corps. 8th Army had assigned some Korean divisions to the 9th Corps and one of them happened to be on the 9th Corps' right flank, which made them on the left flank of the 2nd ROK Corps. Knowing the danger of boundaries in situations of that type, I was careful to see I had that left boundary tied in tight as it could possibly be. On my right flank, the 2nd Corps' right flank, was Lieutenant General I. D. White with the 10th U.S. Corps. I had no particular fear there because we had an enormous big river that separated us and the 10th Corps and I wasn't too apprehensive about anyone coming around through I. D. White's sector.

Each morning along about four-thirty or five o'clock I made a habit of checking these different ROK divisions of the 2nd Corps. There were four or five. I did it by telephone. This particular morning I called the CG of the 6th ROK Division, which was my left division, and asked him how things were on his front. He said his division was all right. Now, I had caused him to have his left frontline regiment - now, you can understand this because you've had military service. However, some people listening to this are going to get confused, but anyway, they shouldn't. The very left ROK division in the 2nd ROK Corps had sent over into the American 9th Corps a small detachment, I think a squad or a little more, and the same way with that division over there in the 9th Corps, which if I remember correctly was the Capitol ROK Division; they had sent over a light detachment into the 6th ROK Division. So I had those people interlocked. I asked the division commander how he was getting along, he said all right. Because we were under constant attack, but the Chinese were making little progress. We were holding. I said, "What about your left regiment?" He said, "Okay." I said, "Your contact with the Capitol ROK Division okay?" "Yes, Sir, it sure is." That was all there was to that conversation. I then phoned the G-2 and G-3 of the 9th Corps and got an all's well from them, also.

I bring this out though for a particular purpose, because later that morning, not too much later that morning, one of the ROK division commanders in the 2nd ROK Corps reported to me, "There are some Chinamen back in my artillery." That didn't perturb me at all, because our 2nd Corps lines were intact. I said, "Well, some of those Chinese have infiltrated. Get a couple of patrols back there and scoop up the infiltrators and get them the hell out of the way."

Shortly after that, General Max Taylor sets down near me in a chopper. He had found out from corps headquarters where I was and he came to that particular place and sat down in the field there in the chopper and asked me how things were. I said, "All right, we're holding. A few Chinese showed up back in our artillery this morning, but they'll be taken care of." He said, "I'm not too sure." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "That Capitol ROK Division" - I think it was the Capitol ROK, now it could have been the White Horse Division, but it doesn't make any difference, it was the division under the 9th Corps. He said, "They gave way during the night and there's no ROK division there now. There's not just a few Chinese in your artillery. The Chinese are now marching in strength where that ROK division was. They're marching through there in columns of four. They will attempt to turn the left flank of the 2nd ROK Corps." Well, hell, that presented an entirely different situation, a serious one.

But finally we got out of that all right. They drove us back five kilometers on one flank and fifteen kilometers on the other before we could counter-attack. It was a tough battle and the Koreans were most appreciative of my help in it, but I don't think you want to go into that. You're talking about Vietnam.

Q: Well, let's bring it back to the point when you're leaving the United States for Vietnam.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: What was your first impression of your MAAG people and Saigon when you first arrived?

WILLIAMS: Well, I would say the whole thing looked like it was an enormous mess. It wasn't anyone's fault particularly; we didn't have very many people out there. That was one trouble with MAAG, they never had enough people to do what they were told to do. And there were very few U.S. military there - Mike O'Daniel didn't have a great deal of help. He had one brigadier that was not the strongest general officer I've ever known, and his headquarters was in a dilapidated, or gutted Chinese building in Cholon. The noise there was terrific from the street noises and things of that nature. Mike hadn't been able to set up any workable administrative system in his headquarters. Frankly I would say that Mike, I had known him since 1925 and we were intimate friends, was not an administrator. He was an aggressive fighter in peace and war but he knew no more about running an office than the man in the moon, and he didn't have anyone to run it for him. So he had no files nor reliable records nor anything of that nature. He was out all the time from daylight till dark, as hard as he could go, trying to get things done out in the field. That was the impression I had of MAAG when I got there. One man driving hard to get things done and with little help.

Q: What exactly was General O'Daniel trying to accomplish?

WILLIAMS: He was trying to get some kind of organization in the Vietnamese army and air force and navy, but his primary work had been at that time to help receive almost a million refugees from up around the Hanoi area. They were moving down into South Vietnam to escape the to escape the communist government of North Vietnam. Now, you seldom hear or read about that, but right after the Geneva accords, Ho Chi Minh said he'd let those people go south that wanted to go south. Well, they didn't let all go but they let a hell of a lot of them go south, and there was no organization to receive them, feed them or do anything else, so Mike O'Daniel at least got tents shipped in there and pitched camps for refugees. I have no idea what the figure was, but I've heard the figure ran anywhere from five hundred thousand to almost a million refugees that came south. That's what Mike was doing mostly, and he was doing it mostly by himself with his bare hands as the South Vietnamese he had to work with were not used to doing things like that.

Q: How many people were in MAAG at about this time?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I think we had around two hundred maybe.

Q: A large company?

So Mike didn't have enough Americans to work with, and for a long time I was terribly handicapped before I could get any additional people. Finally we were able to get what we called "training teams," a few technicians for this, a few technicians for that, to come out, a team of three or four, something like that, and stay for a certain number of days or weeks and then go back. That's the way we were doing it because it took the bureaucracy of the Control Commission so long to operate, the teams would be in and out before the hell they could do anything about it. That's the way we got any additional help at all.

Q: Was the situation ever resolved?

WILLIAMS: No. No, it was not resolved, and it went further than that, because each piece of equipment - and we're fixing to get into that again I'm afraid - shipped in there had to be a replacement for a piece of equipment that was there at the time of the Geneva accords.

Q: How could you know what was there at the time?

WILLIAMS: You couldn't, you couldn't. But anytime that we got anything shipped in I had to show the commission that some number of items were being destroyed. Regardless if it was vehicles or anything else, we had to show item for item. Say we're getting in ten jeeps. All right, we had to show them ten jeeps that were going on the salvage pile right then to be cut up. So then we could bring in ten more jeeps. They made things as rough as possible. Pure harassment. I remember that one time one of my sergeants was absolutely browned off. American soldiers will only put up with so much. He came to me because he was cutting up some old one-pounder cannons. Very likely you are not familiar with those, but in World War II we had a one-pounder gun that was our original anti-tank gun. You'd shoot that against any tank and its shell would bounce off, but nevertheless that was what we had. Well, we were going to destroy some of those to get them off our invoice. And we were cutting those barrels in about two or two-and-a-half-foot lengths and throwing them in the scrap heap. The commission came along and said, "You can't do that. You've got to go back and cut these barrels again, and each one of those two-foot barrels you have to cut them into one-foot lengths." Well, that's just harassment.

Blowing ammunition. There was ammunition all over Vietnam at that time, and large piles of it. I asked my counterpart there, a Frenchman, [Pierre] Jacquot, General Jacquot, "What the hell were the French doing with so much ammunition? Here, there, yonder, there's piles of it all over Vietnam." He said, "It's simple. We were getting ammunition from you, from the States, and if we wanted some ammunition at Hue, it would be better to have it unloaded at Hue than it would be to unload it in Saigon and we then tried to ship it up there. So anyplace where we needed the ammunition, that's where we asked the ammunition be placed." Then they ran off and left lots of it, and there it was. It had deteriorated and had to be destroyed before we could ship in some decent replacementammunition.

I remember one time I notified the commission that we were going to blow a certain number of tons of ammunition at a certain place and time and we'd dug an enormous pit and put that old ammo in there. They hadn't shown up, our people went ahead and had that pit about half full on the way to blow it and the commission came and they said, "What's in there?" The U.S. sergeant said so and so, and they said, "We don't know it. Dig it out of there, let us see it and then put it back." That's when the sergeant blew his top and came to me and said, "General, we're just not going to do it." I said, "I know you're not going to do it. Just tell them to go to hell and go ahead and blow it." Hell, the commission didn't do anything about it, but it's that harassment - oh, they'd make reports about it, they'd make a report to Hanoi, they'd make reports of it to the Vietnamese and so forth, and to Washington: "the Americans are not doing this, that and the other. They are bullheaded." But that was the kind of stuff we were running into all the time. It was just like molasses in January. Did that answer your question?

Q: Yes, Sir. I was just going to ask you about certain people. Now I think at one place General Lansdale says that he spent his first interview with you getting royally chewed out. Do you remember that incident?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I remember it quite well. Because he hasn't let me forget it. First of all, I didn't see Lansdale until after I moved that headquarters out of Cholon, where I had found it, and taken over another building in a better part of town. It was a larger building and better located. The chief of staff or headquarters commandant, or whoever was handling that kind of work at that time, had divided it up and assigned the offices here, there and yonder. Then it suddenly dawned on me - Lansdale was there and I think he had eleven people with him, but they had not come to my attention prior to that, and if they had, it just went over my head. But one morning, one day, I was coming up the front steps of the MAAG headquarters and an American, or at least a Caucasian, unshaven, dirty as hell, in a very dilapidated automobile drove up and got out and left his automobile standing there where he shouldn't have, and went up the steps into the headquarters. The first officer I saw I asked, "Who is that character?" I didn't know if he had any business being in the MAAG headquarters. At that time we didn't have guards on our headquarters. He said, "He's one of Lansdale's people." So I sent for Lansdale and I told him about this incident, and I told him I wanted him to get his people spruced up a little bit.

Well, he didn't make it clear to me, which he should have, or maybe I was a little slow on the uptake, but he had his people looking that way on purpose. They were CIA operators and they were working all over the country and he didn't want them dressed up looking like good, prosperous Americans.

Q: Were these military personnel in civilian clothes?

WILLIAMS: I don't know, I don't know if they were military or civilian. I never inquired into his business that much. Lansdale, I was talking to him in my office and he was sitting there - do you know Lansdale?

Q: No, Sir.

WILLIAMS: Well, he's a very fine-looking officer. But he also has a dreamy look. He can lounge back on a divan or a chair and kind of look at the ceiling, look at the walls with a kind of a dreamy look, and you just think that you're spitting against the wind, that he's not hearing a damn thing you say. So I had to wake him up. He wrote in his book [In the Midst of War: An American Mission to Southeast Asia], which he sent and asked me what I thought about it, that I jumped on him and did it in such a voice that I could be heard all over Vietnam. Maybe I did.

But he also wrote in that book that I reminded him of either his father or his grandfather. Anyway, he said he took a liking to me right then and actually invited me to supper that night, and we had a very pleasant time. Well, I don't remember that part of it. Lansdale and I never did have any major differences. I didn't know much about his business, and I don't think he knew a hell of a lot about mine. There was mutual respect. I liked him.

He was working at that time with a group of people that he had brought over from the Philippines, and he never told me, or no one else told me, but it was my assumption that he had brought these people over, and actually they were men and women nurses, maybe Red Cross people, and they worked all over Vietnam and I think those were his informers. I'm sure they were.

Q: I think he called that Operation Brotherhood.

WILLIAMS: That's right.

Q: What was his official capacity exactly?

WILLIAMS: He was a member of MAAG, and his rank at that time was lieutenant colonel.

Q: But you more or less held him on a loose rein?

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. I had nothing to do with his business at all, never gave him any orders, because I believed he was working directly for the CIA and I didn't want to get my fingers into that business at all, especially after the army told me that if I found a CIA man in my headquarters to report it immediately. I thought, if that's the way they're running things back there, if they don't know what's going on, well, I'm not going to enter into it at all.

Q: Did you ever notify Washington that Lansdale was working for the CIA and not for - ?

WILLIAMS: I don't ever remember mentioning Lansdale in any official letters or dispatches. I gave him a free rein.

Q: Did he report to you on what he was doing or directly to Washington?

WILLIAMS: As I recall he would come in every once in a while and give me briefings and discuss conditions and so forth, and I judged that he told me what he was damn willing for me to know, and that was all. Any reports he was making, official reports, I'm positive he was making direct to his people back in Washington. I had too many problems of my own to think about CIA affairs.

Lansdale is a very unusual man. He's had a lot of experience in Asia with Asiatics and with the Filipinos. He got this notoriety of being the man that they modeled The Ugly American after, which I don't think is true. I don't think they modeled him on Lansdale at all. Lansdale is intelligent. I mean by that that he knew his way around. I think he's smart as hell. I like him.

Q: What was his relationship to President Diem?

Q: Lansdale came back about two years before you did. Isn't that about right? Something on that order.

WILLIAMS: I don't remember.

Q: Do you know what he did after he came back to the States? I've heard that he continued to work on Vietnam problems, and I was wondering if you had any contact with him after he left Vietnam?

WILLIAMS: I think we exchanged personal letters.

Q: Not official contact?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no. I presume he came back and was working with the CIA here in the States. That's the best of my knowledge. In years past I've had a terrific amount of correspondence with the people, officers and soldiers. I get letters now from soldiers that I haven't seen in twenty or thirty years. Sometimes they come see me. The same with the officers. Sometimes an officer will call me long distance on the telephone and I'll have to get out of it as well as I can by saying, "Well, by George, when was the last time we served together?" If he tells me that, then I can chop these periods of time off into compartments and often be able to place a person. Sometimes I can, sometimes I can't. But I mention that because it would not be unusual for me not to remember any specific correspondence between myself and Lansdale at this minute.

Q: Right. I don't mean to dwell on Lansdale. It's only that he has a lot of notoriety, and you're obviously a primary source about Lansdale. So I don't want to let that get away untouched. What was the atmosphere in Saigon in the countryside when you arrived? How would you describe the-

WILLIAMS: Very pleasant, very pleasant. We had no problems there except the problem of dealing with Vietnamese who were inefficient. Now, when I say inefficient, I'm - well, let me take specific cases. The French were there and they controlled everything. Most of the merchants either thought a great deal of the French or they might have been French merchants. I testified before Mike Mansfield's Senate committee in Washington one time that the French objected to our being there and resented it very much. Our State Department took exception to that and Ambassador Durbrow tried to get me to withdraw that statement. I declined to withdraw it, and I told him, "How in the hell can I withdraw it? You know at one of these committee meetings how many stenographers there are typing as the witness talks. Here are all these senators up here listening to me. You want me to come out tomorrow and say I didn't say so and so? How goddamned stupid would that be?" Threats were made but I refused to change my statements.

But the French objected to us. They always said that I was trying to do a job that couldn't be done. They said, "You can't organize a Vietnamese army. The Vietnamese will never fight. They're not worth a damn." My answer to that was, on one occasion to a senior French officer out there, "Hell, they just got through whipping your ass and driving you out of this country. What do you mean they won't fight?" "Well," he said, "that's the Vietnamese up north." I said, "Well, they're bound to be cousins to these down here. I think they'll fight if they're given proper training and have any leadership."

But it must be remembered that the senior officers in the Vietnamese army had been lieutenants and captains in the French colonial army. The chief of staff, the senior officer in the Vietnamese army, was a man by the name of Lieutenant General Ty, spelled T-Y. Ty had been a noncommissioned officer in the French colonial forces in World War I, in a transportation company, a truck transport company and had served in France. In World War II he was a company commander and a battalion commander. The Japanese came in and the French were cooperating with them at that time, and suddenly when the Vietnamese found out that the Japanese were going to take over - Ty told me this himself-he said, "I told my soldiers what was happening." He said, "I'm going to the jungle. You fellows go where you like." He said, "We disintegrated overnight (snaps fingers), just like that." Now, he was very outspoken in telling me that. I think the same thing happened to a hell of a lot of these Vietnamese officers that I had to work with because when the French came back, by grace of the Americans and the British after World War II, they arrested some of these officers and court martialed them. But they didn't sentence them as far as I know, but they threw the fear of God in them.

Now we'll take this man Big [Duong Van] Minh as an example. Big Minh was a very close friend of a man by the name of T-H-O, who became vice president of Vietnam. Big Minh and I were very close. I asked him one time, "What was your relation with Vice President [Nguyen Ngoc] Tho?" He said, "We were in prison together." I said, "Where?" He said, "Right here. The French had us in prison. It was terrible. They had us confined, many of us, in very small rooms. It was more horrible than you could think of. There was no place to relieve ourselves and we'd defecate on the floor, we'd urinate on the floor, and sometimes we'd be ankle deep. Tho got released." Why the French let him out I don't know, and that's beside the point. But he said, "After Tho got out, he got me released." Big Minh had been a first lieutenant in the French colonial army at the time the Japanese came in and he took off. So the French were holding him for desertion. But they never did try him, to the best of my knowledge. I think he feared them.

So these people that we were working with had held jobs as lieutenants or captains, at the most, in the French colonial army, but in which they were never allowed to do anything of any importance.

Now we'll take another incident, that of Tran Van Don, who was Ty's chief of staff when I was there, and was also an intimate friend of Big Minh. Don served in the French army, not the colonial army, but the French army in World War II, as he was a Frenchman. His father was a doctor and had gone from Vietnam to France and the family was there when Don was born. So Don was a Frenchman by nationality. World War II came on. Don went into the army. He was commissioned in the French regular army, not the colonial. I said, "Well, Don, did any of these race problems ever come up at different times?" He said, "Well, no, not exactly. But this would happen if my company commander, who would be a Frenchman, happened to go someplace and I would be the senior lieutenant, something would happen, and a French lieutenant would come and take command and I would be sent somewhere else until the regular company commander came back." So that's the way they were treating these people.

You've asked questions in here about Diem and his officers. Now, we'll take the man by the name of [Mai Huu] Xuan, X-U-A-N. Diem told me on one occasion he didn't trust him. He was either brigadier or major general at that time. I said, "Why?" He said, "Because he was once in the French army intelligence. Any man who was ever once in the French army intelligence is always in the French army intelligence up until the day he dies. And so that man is still under obligation to the French army intelligence. That's why I don't trust him as a general in the Vietnamese army." Much later this was the man in charge of Diem and his brother when Diem was murdered.

Q: Was this a common problem, this divided allegiance of officers?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Most of those people had dual citizenship and had dual passports.

Now we'll take an occasion when the French were turning over to us their excess property that they didn't want, we'd find that in each one of these warehouses or depots, there would be a Vietnamese officer as second-in-command. The French would turn over this material and we'd go in there to look at it, see what they had turned in and try to invoice it as we didn't know what was there. We'd find property in the most terrible condition. Boxes of spare parts broken open, and the paperwork inside the box listing contents, spare parts for an M-16 or spare parts for an M-1 or whatnot, they'd be gone. I'd say to this Vietnamese, second in command, "Well, you've been working here, you've been assigned to this depot for how long?" Such and such. "Well, why does this mess occur? Where are the records? And those officers would invariably say, and I believed them, because I heard it so many times, "I had nothing to do. I was not allowed to do anything. Sure, I was carried here as a deputy for this depot. I don't know what's in this depot, what comes in or what goes out, because I was never allowed to do anything or see anything. But the French could always say, "I have a Vietnamese deputy here."

Now it comes back to advisors again, which we worked out by getting these U.S. training teams out. If I went into a storehouse or warehouse that covers hundreds of square feet of storage I find there's crate after crate of spare parts, for weapons, rifles, machine guns, automatic rifles, mortars or anything else. The boxes have been torn open, the stuff not necessarily spilled out on the floor, but sometimes out on the floor. I'd look at that, and well, hell, ninety-nine times out of a hundred I could look at it and I'd say, "I don't know whether this comes out of a Browning automatic rifle or whether it came out of an M-1 rifle." Because I didn't know enough about spare parts. The Vietnamese didn't know anything about spare parts. I was trying to get trained ordnance people from the States to come over there and try to sort this stuff out. Otherwise it was just going to waste as junk. I couldn't get it done. Now the Secretary of the Army, Mr. [Wilber M.] Brucker, was with me a hundred percent, but he couldn't get it done.

So there was one problem. Vietnamese officer and the noncommissioned officers had seldom been allowed to do anything. They had never been given command. The French had gone so far as to organize what they called light infantry Vietnamese battalions to fight the North Vietnamese, and their comment was, "We formed these light battalions to throw them in against the North Vietnamese. We let the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese get out there and wallow in the mud with each other. What happens, we don't give a damn." Now a smart Vietnamese officer, one that's really been through the French schools in France could see what was happening to them. Now for instance, along about the time of Dien Bien Phu in that time period - one of them told me this one time when I was watching a division maneuver exercise. I saw these people, the regimental commanders and battalions commanders, seemed apprehensive and were always looking over their shoulder, and so I had conversations with a senior officer through my interpreter. The last fight that several of those officers had been into was like this.

They had been on a campaign up north with the French and the French were of course quite strong, they had a division or so, or several regiments. They took this one Vietnamese regiment, and said, "We're going to attack. You're going to lead out. You're going to lead the attack. We're right behind you with a French regiment here and a French regiment there and when we get going right, we're coming in here and going in there to support you." And the senior officer said, "We'd started the attack and got going good and looked around to wait for the French to come up on our right and left, but they started a withdrawal action at the same time they ordered us to attack. That left us alone and we were defeated badly." Now they'd tell me stories like that. So they didn't trust anyone, and it took a great deal of living with and association with the Vietnamese to get them to change over and have some semblance of confidence with the Americans that they were working with. At first they just didn't trust anyone at all. Finally the military began to accept MAAG as good friends and cooperated. Well, I could talk about that for ages, but I don't think that's what you want.

Q: Well, what were you getting the Vietnamese army ready for? What was the prime threat as you analyzed it in those early days?

WILLIAMS: When I had my last conversation in the Pentagon with the Chief of Staff of the army, or his staff, they told me that there was an agreement, presumed agreement, that general free elections would be held in Vietnam, North and South Vietnam, one year after the signing of the Geneva accords, and I believe without going back, but somewhere in my mind the Geneva accords were signed in June or July. If the elections were not held, then North Vietnam was going to attack and conquer South Vietnam. They said, "Now, we don't believe that President Diem is going to agree to general elections." Well, they were right, he wouldn't agree. So, the thing uppermost in my mind when I got there in October was that I had until next July to get something up on the [17th] Parallel to withstand an attack in July of 1956.

That was my primary purpose, to get something up there and get them in some kind of shape, and I believed that so strongly that - although I didn't have the authority to command, I just went up there. I think the 1st Vietnamese Division was in that area at that time. I went up there and lived with that division commander for about a week before I thought the attack was going to be made and stayed up there for about an extra week, so that I could be there and be of any assistance I could with those people in case the attack came. So that's what I had in mind when I went in there in 1955, that we were going to fight a North Korean type of invasion in July of 1956. As a matter of fact, I thought that for at least two years. I thought each year that this was going to be next thing to come.

Q: Were the sects still much of a problem when you arrived in South Vietnam?

WILLIAMS: Yes. To a degree.

Q: The Bao Dai-

WILLIAMS: They were.

Q: -or the Hoa Hao, I mean.

WILLIAMS: Yes, they were, but not both at the same time. When one sect would be up in arms, the others would seem to be taking it easy. In other words, as I remember it, they never did fight all at one time. Incidentally this man Big Minh I spoke of a while ago, had gotten a semblance of fame and notoriety there, before I arrived. He had taken some Vietnamese troops and cleaned out some of those sects from around Saigon. Not only did Lansdale tell me this, but Mike O'Daniel told me that when Big Minh almost had the sects where he was going to destroy them completely, the French moved some troops in between the Vietnamese and the sects. The Vietnamese decided they were going to call the battle off because if they didn't call it off they'd have to fight through the French troops to get to the sects.

Q: Was that the Binh Xuyen, or do you remember that?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember. It was down in the south, below Saigon. You see, the French had us, in many ways, because among other troops that they had, they had some Foreign Legionnaires, some of the best-looking soldiers you ever saw in your life. Any time I went to French headquarters there would always be one of those Legionnaires or two of them on guard at the door. I used to talk to them. I couldn't speak German, but I made a pass at it.

Q: Were they mostly Germans?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Almost 90 percent. With those French Legionnaires, the French could do anything they wanted to. I never had any close contact with any French soldiers in Vietnam, only French officers. The only French soldiers I ever came in contact with were Foreign Legionnaires. They had a Moroccan band with them. One time I said to General Jacquot, the commander-in-chief of Indochina, Indochine they called it, "I want to give your bandmaster some cigars." He said, "That's fine." So the next time I went to his headquarters, I took a box of cigars and I gave them to the bandmaster and I told him to pass them around among those bandsmen and he did. Jacquot was over on the veranda watching me. He said, "I thought you wanted to give the bandmaster a cigar." I said, "Well, you know damn well I wouldn't be cheap enough to come over here with one cigar." Without a doubt Jacquot didn't like it because I gave his bandsmen cigars.

But, as a result of that, I send an aide-de-camp, an officer by the name of Jack [John M.] Shultz that now lives in Austin, over there with my tape recorder and got the bandmaster to record some of their Moroccan music. That tape right there on my shelf, "Foreign Legion Bands, 1956," about one half a reel, ends about graduation number thirty.

Well, I don't know how we got on the subject of the Foreign Legion, but anyhow, for example, [G. Frederick] Reinhardt - Ambassador Reinhardt. Ambassador Reinhardt, who was ambassador when I got there. He phoned me up one morning, he said, "There are tanks rolling down behind my house going down to the river and being loaded on ships. Why don't you stop them?" I said, "Jacquot has got the bayonets, I haven't any troops." Well, it suddenly dawned on him that the man with the bayonets, by God, was the one who controlled. A lot of people don't realize that, that you get into a situation that way, any diplomacy goes to hell. The man who's got the soldiers and the bayonets is going to do what he wants to until he gets tired or until the bureaucracy can get around to making protests. But that quite surprised him. I told him, "You can't keep those people from loading on anything here that they want to take to France."

Mr. [John Foster] Dulles came to Saigon. He was coming up from Australia I remember and he sent me a wire, or sent me a cable before he got there, "Give me an invoice of American property issued to the French during such-and-such a period." Well, that was for three or four years, since 1954 certainly. I had no such records. Mike O'Daniel had no such records. I immediately went to Washington with a TWX and said, "Mr. Dulles is coming here, going to be here at such-and-such a time and he wants an invoice of the property the U.S. furnished the French. Will you send it immediately?" I got a reply back that said, "There's no such record in Washington. All we can do is give you the dollar amounts."

Anyway, when Mr. Dulles came in, I reported to him: "You asked for an invoice of property that we had furnished the French. We have no such invoice as that. Neither do your friends back in Washington have such a thing as that. Further, I can tell you right now that the French are stealing us blind here in this place. They're taking out equipment that they have no authority to take out, and I have no means to stop them." He said, "What did you expect? Of course, they're going to steal you blind. They're going to take anything they can get their hands on. They have ships to haul it with. They're going to do it."

I sent a message back to Washington that the French were taking out more than they were supposed to. In other words, a decision had been made, between Washington and Paris that when the French forces evacuated South Vietnam that they would take out a certain amount of equipment and no more. In other words, they would take out a full TO & E [table of organization and equipment] for all the troops they had in Vietnam. I reported, "They're taking out much, much more than they have TO in troops here." They came back from Washington to me and said, "That's impossible. The French wouldn't break an agreement in that manner."

Several months later, after they had completely evacuated, the chief of MAAG in France sent a message to me as the chief of MAAG in Vietnam, "The warehouses here are full of equipment, military equipment from South Vietnam. Where are the records and how do I pick the equipment up on the French records here?" I send him back a message - I knew this officer although I don't remember now who it was - I replied, "That's impossible, because Washington told me the French wouldn't do a thing like that." But I also sent both messages back to Washington and said, "Here are the warehouses" - Jacquot had boasted in the French newspapers that his warehouses were bulging with equipment that he had brought from South Vietnam - "Here is property theft that I told you about some time ago that you said was not happening at all." I heard not another word from anyone about it. Well, there's nothing anyone could have done about it at that date. It was an accomplished fact.

Q: Let me ask you what your first impressions of President Diem were?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember my very first impressions. I don't remember. He was a very small man in stature. I say very small, I imagine Diem might have been five foot, one or two [inches], maybe not that tall, and inclined to be stout, portly. Always well dressed. That is, to this extent, he had an affinity for white sharkskin suits, he always wore a collar and tie, and his shoes were polished, his hands, nails and teeth were clean. His hair always well combed, his face hairless. He was a great talker. It was not unusual for him to have me sit down beside of him, and talk to me for one or two hours without ever stopping for a breath. His office was spartan as was his bedroom. An army cot, table and two chairs. Our conferences presented a problem that I was able to solve to a degree. I was able to get, at various times, different American officers who could speak French and at the same time someone who had enough military knowledge to know what we talked about and enough economic and political knowledge so what was said wasn't foreign to them. They would sit there, and every once in a while - initially I'd say, "Mr. President, stop just a minute," and then I'd tell this man to tell me what the President was saying.

Then after I got to know him better, or he got to know me better, I suggested, "This is not going as well as it should because my memory is not as good as yours and I can't remember everything that you tell me here and all the problems we discuss. I've got a good interpreter, and I have him interrupt us occasionally, Why not just let him take notes and there will be no interruption, and then when we get back to my office we'll put his notes into a draft that I can read, so that I can know exactly all that was said." And he bought that.

Consequently, thereafter that was the method of operation. When I would get back to my headquarters and before the interpreter was able to get something on his mind that would divert his thought to something else, I had him sit down in my office and with the notes he had write out in longhand his concept of what had been said during the last two or three hours. I'm not exaggerating when I say two or three hours, because that was not uncommon. The same time he was doing that I was sitting there at my desk writing my version. In those days I had an excellent memory. We'd get through, he'd hand me his version and I'd take it and thank him and he'd go his way, and I'd take his draft and compare it to mine and I'd come up with what I thought was a reliable record of what had transpired. I became a great admirer of President Diem. I thought he was doing a wonderful job. He was simply outstanding and well informed. But I was in the minority as far as some local Americans were concerned.

Q: I want to come to that a little later down the line, because I think you can speak to that point very well, and I have some questions I wanted to introduce along that line just a little further. Do you remember any of the other young officers who became so prominent later on? Do you ever encounter people like [Nguyen] Khanh, for example, who took over I think sometime around December of 1963 after the coup in which Diem was assassinated.

WILLIAMS: I read part of something right here. We've been cleaning up my office here the last few days and I unearthed something here. Now you take a look at those papers and talk about Vietnamese officers. Now I don't have the file at my fingertips now, but before I left Vietnam I had compiled a roster of the Vietnamese military officers, the senior officers or officers that had key positions, and either written a brief about those officers, each one of them individually, or had the American officer that was most closely associated with him write a detailed brief of him. So I had a dossier on every officer that I thought outstanding in the Vietnamese forces, and as I recall I furnished a copy of that file to CINCPAC, and I kept a copy myself. I don't know where my copy is. I'm almost positive that I gave it to the U.S. Army Historical Section. But at that time, which was twenty-one years ago, I knew practically all these people and knew very closely where they came from and what they did, what their idiosyncracies were and how good they were or how bad they were.

I remember that when [Nguyen Van] Thieu became president that I referred back to that file - at that time it was on the shelf right over there in that corner - and the notation I made on Thieu, who I knew as a lieutenant colonel or colonel on the Headquarters Army Staff there in Saigon, I had stated, "This is the most efficient Vietnamese officer that I have met in Vietnam, and one that will probably go the highest." And by God, he did, he became president.

Q: So you were not surprised?

WILLIAMS: I was not surprised, no. I didn't think Big Minh would ever become president, although later I think he wanted to be. I didn't think he would, because he was too lazy and he wouldn't take responsibility. I thought possibly Don would go high, Tran Van Don, but I wasn't too sure. But Thieu, when I knew him was a staff officer on the Vietnamese general staff. I thought [he] was the smartest and most intelligent man I had ever come in contact with in Vietnam, Diem excepted of course.

Now there was one man that was pushing him very closely and his name was [Le Van] Kim. Kim was a French citizen and was married to General Don's sister and had been an officer in the French regular army. When I wanted to get the [Vietnamese] military academy on its feet and going, Kim was the man I picked to do that job. At that time he was a colonel or a brigadier, I forget which. Did that answer your question?

Q: Yes, Sir, that's exactly the kind of thing I was looking for. Do you remember [Nguyen Cao] Ky, or was he still a youngster?

WILLIAMS: I knew Ky, but not too well. He was a captain and an aviator. I'm not too sure that I ever had any conversations with Ky, but I saw him frequently because on occasions I went out to the headquarters of the paratroop brigade, the outfit that tried to pull a coup in November I think-

Q: Of 1960.

WILLIAMS: -of late in 1960, yes. Ky invariably would be going here to there or passing some place near, and I always recognized him because he had very dark hair and his moustache. At that time he didn't have the flamboyant dress that he later affected, but I asked who he was and I remember being told his name. But if I ever had any detailed conversation with him, I don't recall. He had aroused my interest.

Q: Now everybody, even Diem's enemies, credit him with being a scrupulously honest man. But were there problems with the corruption further down the line in the Vietnamese administration? Did you encounter problems this way?

WILLIAMS: I couldn't say that there was not. First of all, however I'll say that I would agree that Diem was scrupulously honest and had not only an honest, but I think a high moral character. How much corruption there was down the line I don't know, but I do know this, that on several occasions without any warning of any kind or anything of that nature, I would require American officers to appear at this pay table or that pay table when the Vietnamese were paying the troops. Or, with their interpreters, check records, and I never once found a Vietnamese officer who was padding his roster to draw additional pay. Now they were always after more pay, no doubt about that, and I had several hard conversations with Diem about the army being top heavy with noncoms. They were not noncoms, they were people carrying noncom ratings and drawing that extra pay. But I never found any corruption as far as the Vietnamese military were concerned although I was looking for it all the time. That's normal precaution.

Q: Did this apply to aid, their handling of American aid in those years as well?

WILLIAMS: To the best of my knowledge, yes.

Q: Were you satisfied that we were able to keep track of how they administered the aid that we were giving?

WILLIAMS: The military aid, yes. Other aid that went through USOM [United States Operation Mission] no, I have no idea.

Q: You have no acquaintance with that end of it?

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: The military aid, that was okay?

WILLIAMS: Yes, absolutely.

Q: What struck you as the problems that were bothering Diem the most at this time? What seemed to be on his mind?

WILLIAMS: He was just trying to build a country. Some thought he was working on a foundation of sand, and I think he knew it. He had a terrible time, I think, deciding who he could trust and who he could not trust. He placed great trust in me. Probably more than any other foreigner. Being a Vietnamese, of course, he was a very strong family man, and that's the reason he relied so much on his brothers, because they were family and he thought he could trust them. But I'm sure that he was never sure whether he could trust anyone else or not. I'm not talking about his military so much now, I'm talking about the different things he would try to do in the legislature with his land reforms and his taxes and things of that nature.

Q: Did you have much familiarity with those programs?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: They've come in for a lot of criticism after the fact. What was the problem with land reform as you could see it?

WILLIAMS: There was no problem, no problem at least to my mind there should have been no problem. First of all, a lot of those people over there - not a lot of them, but several of them owned large acreage, thousands of acres. We mentioned Tran Van Don here. His father was a doctor and had been an ambassador here, there and yonder, highly respected, a highly educated man. He owned thousands of acres down in the Delta. One of Diem's reforms was that no person could own more than a certain number of hectares, and I think it averaged down to no one could own more than two hundred or maybe two hundred and fifty acres of land. So that immediately threw the big landowners against him. Now the government didn't confiscate that land, but they decided what the fair value was and that's what the owner was paid and that was it. Then the government turned around and sold this land or gave it to the peasants. Thus many were no longer sharecroppers but small landowners. Well, you know, if you tried that right here in the United States you see what you would run into. Say someone is going to decide to break up Lyndon B. Johnson's or other ranch holdings over here, and then say one can have two hundred acres and no more. Well, you know what that would raise. Well, that same thing happened over there. The land barons were being divided [?].

He tried and did move people from unsettled and poor areas into more prosperous areas and built small towns. I thought he was doing a wonderful job. I thought if a man owned land he would fight to defend it. As a sharecropper he probably wouldn't.

Q: Was this what they called the relocation program?

WILLIAMS: That's right, yes. That was one name to it. Another one they called something with a ville on the end of it.

Q: Oh, agrovilles.

WILLIAMS: Agrovilles, yes. I thought that was wonderful, because not only were these people brought into small villages, but then they could go out from there to farm their nearby holdings, but the villages were arranged so that there was a certain amount of ground behind each house, maybe fifty feet wide. I'm guessing now, it makes no difference. Say it's fifty feet wide and a hundred feet long. Each house had a little garden right there. The American embassy objected to that. Why, I don't know. They never explained to me why they objected to it. They fought it tooth and nail.

I know that we had a discussion, Diem and I had a discussion on this one time, on people doing various work for the state. He said, "We're supposed to pay for this work with taxes. Some of the people can't pay taxes. What's your solution in the United States?" I said, "I don't know what the solution is in the United States now but when I was a boy in Denton, Texas, in Denton County in North Texas, when some taxes came due if a man couldn't pay his taxes, he took his team of mules or his team of horses and his wagon and he worked on county roads and he paid out his taxes that way. There was no discredit to the rancher or the farmer who did that. It was normal and hundreds of people did it, that's the way they paid their taxes." "Well," he said, "I think that's all right," so he started doing that over there. Well, Jesus Christ, you would be surprised at the uproar that went on in the American embassy.

Because Diem was allowing some of these people to work and therefore get credit for the tax, they were being made peons and slaves. Well, there was no slavery about it. And in those country team meetings I'd say, "Well, goodness gracious, they did that in Denton County, Texas when I was a boy and no one said anything about slavery then. I don't see anything wrong with it. It's honest work for an honest debt." Well, they said, "You don't do things like that anymore." And so that was it. Actually they were advocating welfare that the U.S. would pay for.

Well, I don't know what their solution was, that is Diem's solution, except that if the people couldn't pay taxes, then they had no one to pay for this labor and so the labor wasn't performed and so the agroville slowed to a halt. A Diem program was blocked again. Maybe the embassy wanted the U.S. to foot the bill. Maybe they were put out because they hadn't proposed the project themselves.

Now there were all kinds of arguments like that coming up and it really got to be very bad, very bad.

Q: You mentioned the relocation program, and I'm a little puzzled. Was that supposed to be a social reform or were there military implications to that? Exactly what was Diem trying to do?

WILLIAMS: It was largely social.

Q: It was?

WILLIAMS: Agricultural.

Q: Now I'm speaking of the Highlands. Didn't he move some people into the Highlands?

WILLIAMS: Yes, he put some people up there, but I don't say that was necessarily military. I was quite in favor of it, because in that country there you had a series of tribes that are generally called Montagnards [tribes] or Moi. That's the [Vietnamese] word for savage. They weren't savage. They were not - oh, they might have been on the same life standards as American blanket Indian back in say 1800s or something like that, but I visited among them time and time again. They were very primitive. The women, oddly enough, wore skirts, but from the waist up they were completely naked. But the men wore jackets, but from the waist down, except for a jock strap, they were naked, reversed that way. No one seemed to think anything of it. They were migratory. They would go into an area and cut down the brush and the trees and plant their crop. Some of them were very industrious, and near some of their villages there would be any number of what back here in Texas you'd call a corn crib. They had their produce stored up in those cribs. Now when they got ready to move they'd go to another place and first of all, after they cleared off as much brush as they wanted to, they burned the rest. I asked them why, and they said, "That's the way we get our fertilizer." I could communicate that much with them to find out what the hell they were burning this brush for. Well, to make the ground more fertile. Simple.

I was very strong for Diem putting as many people up on the borders as possible, because what I really wanted was a string of listening posts. I wanted a string of listening posts all up the Cambodia border and all the way up to Laos and on up to North Vietnam. I remember one time that I had that plan fixed up on a map for benefit of one of our officers that came down from CINCPAC, one of our admirals. When he looked at that he said, "Hell, you're building a Maginot Line." I said, "Look at the scale of that map. Those outposts are thirty miles apart." Too few Americans knew anything about Vietnam, the country or its people.

Q: Were there any problems with that relocation program?

WILLIAMS: Yes, they had a lot of problems. Just exactly what the magnitude of the difficulties were [I don't know], but very few of those plans worked out completely because first of all, he had to fight the landlords. Then he had to fight the Americans and God knows what other political people that might be involved.

Q: What Americans were against it?

WILLIAMS: The American embassy, representing the United States State Department as far as I could guess.

Q: What was their objection?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. They never did explain to me. Why not let a man work out his taxes with his [labor] in one of those agrovilles? What's their objection? I don't know. You'll have to ask some liberal, bureaucratic character who thought welfare better than work.

Q: Sounds like someone is not communicating.

WILLIAMS: That's right. There's no doubt about it. Or they suddenly say, that's slavery. I've heard people here in the U.S. - years ago - say when a person went down to one of those labor halls, they'd speak of going down to the slave centers. Why teach a people that welfare is better than honest work?

Q: In line with what we've said about the relocation program, did Diem ever express to you any concern about the long frontier that he had with Cambodia and Laos?

Q: These were Cambodian troops?

WILLIAMS: Yes, or as far as I know just outlaws, because by the time I could get there they were gone. There would be a fight, a short little fire fight. They'd attack these villages, burn up what they could, shoot up this and that and the other and then jump back across the border real fast. I suggested to Diem that he have an arrangement with Prince [Norodom] Sihanouk of Cambodia for the privilege of hot pursuit. Well, Diem didn't know what the term hot pursuit was, and I used as an example the agreements between the United States and Mexico, which led eventually to General Jack Pershing going across the border looking for Pancho Villa. I said, "We would never have accomplished that if Mexico hadn't given us the privilege of going in there when we were hot on a bandit's trail. Of course if the Mexicans were hot on a bandit's trail they could come into New Mexico, Texas or wherever they wanted to. But usually it was the other way around, and it ended up with Jack Pershing going into Mexico." He said, "We can't do that with the Cambodians because I've discussed a plan of that nature with Sihanouk, and he won't have anything to do with it."

He said, "You know, there's a great rivalry between the Cambodians - hostility, too - and the Vietnamese," and he told me something about history that I didn't know. Later I read and studied it. But in years gone by - and I'm talking about plenty of years gone by - the Vietnamese conquered Cambodia and exacted tribute from them. They kept an occupation force in Phnom Penh for years, maybe fifty, a hundred years, something like that. And the Cambodians became so used to it - this was Diem's statement - that eventually the only Vietnamese that stayed there were not troops, but merely the Vietnamese agent, this day and time you'd call him ambassador. The Cambodians paid him tribute each year and he sent it over to Vietnam. He said, "That's the hostile relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia. I haven't been able to improve that relationship although I have tried."

Now with Laos it was something else. I found here the other day a paper that is a proposed agreement with Laos for hot pursuit, and I think I wrote it, but I'm not sure. By anyway, it was one of the things that Diem and I discussed. He was very much in favor of one member of the royalty in Laos. They had a royal family in Laos, and there were arguments between members of that family. He favored a certain part of that family, a certain branch of that family. And actually, a prince came down to Saigon one time and I was invited to the Palace to meet him. I was amazed when I met him because I'll bet you that man stood six-six if he stood an inch, and weighed about two hundred and fifty or two hundred and seventy-five pounds. When you remember that most Vietnamese and Laotians are people that stretch it to weigh a hundred to a hundred and ten pounds, you can see. But anyway, Diem was very knowledgeable of that border and worked with me in many ways in trying to secure it. I thought so much about it that one time I got in the group with Reinhardt and a couple more people and made necessary hunting arrangements. Got on elephants and went up and rode that Cambodian and Laotian border an awful long ways under the guise of hunting. Reinhardt wasn't under the guise, he was actually hunting. I was under the guise of hunting. I went up there to see what the terrain, trails and streams were like. I had a good plan prepared that comes into road building. I wanted a road that would go from the east coast across Vietnam, across Laos, into Thailand and on down to Bangkok. I wanted a good highway through there so that if and when we started fighting that we would have this lateral behind us for supply purposes. But I was blocked on that. Diem was blocked on that. Laos agreed.

Q: What was the objection to that?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. Diem was for it, the Vietnamese were for it, MAAG was for it. USOM and the embassy were against it. Some of the roads that - well, they wouldn't come out and say, "We're not going to do this." But they'd volunteer to take over certain sections of the roads to build. They were going to do that with USOM funds. They'd never get their sections done. They'd never do it. Finally I'd go in there in desperation and try to finish the job myself with army engineers, that is, Vietnamese army engineers. From the day I went out there until the day I left, I thought we might have to fight, and I thought we could fight and win but I didn't think we would need American infantry to do it. Some U.S. Air Force and some U.S. Navy, maybe.

Q: In connection with this security problem down along the border, did the Vietnamese attempt to enlist the Montagnards who were already sparsely up in that area?

WILLIAMS: Yes. But the Vietnamese military told me they couldn't rely on the Montagnards, and I could understand that because the Montagnards couldn't rely on the Vietnamese. I remember General Ty, the chief of staff, told me, "They can't stand artillery fire." "Well," I said, "you know, I think that's particularly unusual because you've got one company in the Vietnamese army that's made up entirely of Montagnards and that's a trench mortar company." They call them trench mortar, I'd call them 4.2s or 81s. I don't think General Ty ever knew that he had such a company.

The French considered those people savages and that's where they got their name. Diem said that the French priests, Catholic priests, were preaching sedition among them and he issued an edict there at one time that no French Catholic priest nor American minister of any kind could go into the Montagnard area without specific passports from the secretary of defense. The Americans were sending over large amounts at different times of material for destitute people, mostly clothing and things of that nature. That project was handled by church people, not by MAAG. We had a few American protestant ministers over there, missionaries. And there were Catholic priests there. And they may have had some French Protestant preachers, I don't know. But the charity was under agreement. Church organizations assembled all the clothing, blankets, et cetera in warehouses in Saigon, and then because the French priests had penetrated the Highlands better than anyone else, they turned the disposition of it over to the French priests. Diem complained bitterly to me about that arrangement. He said, "The American people think that's going to the Montagnards and so forth as presents from American people. It's not. These priests are taking it in there and either saying so directly maybe, but the implication is that all this aid is coming from France. If you ask any Montagnard that's got on an American sweater or a coat, 'Where did you get this?' he'll say, 'From France.'" Diem said, "That's wrong. You ought to get that changed." I could not.

I took the matter up with the embassy but they weren't interested in it, and I had bigger problems and so I never did anything else about that other than to discuss it with a couple of American missionaries. The system did not change.

Q: Was there an ethnic problem between the Vietnamese people and the Montagnards? Was that part of it?

WILLIAMS: Yes, definitely. That whole country over there as I knew it was divided into classes. Some examples: One night at a lawn party at the French embassy, a hundred people present, men and women, Vietnamese and French and some Americans, I was standing off by myself when I saw a Vietnamese army officer nearby that I knew and knew he could speak a certain amount of English, and so I engaged him in conversation. I said, "You know it seems odd to me that everyone here is speaking French. I don't hear any Vietnamese spoken at all, and certainly a third of these people here are Vietnamese." "Well," he said, "you can't expect anyone here to speak Vietnamese. If one of these Frenchmen speaks Vietnamese, he loses face immediately in the eyes of other Frenchmen because he knows how to speak our language." I said, "You couldn't be serious." He said, "I'm very serious. It would not be popular for a Frenchman to be known as to be able to converse in Vietnamese."

One time I was talking to a Vietnamese general. I asked what some Vietnamese soldier had said in our presence. He took me to one side, he said, "General Williams, you know, I don't understand Vietnamese." I said, "You don't speak Vietnamese?" He said, "No, Sir. I was born and raised in France, and I was educated in France. I can't speak this language." I said, "Well, goddamn it, you're wearing stars in the Vietnamese army! Why don't you learn?" He said, "Yes, Sir." I doubt if he did.

I was driving with a Vietnamese general one time going to his corps headquarters. I was always trying to find some way to improve their mobility. We were accused by certain American writers of trying to make the Vietnamese army over into an American type army, where everything was done in trucks. Well, that charge was not true at all. They had a method of carrying food, water, soil, any load, in baskets. You very likely saw it yourself in your time over there. They'd put a loaded basket on one end of a pole and a loaded basket on the other end of the pole, put the pole on their shoulder and they'd go down the road with their load. Those little old women and men would go along there at almost a trot and they'd go like everything. They could cover distance. So I said to this general beside of me, "Is it easier to carry the same number of pounds of whatever you're carrying with two baskets on a pole, or to carry it some other way." He said, "I don't know." I said, "Surely you must have some idea." He looked at me and said, "General, I never had one of those poles on my shoulder in my life." In other words, "What the hell, do you think I'm a black goddamn nigger or something like that?" That was that officer's attitude.

Now, Diem decided that he wanted to get the Vietnamese of Saigon to know something about the Montagnards other than what they had known before so he decided to have a big reception and party. He invited any number of Montagnards down from the hills to an open outdoor banquet on the Palace grounds or what they called the Palace grounds. The Palace really was just a big building; it wasn't no more a palace than this house is a palace, but it was known as the Presidential Palace.

They had the food and drink all laid out on tables and he had a lot of guests present: French, Americans and so on and so forth, American military, French military, American civilians, French civilians, the diplomatic corps. Then the Montagnards arrived. They came through the big front gate of the Palace grounds. They dismounted from whatever vehicles that had been used to bring them down from the hills and they walked down past the Palace, down to where the banquet tables were laid out. What we'd call a big picnic where people would go up to tables and help themselves. They walked down through the party guests. They were dressed up, they thought, the best they could possibly be dressed up, and some of their costumes were rather picturesque. Of that whole damn group, French, American officers, American civilians, French civilians, Vietnamese civilians, there were only two men who stepped out and met those people or shook hands with them and said hello, and one of them was Ngo Dinh Diem and the other was Sam Williams. The local people stood around and stared at those mountain people like they were animals out of a zoo. I had visited most of the chiefs in their villages. Common courtesy required me to speak to them and I did.

The Montagnards were not that bad, I can assure you. I've gone up into their villages, I've also gone up in their villages with President Diem. I preferred to go with him more than anyone else, because he didn't mind going into the villages and talking with these people. If with a Vietnamese officer, he was liable to, hell, cuff one of them or something like that, arrogant as hell, because the mountain people were in their opinion much lower.

Now you ask about the ethnic divisions, there they were. Now here's one officer that says "I can't speak the Vietnamese language." Another officer says "I never had one of those carrying poles on my shoulder in my life." Then you see this at the reception for the whole group to Montagnards. Sure, it went straight through.

Q: The great distance between officer corps and everybody else.

WILLIAMS: Yes. European style. Now, here's where they started having trouble, almost having trouble. They had one division they called the Nung, N-U-N-G, Division, it was the 3rd. That division was recruited by the French several years before on the borders between North Vietnam and China. They were mountaineers and some of the best soldiers I ever saw. They moved them down to South Vietnam and the French positioned them, and they were in position when I got there. Going out of Saigon as though you were going north to Hanoi, shortly before you came to Cam Ranh Bay, that's where the Dung 1 position was.

A colonel, a Nung colonel, commanded that division and he had French-Vietnamese dual citizenship. Diem wanted him to take Vietnamese citizenship only but he wouldn't. I visited him frequently. I liked him, I liked his wife. They served an awful good table and the food hotter than you can buy in Austin or San Antonio. Oh, it would burn you up, but it was good. I said, "Why don't you take Vietnamese citizenship? What would it hurt?" He said, "The French have told me I would lose my pension. I'm almost ready to retire." There was his official reason. Renounce French citizenship and you lose your pension.

Diem and his people became nervous because of these Nungs. They wanted to infiltrate them. They decided that they would do it through the division signal company. So they sent in some enlisted men, Vietnamese enlisted men. Radio and telephone men, and assigned them to this Dung division signal company. Then they also sent in some Vietnamese officers who were top notch, as well as they had, signal officers, to run telephones, radio and so on and so forth.

Now one day in an inspection of some kind, one of these Vietnamese officers was going through this signal company, which was predominately Nung, and he slapped a Nung soldier for some reason which to him was perfectly all right, because officers had done it in the Vietnamese army, they had seen the French do it to their soldiers and their own. But boy, they had an awakening right there. The soldiers grabbed the Vietnamese lieutenant and those people know rough ways to treat a prisoner. They had out in those divisions cages. If you looked close enough you'd see these wire cages, just about the size of a good dog house. A man can't stand up, he can't lie down, he can't sit down, nothing. They're made out of barbed wire. So when I got wind of this thing, they already had this Vietnamese lieutenant in one of these barbed wire cages and then had turned the whole thing over to the commanding colonel of the Nung division.

Diem said, "They haven't had discipline." I said, "Wait just a minute. They've got plenty of discipline. Your officers have got to stop, your officers have got to stop slapping people. You can't do that at all." He said, "I agree." I said, "All right. That Vietnamese officer slapped a Nung soldier standing in ranks. In the American army an officer cannot hit a soldier. Nor can a soldier hit an officer, because if either one of them should do that, the other one is going to be in an awful jam. That's the only way you can work this military business and you've got to teach your people, and make your people believe that." Well, Diem didn't argue with that, he agreed, but what could he do? You can't change customs like that in one generation; it's going to take some time to change things of that nature. However he did stop use of rickshaws overnight. It was degrading for a human to pull a rickshaw. Yes, they had ethnic problems

Q: How did that relocation program finally work out, or was it still going on when you left?

WILLIAMS: It was going on when I left.

Q: Continuing problems with it?

WILLIAMS: Same thing. I don't think they ever found a solution. They weren't getting adequate support. The Vietnamese were going to have to have some financial support from USOM, even if it was no more than - well, I don't know enough about that to talk to - maybe - no more than seed rice for planting their crops or something of that nature.

Q: But you attribute the problem to lack of support primarily?

WILLIAMS: Yes. American economic support.

Q: Let's deal with what was primarily your bailiwick over there, the Vietnamese military organizations. I presume you had a good deal to do with their training and so on. Did Diem distinguish between an external and an internal threat to security at that time? Or did you?

WILLIAMS: I don't know whether he did or not. Now if I understand, when you say internal threat, you mean an uprising of Viet Cong, for example?

Q: I don't mean to look at it through the glasses that we're wearing now, because we know what happened later on. But there was organizations formed early to keep security internally. Like the Civil Guard, for example. What was the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps supposed to do? What was their role?

WILLIAMS: The Civil Guard in theory roughly could be compared to the National Guard in the United States. The Self-Defense Force was maybe what you'd call state militia. There's a difference. Neither of them were functional because they didn't have the leadership nor the means to function. They didn't have the training, they didn't have anyone to direct their training. They were not a MAAG problem because MAAG was told repeatedly by the embassy to keep hands off completely in the Defense Corps and the Civil Guard organizations' equipment and training.

Q: Well, whose problem were they?

WILLIAMS: USOM. USOM sent back to the States and had police people, University of Michigan I believe, but I'm not sure, come over and they were supposed to train them.

Q: Michigan State in fact.

WILLIAMS: I remember distinctly that - well, as an individual and as chief of MAAG I had quite a bit of argument repeatedly about the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps, very serious. Because - well, primarily: the Civil Guard was untrained, Self-Defense Corps was untrained. Their weapons were no good. Some of them were carrying old French rifles that the Vietnamese called fishing poles. I've picked them up and had them fall apart in my hands, actually physically had rifles fall apart in my hands when I'd take them from a man, take them up like that to inspect them. They'd put a detachment, say a

platoon, what we'd call a platoon, out to guard a bridge or something of that nature.

Q: Let me interrupt you just a second, General. Who were they guarding it from?

WILLIAMS: Any outlaws or anyone - actually, what they were doing mostly was giving them jobs, I thought. But there was a certain amount of outlaws there and what they call Viet Cong gangs and so forth that would try to disturb things. Of course the Vietnamese guards would move in around this bridge with their wives and children and they'd set up their little hooches and things like that. Now, we'll say that twenty, thirty of them were there, of the Civil Guard or the Self-Defense Corps. This would happen for instance. Maybe half a dozen hard-core Viet Cong would come to a nearby Village and demand, "All right, everybody out." They'd get them out, they'd form up. "Now we're going to march up such-and-such a place and you're going to holler and yell." So they would, Viet Cong in front. Now these poor bastards guarding this bridge for instance, we'll just take that as a hypothetical situation, here is this multitude in the dark. The leading Viet Cong comes up and demands: "We're here. We've got so many fighters. We can surround you in a minute. It's either life or death. Surrender immediately or you've had it." And they had all this shouting and so forth. These poor people in these hooches at this bridge, they hear maybe two hundred people back here shouting and yelling. They have no discipline, they have no weapons that's worth fighting with and so forth, they see themselves as heavily outnumbered and they give up.

Okay. Now where does MAAG enter into that? I say when that happens, it causes the people to lose confidence in the government, because the government had put the people there to guard a bridge and they can't guard that bridge from a half a dozen Viet Cong, although the government had maybe forty or fifty men there. So any time that happens it weakens the government that much. I don't want the government to be weakened. I want these Civil Guards and Self-Defense Corps to be so strong and so well trained that they can fight and resist anything like that. And if they fight the half a dozen Viet Cong are going to fade back into the brush. That briefly was my interest in the problem. Now, those discussions became serious and heated.

Q: At what point was this beginning to become a problem? Was this a problem right from the earliest days?

WILLIAMS: I'd say by 1957.

Q: That early?

WILLIAMS: When did Mr. [Elbridge] Durbrow come over? He came over in April of 1957. Well, it was during his regime that most of this started and became progressively worse.

USOM brought a man over to Saigon and he appeared at a country team meeting one time. You're familiar with the country team? That's a group made up of the heads of the various sections: the head of the USOM, the head of USIA, and the head of MAAG and the ambassador and so forth. I was introduced to this man as Chief so-and-so and he said his job was or was introduced to me as the man who was training the Civil Guard and police, a dual job, in South Vietnam. He seemed like a nice sort of fellow, maybe in his fifties, and friendly. I said, "You've been in police work a long time?" He said, "Yes, I have," and I think he told me he'd been in the police business ten or fifteen years. I said, "They call you chief. Were you chief of police?" He said, "Yes, Sir." I said, "Where?" He said, "Detroit." Well, that made quite an impression on me because the ex-chief of police of Detroit must be a pretty reliable man. Now it wasn't till a long time after I found out there's more than one Detroit in the United States, and he wasn't from the Detroit, Michigan that I knew about. Now that man was flying under false colors with me.

I wanted USOM to arm the Civil Guard with decent weapons. This Chief said, "They don't need any more arms. The only thing we need is one revolver per man. These people will be taught marksmanship to such an extent that every time a shot is fired an outlaw drops dead." Now this was a serious discussion, just like we're having here now. I asked, "Were you in any gunfights when you were chief of police of Detroit?" He said, "No, Sir, I never had to draw my gun." I should have wised up right then. I said, "Have you been in any gunfights since you've been in South Vietnam?" He said, "Why, no." I said, "Have you ever been out in the boondocks here, out in the countryside when the Vietnamese and the outlaws were shooting at each other?" "No, Sir." I said, "Well, if you're going down a road in your jeep and a half a dozen men from either side of the road start shooting at you with rifles or throwing grenades, are you going to be able to handle that situation with a six-shooter?" "My every shot will be a dead man." (Laughter) And you know, everyone on the country team believed that man. Everyone believed that man!

Q: Well, his concept of the Civil Guard was a police force.

WILLIAMS: Exactly. A city or village policeman.

Q: And your concept was more of a military.

WILLIAMS: That's right, that's right.

Q: Was that the heart of the-

WILLIAMS: That was the heart of the whole business. Now, these differences were no secret. The chief of staff of the American army knew of them. Mr. Brucker, who was secretary of the army, -h~e knew about the problems. His deputy had come out there repeatedly, they all knew about this thing going on. One day someone told me, "There's two thousand Tommy guns in Japan" - or Okinawa, it makes no difference-"that have been declared surplus. You can get them free. Do you want them." They said, "All right, you've got them." And so eventually they shipped me two thousand Tommy guns, 45 caliber, the whole thing. Spare parts, magazines and a certain number of rounds, two or three thousand rounds per gun. Shipped those to me at Saigon. CINCPAC knew about this. I told CINCPAC I was going to issue these to the Civil Guard, and he directed: "Don't do it all at one time. Issue them in small groups and see that the people are trained to handle them before you turn them loose."

Q: Wouldn't USOM object to this?

WILLIAMS: Up until now they hadn't objected. When I asked the USOM director to request these weapons before I did, I said, "They're there. All you have to do is ask for them. They're your babies. You ask for them." He said, "I'm not sure we want the Civil Guard to have those weapons." Now that was his answer, and that's the last answer I ever got from him. So I said to myself, to hell with that, I haven't got time to play with that kind of a ball game. So I immediately asked for them myself and got them for free.

All right. Then I said to USOM, "We've got these weapons. Will you order in two hundred Civil Guard people at one time for one week's instruction under MAAG officers, to be instructed in the use of these Tommy guns?" He agreed, and he did. Now, as a precaution, I had a list made of the serial number of every one of those guns, because if something was going to come up about it or some captured they'd say, "All right, it was your fault." I'd say, "What's the number on that captured weapon?" Whether that would have done any good or not, I don't know.

So that way we distributed two thousand Tommy guns to the Civil Guard. Now after it was over, Mr. Durbrow, who at that time was the ambassador, took me to task. He said, "Why in the world did you issue those weapons to the Vietnamese?" Well, I said, "For a simple reason and you know why I did it. We've talked about this at the country team meetings, about these weapons being available. USOM was going to get them, they didn't get them, so I went and got them." He said, "Yes, but if we'd held it off, I could have held these up as a carrot to Diem, and then got some favor in return." Well, I said, "That's too late now. What we get in return is some efficiency out of the Civil Guard, maybe. Certainly not some personal favor."

Q: Did he ever say what he wanted out of Diem?

WILLIAMS: No, no, didn't. And I doubt if he had any particular thing in his mind. But I had interest in the Civil Guard, but up until the day I left there I never was able to get any decent training done in the Civil Guard nor any adequate training done in the Defense Corps. Now, some people have said much later, well, the Vietnamese didn't want good training or equipment because they were afraid for all these people to have decent weapons. That was not true. It certainly was not true as far as the secretary of defense was concerned, the Vietnamese secretary of defense, the secretary to the presidency, or Diem, or Mr. [Ngo Dinh] Nhu. None of those people offered any objection at all to the Civil Guard or the Defense Corps having individual weapons. In fact they wanted them. Also they wanted them under MAAG for training.

Q: Did any of the ARVN officers express an opinion on that?

WILLIAMS: No. Not on the Tommy guns. They expressed no adverse opinion on it. Of course, a lot of them said - not a lot of them, but it was hinted later, "Well, General, why didn't you give us those Tommy guns?" "Well," I said, "your TO & E doesn't call for them."

Q: The reason I ask is that one former USOM official has advanced the claim that Diem was creating a counterweight to disloyal army units with the Civil Guard.

WILLIAMS: I've heard that. I've heard that.

Q: Would you put any credence in that?

WILLIAMS: No. None whatsoever. Because the Civil Guard was in such a pitiful condition that even though the army was not at that time an A-1 army by any manner or means, the Civil Guard couldn't have offered any competition to them at all. By 1957 the army was making good progress.

Q: You have hinted several times that relations between Diem and USOM, or Diem and the Ambassador, were not everything they should have been. Is that correct?

WILLIAMS: That's my positive opinion, yes.

Q: Was that a constant or did that situation build?

WILLIAMS: I'd say it built.

Q: What was behind that?

WILLIAMS: I'm not too sure. When Mr. Reinhardt was ambassador, relationships all around were excellent, and within the country team they were excellent. But after Mr. Durbrow came, maybe we were all at fault to some extent. Friction developed. I was trying very hard and I thought it was in the United States' interest to get South Vietnam built up into a strong nation as fast as possible. I used to tell any Vietnamese who had any questions about it, "If you've been told by the French or others that we're just swapping hats, that the French left and Americans come in? That's not so. The quicker we can get this job done, the quicker we are going to get out." I made that remark before a Senate committee one time. One of those senators said, "Well, General, what you're trying to do is work yourself out of a job?" I said, "That's exactly what I'm trying to do."

Q: Were those the hearings in the summer of 1959, the [Albert] Colegrove business?

WILLIAMS: I think that was the Mansfield Committee. I'm sure it was.

Q: Some people have accused I guess the Self-Defense Corps, that was the Dan Ve, wasn't it, wasn't that called the Dan Ve?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember.

Q: I don't speak Vietnamese, so I'm on shaky ground - that they were often guilty of misbehaving in the villages, stealing~ducks or chickens or arrogant behavior or so forth. Was that a common thing or did it happen at all in your tenure, or did you hear of it at all?

WILLIAMS: I'm sure it must have happened, but right now I can't remember a single incident of that kind ever being brought to my attention.

Q: So it wasn't a problem so far as you knew?

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: Where was Diem getting leaders for all of these organizations?

WILLIAMS: I'd say he was having an awful hard time. He was scratching.

Q: Where did he get officers for the Civil Guard, for example?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I know that the leaders of the Civil Guard, the commanding general of the Civil Guard, was normally an army officer.

Q: Did army officers take lesser slots in that as well?

WILLIAMS: Probably.

Q: The reason I'm asking is that once again, a former USOM official has said one of the problems with the army was that Diem was using army officers for lots of other things besides being in the army.

WILLIAMS: Oh, he did, there's no doubt about that. He used them for many things: overseeing construction work, overseeing the building of villages and overseeing the building of roads and things like that. We do it here in the United States to a degree. Most of it is done by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, as you know.

Which brings up another thing that I just happened to think about. We had to have an airfield at Tan Son Nhut. The airfield we had there was not big enough to even take care of the planes we were then using. We had a wonderful chance there to get a field, and I wanted a field that's not less than two thousand feet long.

Q: What was significant about two thousand yards?

WILLIAMS: I wanted it big enough for a four-engine bomber to come in and land on it. No one objected to that particularly. I don't think anyone thought about it. They didn't think, "what does General Williams want two thousand feet for, anyway?" But they argued about who they'd give the contract to. Okay, now I spoke about the army engineers a while ago. The American Navy takes on jobs like that, which I didn't know prior to that. So the American Navy sent out a couple of captains in civilian clothes, I guess they were naval engineers. They looked over the thing. And the United States Navy put in a bid for that job.

Q: How can they do that?

WILLIAMS: I don't know what the authority is; just like the Corps of Engineers can go down here and put in a bid, I guess for building a dam. But nevertheless, it was done. Now, that was a very good bid and I was very much in favor of it because I thought we could trust the American Navy to do the job we wanted done. Incidentally, along about that time I couldn't get any air force officer of any stature to back me up on my desire for a long landing strip.

Q: Why was that?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. Whether they didn't have the foresight to see that they were going to use bombers in there one day that would require that kind of runway or not, I don't know.

Q: Were they saying that what you had was adequate? Was that their position?

WILLIAMS: No, but they wanted me to agree to take something less. Well, anyway, when the discussion [arose] at the country team about that, the USOM director said, "Well, we can't have a bunch of sailors running around out there with their sailor suits and so forth. Why, the communists will know immediately that that is going to be for military purposes." I said, "Didn't these naval officers explain what they did?" "Well,

I don't remember." I said, "If the Navy Engineers got the job, you're not going to see anyone in navy uniform around that place. Those officers you talked to were here in civilian clothes. The people that they employ, whether they're Americans or local labor, and they'll employ both, will be in civilian clothes. You can't tell that from any civilian project except it will be done better and you can depend on it." I don't know whether there was any hanky-panky in there or not, but the company that got the contract for that was not the United States Navy and it cost a hell of a lot more than the United States Navy bid on it. But those are the problems that I ran into.

Now for instance, we were building a highway from Saigon, going up north, and there were places on that highway that were going to be straight as an arrow. Now USOM was building this highway. It was not a military highway presumably. I said, "Now from this place here, certain kilometer, up to a certain kilometer, you've got a straight stretch. Let's make this highway four lanes from Saigon at least out that far or a little further, and let's put a little bit heavier base on that section." "What for? What do you want to do that for?" I said, "I want airplanes to be able to land on that. Did you ever hear about German planes landing on the autobahns in Germany during World War II?" "Ho. They did that?" You have an awful time convincing people if they're not informed about things. But that suggestion didn't work either. There was a good chance. I wasn't there after the war started, but all those airfields they had to build and those big things they did with the air force out there, lots of that could have been done beforehand, well beforehand, and certainly at much less cost than it was later. But you've got to work with people who have a little foresight to do things like that and to get things done.

Q: Did the South Vietnamese army suffer from losing too many officers to all these various and sundry projects that Diem had going on? Was the leadership diluted more than it should have been?

WILLIAMS: I doubt it.

Q: Speaking of officers, how did Diem select the top officers?

WILLIAMS: I don't know for sure. I think he took them more or less in order of the rank they had held in the French colonial army. He told me he selected Lieutenant General Ty as commander because he was the senior Vietnamese officer, a major I believe.

Q: There are allegations that he placed too much reliance on personal loyalty and not enough on efficiency. Did you ever make a recommendation for promotion and run into that problem?

WILLIAMS: Well, I can't deny that he put a great deal of faith in the personal loyalty, but I can't say that I could ever cite an instance in which he put a less efficient officer into assignment because he thought that officer was loyal to him and some other officer wasn't.

Q: So if this happened at all, it didn't happen during your time?

WILLIAMS: It could have happened in my time, but I don't believe it did. But you know, you can't tell, you can't tell what goes on in a man's mind.

Q: Did he consult you about high appointments in the ARVN?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Q: Was your advice pretty well heeded, do you think?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Except in one instance I brought up here a while ago, in the case of General Xuan, X-U-A-N, I don't think I'm pronouncing that right. I suggested Xuan for such and such assignment and he said, "I haven't got complete trust." And you know he was right in that lack of trust because it turned out that he was the officer that Big Minh sent to Cholon to pick up President Diem and his brother and bring them back to his headquarters. They were executed en route. Xuan was head of that convoy. So Diem had been right all that time.

Q: They never have decided who pulled that trigger, have they? Did you know?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I think so, I think so. [Tram Van] Don says so in his book [Our Endless War Inside Vietnam]. There's no doubt in my mind who did it. However, I think that all of them were equally responsible regardless of who pulled the trigger. I think Big Minh ordered it, Don insists that he didn't know anything about it. There were about twelve of those officers in that coup and we know, they were being monitored by a CIA man by the name of [Lou] Conein. Conein has stated publicly in the United States that he was in constant communication with Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge while the coup was going on, and advising Lodge what they were doing and what they were going to do, and so on and so forth.

Well, anyway, when Diem phoned in from Cholon into the headquarters and told them that he was ready to surrender, they promised him they'd send him out of the country. Big Minh sent Xuan, in command of the detail, to go get them and send an armored personnel carrier to bring them back. I don't know where the word came out, but Diem and his brother were suspicious when they came for them and locked them in the back of a personnel carrier instead of an automobile. Then initially the escort claimed they came to a railroad track and had to stop, and then that sometime while they were stopped some persons unbeknown got out of the convoy and went in there and killed President Diem and Mr. Nhu.

But that's not the true story at all in my mind. Xuan knew about the murder because Don states that when Xuan came back he was in the room with Big Minh when Xuan came in and reported: "The job is done," period. Don, thinking that they had the prisoners there, went out and over to another part of the compound where they were to fix up quarters for Diem and his brother, and when he came back he learned they were dead. The brother had been shot and cut up terribly, Diem had been shot and stabbed a couple of times, they were dead. There's no doubt in my mind about it but that Xuan knew of the murders and had honchoed the crime. I, from a personal point of view, held all of the generals that were present or members of the coup responsible for it.

Q: Well, they undoubtedly had agreed on what was going to happen.

WILLIAMS: I don't know if they did or not. Maybe Big Minh might have taken the murders on himself, but I doubt it, but whether he did or not, I say the others are responsible just as much as he is. Of course, his aide charged with the murders then committed suicide. Now whether he committed suicide or Big Minh had him killed, I don't know. They found him hanging in his cell. Of course, they had first locked him up and then they found him hanging in the cell. I would say it's highly probable that Big Minh had that done, maybe did it personally, as he was such a big, powerful man physically, maybe he wanted to be damn sure that this aide de camp didn't talk. I wouldn't put it past him at all. But anyway, as a result of that, I broke off all correspondence with the Vietnamese.

Q: We hear a lot of criticism after the fact that we were training the Vietnamese for the wrong war. I would like to ask you, was there any criticism at the time of the way we were training the South Vietnamese army?

WILLIAMS: While I was there, there was none except occasionally there would be an article by some newspaper reporter or stringer that would write that we were building a Vietnamese army in the image of the American army and that was the wrong way to do it. Those people didn't know what they were talking about. Now I'll tell you exactly what we did as far as organizing the Vietnamese army. First of all, over a period of time, the Americans had been putting in for supplies, rifles, machine guns, whatnot and so on and so forth, and the requisitions were being honored back in the United States. The word came to me, orders came to me, that we had to have an approved table of organization and equipment and we would therefore requisition against that, nothing else. So that meant that immediately the Vietnamese had to have a table of organization and equipment, which up until that time, believe it or not, they had never had.

So we started working on it. They appointed a board and we worked with that board for an awful long time and we finally came to a consensus, and it wasn't easy and there was draft after draft. We started in from the rifle squad right on up, or the artillery crew right on up, see, the mortar crews, building right up from the bottom. And all to take advantage of the characteristics of the Vietnamese people and the terrain on which this army would be used. Finally after we got an agreement between the Vietnamese and MAAG on a table of operations we turned it in, as approved by the Vietnamese government. We sent it to Washington through CINCPAC. Washington then approved the TO & E's and that's what thereafter we requisitioned against. That's what we paid the troops on. I spoke a while ago about Diem being perturbed because we had reduced the number of noncoms. Instead of having, say, umpty-ump numbers of corporals, we had a lesser number, according to how many squads they were going to command and things of that nature. There was no padding.

Now where these stringers got their ideas was this: Any time the Vietnamese had a parade or anything like that in the streets of Saigon, they had an idea that the more vehicles, the more armor or the more heavy material they could show in that parade, the better it would look to the world. Okay, you see a man come in there and he's a reporter from the Philippines or Japan or someplace and he sees one of their parades, he says, "Mother of God, look at all that equipment coming down the street. Everyone is riding in a two-and-a-half ton truck or a jeep. Look at all that stuff. MAAG must be crazy. Those people can't work that in the jungle."

These photographs here, which I'll show you and describe them, these are some of the things that we tried to do. Now the Vietnamese are crazy about bicycles, and they use them all the time. So this vehicle you see here is a bicycle wheel under a frame that would normally look like an ordinary stretcher. All right, now there's their packs and their equipment on that frame. A man in front, a man behind that frame, but the weight's on this bicycle, and there they go. All right, that's one thing we used.

Pontoon bridges. We didn't have use for American-type pontoon bridges nor did we have them. Those people are used to using the normal growth there, so here we're showing how to build local pontoon bridges. You don't have to carry those or very little of them in any wagon train, because you haven't got one. You can actually build pontoon bridges on the spot. Here's where we take shelter halves and put them together and make rafts and use those for boats. There's another example of it right here.

Here's some more of these pictures showing how sometimes we would use two wheels instead of one wheel under one of those stretcher frames. Here's where we tried pack animals - we had some horses over there, but not military, but we tried to use some horses as pack animals to see how it would work, but it didn't work at all.

Q: What was wrong with the horses?

WILLIAMS: Climate. You see there a raft made out of inverted helmet liners. Another type of raft - we were doing all kind of experimenting like that. Here's people stripped down to their shorts because they're going to do some work out there in the river with their rafts.

Q: The point of all this of course is that you were using indigenous materials?

WILLIAMS: And materials that the people had been used to working with. Here rafts are made out of shelter halves. Soldiers crossing rivers on ropes and so forth. This is the stuff that the anti-Vietnamese and pro-communists who were writing about the parades in Saigon never saw or heard of. They said, "Well, goodness gracious, MAAG is building an armored force in Vietnam." We weren't doing anything of the kind. People read that trash and believed it.

Q: Were there other representatives of Western allies, military representatives of Western allies, in Saigon at this time? Did they have any input into all of this training exercise?

WILLIAMS: There were other military people there, from Korea, Australia, Great Britain, but those were military attaches, and in their embassy attache office. They had nothing to do with the Vietnamese training except to observe.

Q: And they never entered into the advisory capacity?

WILLIAMS: No. Oh, I used to talk to them. They used to come over and see me and ask me about this, that and the other, because they had to get a certain amount of material to report to their home government.

They'd come over and ask questions, and I was always very frank with them, I'd lay it right on the line, tell them what we were doing or trying to do.

There's a lot of Americans that wanted to find fault with what went on in Vietnam, and one claim was that we were training the Vietnamese military improperly. But my orders were to organize, train and equip the Vietnamese army, navy and air force. I had a certain number of navy personnel there, not many. A captain was their senior officer, comparable to an army colonel, of course. We had a major of the Marine Corps there, a good one, too. I think the senior air force adviser would have been a lieutenant colonel, maybe a colonel. The rest of them were army. We were always so shorthanded. Of course, you say what we can see today and we couldn't see then, but I thought I saw a whole lot then that I'm not convinced that I didn't see. After say 1958 or 1959, I did not see a North Korean type invasion from North Vietnam, which I had seen in 1956 and 1957. I said to myself, "They're not going to do it."

Q: How did you know? What changed your mind?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I think it's because the Vietnamese were getting progressively stronger. We were making very good progress. I thought if the North Vietnamese came down they'd have a fight on their hands that they didn't want to take on. I believe that if they had come down in 1955 or 1956 they could walk in standing up. By 1958 or 1959 I thought it would be a terrible fight from start to finish. And I wasn't sure that the North Vietnamese could handle it or wanted to handle it.

Later I was under the impression that if we and the coup had let Diem alone that there would never have been a war. I think that Diem would have been able to negotiate in such a way with Ho Chi Minh that they could settle differences. You see, Ho Chi Minh and Diem knew each other quite well, and Ho Chi Minh had offered Diem a job in his government when Ho Chi Minh first took over from the French, but Diem had turned it down. So they were not strangers. Diem knew that country up north very well and had lived there, had traveled there. He was not a North Vietnamese, his home was around Hue, which as you know is in Central. But he knew the North Vietnamese and spoke several of their dialects. He was a smart man, and I believe if they had not had a coup d'etat and killed him there would not have been a war. In Diem's time, at least.

I think more so, that if they would have gone ahead and given me an adequate number of advisors - see, when we got down to the fighting troops I had advisors at division headquarters only. None at artillery, none at the regiments, nor in separate battalions and units like that, and then advisors with supply and logistics, I was woefully short. When it came to the navy, hell, I couldn't move, I didn't have near enough. I tried to put a couple of officers in the naval academy in 1955-56, and the French admiral in command of the French navy in Vietnam at that time, told me and told me in all seriousness, "General Williams, if you will take command of the Vietnamese forces, I'll back you up with anything that I possibly can with the French navy. But as long as you insist on the Vietnamese being in command and Americans merely being advisors, I'm going to fight you every step of the way until I'm shipped out of Vietnam. If you try to put one single advisor in the naval academy, I'll pull every French officer out of that academy within the hour after you do it." Well, he had me, because at the time the utmost that I could have put in that naval academy was two U.S. officers.

Q: How did you explain his attitude?

WILLIAMS: Well, that's the way he thought; he just thought, by George - and I don't think he was too damn stupid either. He just thought we should take command as the French had done and not try to let the Vietnamese command their own navy - in other words, I think he thought we were just spinning our wheels, that we couldn't teach the Vietnamese. Just like a senior French army officer said, "These people won't fight." And foolishly I said, "They just whipped you." Well, that was a stupid thing to say. The French weren't whipped necessarily there. They were whipped in Paris, just like we were whipped in the United States. We weren't whipped in Vietnam. That is my humble opinion of it.

Q: You gave me your reasons why you thought there was no longer a serious threat of invasion, say after 1958. Did you have a good intelligence about that sort of thing in those days?

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: How good was our intelligence over there?

WILLIAMS: I could only say as far as MAAG was concerned it was nonexistent. I had no intelligence personnel. I had no way of getting any military intelligence about the North Vietnamese and little about the sects, other than Bao Dai or the Hoa Hao that I got from the Vietnamese themselves. I think the Vietnamese officers, their headquarters, gave me all the information they could get, but I had no means. And I got none from the United States; I got no reports from G-2 of the Army or G-2 of the Department of the Army or Defense Department, saying such-and-such a thing is happening in North Vietnam. I got nothing of that nature that I can recall. Once I suggested to Diem that he get spies into North Vietnam. He said they had tried but with poor success.

Q: So you depended more or less on Vietnamese sources for lack of anything else?

WILLIAMS: Yes, that's right.

Q: When what we now call the insurgency in South Vietnam got started - and there is some argument about when you can date that exactly, but the late fifties seems to be a pretty general consensus - how good was your information on that, on the early beginnings of that?

WILLIAMS: The only information I got of that was when the Vietnamese military would report, "We had an attack at such-and-such a place." The embassy often said these reports were false. MAAG advisors said the reports were true.

Q: Did you see these as communist-inspired or bandit-inspired or what?

WILLIAMS: I thought it was simply local, but I always figured that the hard-core was communist and directed from Hanoi?

Q: You always thought that?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I never at any time thought it was local uprisings. I thought they were sending those people down, these hard-core people down, and they would go into these villages and intimidate the people. They could do that. They would take a man and string him up on a pole, cut off his head and lay it down at his feet, take his wife out and gut her and lay her down there by his head and let the pigs get on them, things like that. I know those things happened. If you want to intimidate a village, that's an awful good way to do it, and two or three men can come in the night and do it. They know where the chief or the top man in that village lives. They come in, they go into his hootch at night and pull him and his wife out, and in the morning they're there laying out there in the middle of the street.

Q: Could you ever get hard evidence that people were infiltrated from the north?

WILLIAMS: Well, you say hard evidence, no. I never had anything that you could pull a man up and try him for, but I know one of the first times we had casualties there, it was out at Bien Hoa if I remember correctly. It was after supper and the Americans were in their dining room and they put up a little motion picture machine and looking at motion pictures. Suddenly some people appeared at the windows, local Vietnamese were already at the windows looking in, kids and people there at that post looking through the windows at the picture show. Some of these outlaws appeared and sprayed inside the room with automatic weapons. One of them appeared to throw a bomb or a grenade of some kind through a kitchen door. He was countered in that, because there were two screen doors about ten feet apart. He apparently didn't know about the second screen door, and so the thing bounced back on him and they found his remains outside the next morning.

I happened to be in Bangkok that particular day that happened, but I got a message of this attack. I got over there as fast as an airplane could take me. I told Diem, "This is no good." I don't know what our casualties are. There's three or four people wounded and I think one or two dead, but I'm not positive and it makes no difference now at this late date. Lord take care of their souls. But I said, "This won't work. This case must be solved." Later Lansdale told me, "The Vietnamese thought so much about this that they broke some of their security finding out who did this." So those people, the best I could find up until now, came three days marches from the north. In other words, they left someplace in the north, and I never did know the details and I didn't particularly care to, if I had known I couldn't have remembered it anyway. They left a particular place in the north and they walked all night. Then they went into hiding during the day. Another guide picked them up. They were strangers, they didn't know the country. Another guide would pick them up, walked them all night.

So for three nights they walked. They got to this place and then they botched their job, because the windows were too high so they couldn't shoot down at the seats. The people that were hurt were trying to get upstairs to get their weapons. By that time I'd told our people to always keep a weapon handy. Now, we weren't supposed to be armed. But I never went anyplace that I didn't have a .45. I said, "You can carry weapons without advertising it to the world, not even your Vietnamese compadre needs to know that you're carrying a .45. But for Christ's sakes, carry something!" These advisors weren't carrying them because they were sitting in their own dining room, they'd left their damn weapons upstairs. That's stupid. The reason some people don't survive is because they do things like that. But anyway, the people that were shot were going up the staircase.

The raiders killed a Vietnamese girl that lived there. She happened to be standing outside on a box or something watching the movie. They killed her. They didn't give a damn who they killed. [They found] the remains of one of them there. He had been killed by his own grenade. But that was the only hard evidence that I recall that someone had come down from the north. But of course I knew, or at least I believed, that these people were coming down and they would go to these places and they would intimidate these villagers and they would make certain recruits.

Q: Was that the purpose of these terroristic acts in your own mind?

WILLIAMS: Yes. It was merely to disturb the people so that they would have no confidence in their government.

Q: With a view toward-

WILLIAMS: Someday to overthrowing it maybe.

Q: I see. Okay.

WILLIAMS: But in my mind it never was anything except communists. I didn't believe any of these local agricultural people wanting to rise up and overthrow the government. To me from the very first it was definitely communist inspired. I still think it was. And I think some of the things that came out to us from the United States was by people who had a very charitable view toward communism. I wouldn't say they were communists, but I would say that a lot of the things that came down to us or came to me I thought was instigated by someone who was pro-communist. I'm very serious about that; even after twenty-some odd years I still believe that with all my soul.

Q: You said that our intelligence was no better than it should have been, I suppose. How good was the other side's intelligence as you discovered as time went on?

WILLIAMS: The Viet Cong?

Q: Yes.

WILLIAMS: I think it must have been very good. I think it must have been very good, because they could pass themselves off as villagers. They could go anyplace in the country they wanted to anytime as there was free movement. I remember one U.S. Army War College class came out there on a visit and one of the students said to me later, "Hell, you're living in a police state." I said, "Why do you say we're in a police state?" He said, "Well, from the airfield in to your headquarters there were two policemen on every block." Police walking. I said, "Sure, they're watching traffic. They know you're coming in. They want you to move and move without any congestion or anything else where you're going. Now for your information, I've talked to police officials in the United States and told them what the police strength was in this city and asked about the ratio of police to population. I've been told that there's no city in the United States that could work on a ratio of as few policemen per thousand people as they do right here in Saigon. This is not a police state." People could go anyplace. There wasn't any hold on them. This student had been given false information before he ever got to Vietnam.

Q: A very free and easy atmosphere?

WILLIAMS: That's right, yes.

Q: Did you ever have any indication that the Viet Cong had infiltrated higher headquarters, not necessarily yours, but others?

WILLIAMS: No. I never suspected it.

Q: Well, I have to ask you to explain something then. I read an interview that you gave to the U.S. News & World Report - at least that is the credentials that they presented - and as I recall the interview was in 1964.

WILLIAMS: Well, I tell you, I sure wish I had a copy of that interview because several people have asked me for it and I have said, "I can't find that damn magazine. I used to have it around here."

Q: Well, I'll give you my copy. I can get another one. The reason I ask you that is because they've got a quote there that says, and I'm quoting - well, I will in a minute - the VC infiltrated both ARVN and MAAG headquarters and then they quote you, "I knew that and I fought it," unquote.

WILLIAMS: Let me see if I can find that.

Q: I don't have the page [number].

(Interruption)

You've just said that you may have said it in 1964 but you can't remember now why you would have said it.

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: Okay. Well-

WILLIAMS: I know that they used to come in and insist on going over my walls and telephone and things like that with their electrical machines to see if there were any bugs in there or if the phones had been tapped. But, I didn't put a great deal of faith in that either. You know, it's just like anything like that can happen. They can do that and say your place is absolutely clean, tomorrow morning might not be clean at all.

Q: Did they ever find anything?

WILLIAMS: No. If they did they never told me. Correction. A Vietnamese clerk in MAAG finance office was arrested. Vietnamese police told us he was a Viet Cong agent.

Q: Was there some point in the fifties when you became aware that what was going on in the countryside was not just isolated terror anymore, but a campaign of sorts had started against the government? In other words, these were not unrelated incidents but there was a pattern and it was being centrally directed.

WILLIAMS: I thought - well, now, against the government. Well now, we're talking about the Viet Cong raids?

Q: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Well, I thought all the time that was directed from Hanoi.

Q: Okay. Did Washington ever give you any indication of what their estimate of the situation was at all? Any advice on what new measures should be taken to cope with the worsening situation, anything like that?

WILLIAMS: At this moment I can't remember of any. In any case I had no means, no troops, no police.

Q: The reason I'm asking is that there was a national intelligence estimate that was done in the spring of 1959, which I came across, which predicted that the security forces - the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Forces - were not going to be able to cope with the terror in the countryside, that the ARVN would have to be used, and the Diem was losing his popularity. I'm wondering if you ever got such a report from Washington.

WILLIAMS: If I did I can't remember it.

Q: Okay.

WILLIAMS: But a report like that would not be surprising to me at all, because I think every Tom, Dick and Harry that had ever crossed the Pacific Ocean suddenly became an expert on Asian affairs and was liable to get anything in print back in the United States about that part of the world.

Q: Of course, this was a national intelligence estimate, it wasn't a State Department estimate or even just a CIA, it was the combined intelligence thinking of the whole Washington community. When I saw that I thought, well, this is serious. Obviously somebody in Washington thinks the situation is getting serious. I was wondering if they ever communicated it to you.

WILLIAMS: If they did I don't remember it. The embassy may have received it, however.

Q: Okay. Despite the increase in terrorism, did you think still in 1959 and 1960 there was still sufficient cause for optimism about how it could possibly all turn out?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Yes. I was optimistic up until the day I left there in 1960. Since 1955 we had made great progress with the Vietnamese armed forces. Our advisors were good. They were doing top work.

Q: That was the impression that I had garnered and I wanted to make sure it was the correct impression. But you also said in another place, I think it's in this other interview, that when you left in September that the situation had worsened in one respect, and that was the relations between the embassy and President Diem. Is that an accurate statement?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. I would say that.

Q: What was going on? What was the trouble there?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I know that there was this friction - what I called friction - between the President and Mr. Durbrow. It didn't surprise me too much because there was always so many derogatory things being said at country team meetings about the President.

Q: Such as what?

WILLIAMS: Oh, vulgar things in country team meetings where not only the country team members were present but maybe some staff officials from their various headquarters would be in there for different kinds of briefings and so forth. If derogatory things were said, I had the fear, and I believed very strongly, that those things could be repeated on the outside. Say that USOM might have a man at the meeting that's going to say something about fisheries or something like that. Maybe the Ambassador or one of the high-ranking individuals there would say, "Well, now, what do you think that little son-of-a-bitch is going to do about that?" Or someone might ask how can we embarrass the little bastard today.

Q: What would prompt-

WILLIAMS: What would prompt that? I don't know. I don't know. Because I thought it was terrible and I objected to it and I objected to it strongly. I said to these individuals, maybe not at that instance, "You've got people in here that go outside and this man here has something to do with fisheries and he goes back to his office and says, 'I heard the Ambassador or so and so, maybe the USOM chief, refer to President Diem as that little sawed-off son-of-a-bitch or a dirty little bastard.' He says that because that gives him prestige; he thinks because he's telling someone that he was in on such a conference. Who he tells it to, whether it's his secretary, whether it's another American or whether it's a French secretary or what, they're going to repeat it. First thing you know, it's all over town that so-and-so referred to the President as a son-of-a-bitch. Now what good does that do anybody? It can do nothing but harm, nothing but harm. It's nasty, it's shortsighted, it's non-professional."

Q: You were out of sympathy with people who felt that way?

WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

Q: Well, did this affect your relations with the country team or with USOM?

WILLIAMS: It affected my relations with the country team no end.

Q: How so?

WILLIAMS: Well, because most all sooner or later became hostile to me. Example: when MAAG submitted a yearly budget, I would never get up and submit the budget. I would always get one of my officers, in particular a man that's dead now, General Lambert, to present the budget. Lambert could get up and present the budget and [snaps fingers] they'd approve it like that. I'd get up and present that budget and have to argue and answer questions for three hours, just nit-picking. They knew that President Diem put a good deal of faith in me and that he had a very high regard for my opinions and took me in his confidence and he didn't take these other people in his confidence. There must have been jealousy there. I assume it was jealousy. I would certainly say it was stupidity, because it didn't do the United States government any good to have friction like that going on. I thought it was very bad, very bad.

Q: Did you report on this development through channels?

WILLIAMS: I made no official report of it that I can remember of, by sitting down and saying, "I want to report this, that and the other." But the Secretary of the Army, Mr. Brucker, was thoroughly cognizant of it. I'm sure General Taylor was aware of it. Admiral [Felix] Stump certainly knew it, who was CINCPAC. Admiral [Harry D.] Felt certainly knew it. It wasn't any secret in Southeast Asia. As a matter of fact, one time I was bemoaning the fact to some U.S. army officer visitor, and he said, "Why, you shouldn't worry at all. You should know about the friction that's going on between MAAG and the Ambassador up in Japan. What you've got down here amounts to nothing. If you want to get into it, just think about the Chief of MAAG over in the Philippines and the Ambassador over there. They're almost at fisticuffs. Hell, everyone does that." So, that causes a person to think, well, maybe it's not so bad, but to me it was very bad.

Q: Now, I have looked at some Senate hearings that were done in the summer of 1959, and then again there were some that were taken, some testimony was taken in Saigon in December of 1959, and I think this has to do with Colegrove, who was a reporter and reported some very sensational findings and there were hearings and so on. The testimony from Ambassador Durbrow and Mr. [Arthur Z.] Gardiner, I believe it was, is all very positive about the whole program, about President Diem and so on and so on. Not a harsh word.

WILLIAMS: Very positive, you say?

Q: Very, yes. They praised the Vietnamese government and so on. It reads one way and what you're telling me reads another way. Can you reconcile that?

WILLIAMS: They couldn't afford to downgrade Diem and the Vietnamese in an open investigation. I was reading a draft that they had prepared up at the Military History Division, they sent down here a book that they're writing to get my opinion. They spoke about the friction between the American Ambassador and the Chief of MAAG and said both freely admitted that this friction and that Mr. [Leland] Barrows, who had been USOM chief before Mr. Gardiner, said yes, that it was simply terrible, that the friction that went on between those two men was just out of this world. That same history, that was a draft of a history they're writing, quotes General [John F.] Ruggles as remarking on it, so on and so forth. So there was no secret about it.

Q: But it doesn't come out in the testimony before a Senate committee?

WILLIAMS: Probably the Senate had no knowledge of it and certainly Durbrow and Gardiner wouldn't bring it up. But I'll tell you what did come out there, which was very bad. The Senate sent for the Ambassador and Mr. Gardiner to come back to the United States to appear before the Mansfield Committee. Suddenly I got orders from the Department of the Army that I would come also, that same time. So I did. When we got to Hawaii I think it was, Durbrow said - maybe it was Guam - to Gardiner and me, "Now we've got to get our stories lined up so it won't appear that there are any differences of opinion." Well, Gardiner didn't say anything, I didn't say anything. When we went in before the Mansfield Committee, the Ambassador sat down at the center of a table. I was over on the righthand side and Gardiner on his lefthand side, and the Ambassador and Gardiner had stacks and stacks of papers and books in front of them. I had a pocket notebook and a pencil, nothing else.

Well, as this committee hearing went on and went on, I kept moving further away because it was a massacre. Finally it got so that those senators would ask either the Ambassador or Gardiner something, and before they could answer they would ask them another question. And you know when they start seesawing a witness that way the witness is whipped. So I kept taking distance. Now, at last when they did question me, Mr. Mansfield started out by saying, "Now, General Williams, we didn't ask that you appear before this committee, but the Army decided, or the Pentagon decided that you should be present. So since you are here we'd like to ask you some questions." So he asked me some questions. Now I must say that maybe this was not very diplomatic, but several times during this couple of days these hearings had been going on, when they'd ask the Ambassador something or Gardiner something and they'd start fumbling with the papers to answer it, I would say, "I'll answer that question. It was such-and-such." And that was the answer, because hell, I knew it from general knowledge and memory without having to - in other words, if I had to shuffle through a batch of papers to get an answer, I would be lost.

Q: Was one of those questions whether they had ever canceled one of your programs?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I don't remember. But anyway, Mansfield said, "We didn't ask you to be here, but since you are we'd like to ask you some questions." And they did ask questions. When they got through, Mansfield and some of these other senators were very laudatory in their remarks to me. I was surprised. There's where I got the expression that I used later with the Vietnamese, I'm working myself out of the job, because Mansfield said to me, "You're trying to work yourself out of a job." I said, "Exactly. Just as soon as I get done what I was told to do out there, I want to come back to the United States, as I've been out there some time." Neither Durbrow nor Gardiner could have been too happy with their experience before Mansfield.

Well, anyway, now we're back in Vietnam. One day Mr. Thuan, the secretary to the presidency, said to me, "What did you think about the Mansfield Report?" I said, "I haven't seen it," and I hadn't. He said, "Well, the embassy tells us to take it all with a grain of salt. Said your treatment wasn't as good as it sounds."

Q: All right, General Williams, despite the increase in terrorist activities in 1959 and 1960, did you see cause for optimism in the South Vietnamese situation in your last two years on your tour?

WILLIAMS: I was not necessarily optimistic, but I certainly was not pessimistic. I thought that the situation was under control and that it could be kept under control, because I had a great deal of faith in the people that I was working with, especially U.S. military advisors, both officers and NCO's being furnished me. I had a great deal of faith in the Vietnamese leadership in the form of President [Ngo Dinh] Diem and his secretary of defense, his various secretaries of state and so forth. And I thought that they would come out of it, that they would come out of it in time.

Q: I think, in fact, you said in a letter to Senator [Mike] Mansfield that you thought after 1960 South Vietnam might even be able to reduce its defense budget. But in 1964 - and I'm referring again to the interview that you gave to the U. S. News and World Report - you said that when you left Vietnam in September of 1960, that the situation bordered on the critical due to a loss of good relations between USOM [United States Operations Mission], the embassy, on one hand and Diem on the other hand. In what sense was the situation critical when you left?

WILLIAMS: Well, I don't know exactly how to explain that to you. To me, it was critical because there was not good relationship between the presidency and the Americans in general in Vietnam with MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] excepted. The President was making complaints about the Ambassador personally; he was making complaints about the CIA; he was making complaints about USOM. On the other hand, the people at the embassy, the people in USOM - I'm talking about the leaders of those people, not the Indians doing the work, but the leaders - were making complaints about the presidency and about any other government official whose name happened to come up, and in my opinion, the situation was such that if there was not some change made, that it could become severely critical. And I was right in that, because it did become-

Q: Can we take those a little in detail? Now you saw that Diem was complaining about the mission and about the CIA, for example. What sort of complaints was he making?

WILLIAMS: Well, he was complaining because USOM would not do anything about helping them with a Civil Guard. That's one thing. Any project that he wanted to carry out, such as resettling people and things of that nature, they would buck him on it. For instance, he wanted to take people out of the Delta where they were packed in as tight as they could be, and put those people up in the Highlands on farms.

Farming was what they were doing down in the Delta. And personally, I thought it was right. I thought if he could settle that Highland area with good substantial Vietnamese and each man own his own land, that it would be a good bulwark against communist inroads. His idea was that every man, every head of family, that went up there was going to have two or three hundred acres, and the government was going to sell him that land and give him either six or seven years to pay for it. I couldn't think of anything better. USOM said no. If they moved anyone up there they had to move them up and put them on the outskirts of any cities that were there, in other words, merely enlarge the cities. Well, Diem's reply to counter that was, that's just making larger cities up there; it's not cultivating the countryside nor it's not sowing a good yeomanry through the country. Those kind of things.

Some of the villages he started to build in the Delta area. There was a tax on those people to help build the villages. He asked me one time what I thought about people down there that couldn't pay their tax. I asked, could they work? And he said yes, and I said all right, will you consider this: why can't a man work out his tax? I said, as a child in Denton, Texas in the United States of America, they had road taxes, and I presume they still do. But in my day and time, if people didn't have cash money handy, and the county had some roads to build, a man and his team of horses or mules and scraper or wagon would come, and they would work under county supervision and build roads. I said there was nothing degrading about that; a man was working out his taxes. I said, hell, everybody did it. All right, now he started to apply that to the Delta area. Immediately he was accused by embassy and USOM of using slave labor.

Q: Were these the agrovilles?

WILLIAMS: That's right, the agrovilles, I think that was the name. They said, look, Diem's trying to do this with slave labor. I said what the hell's slavery about it? A man's working out his taxes. If he has money, he doesn't have to do that if he doesn't want to. He can work or he can pay his taxes with money. He can do either one he wants to do. Diem put out an ordinance ruling or dictating, or whatever the proper term is, that no person could own over two hundred and fifty acres of land. There were some people, some Vietnamese, that owned large estates - two and three thousand acres - and they used Vietnamese farmers to farm that land as sharecroppers. But the farmer's share was very small. American sharecroppers wouldn't put up with that. I'd seen sharecroppers in the United States as a child, and had observed them, and after I got grown realized they were getting the short end of the stick.

Well, immediately the large landowners - a man owning two or three thousand acres of land - looked with a dim view on the government taking all of his land except two hundred and fifty acres, although he was reimbursed for what the government took. He looked with a dim view on that, because then he would shortly in years to come, or his family, would fail to be millionaires or multi-millionaires, and be ordinary, moderate citizens.

Q: Were these larger estates primarily Delta estates?

WILLIAMS: They were, yes. Now, Diem would be opposed in anything like that that he brought up. It didn't make any difference what it was, someone would up and say, "Well, that little son of a bitch can't do this."

Q: Is that the term that they used?

WILLIAMS: That was the term they often use. And I objected to that very strongly. I said, "Don't you know" - speaking to these senior U.S. people in the country team meeting - "that using language like that is going to leak and get back to the President of this country and to his various and sundry people, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State and so on and so forth." "Oh, no, no one's going to repeat anything like that." And I said, "The hell they won't. You can believe it, and on top of that, what good does it do to always be abusing a person? It's going to cost you money, it's going to cost you prestige. It's going to cost you the ability to work.

I was totally disregarded; they kept on doing that. That irritated me terribly because first of all, I thought a great deal of President Diem; I thought that he was doing a good job, as good as he could possibly do. And I thought that our purpose was to give him as much help as possible, and if we thought he was going wrong in this or that to nudge him politely to get him to change ideas instead of saying flatly "you can't do this" or "you can't do that."

Q: Who, primarily, would you say were the chief offenders in this way, in the USOM?

WILLIAMS: I'd say it'd have to be the chief, because I think most take their line of conduct from their chief. All Indians in USOM were not anti-Diem.

Q: So you think Ambassador [Elbridge] Durbrow, for example.

WILLIAMS: Well, as far as the embassy was concerned, certainly it was the Ambassador as he is responsible for the embassy and his staff.

Q: I'll ask a question about him a little later, but we can get into that. So you felt that relationships were what was critical?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: In 1960. Not the security situation, necessarily?

WILLIAMS: No, I thought that mainly the critical situation revolved around the relationship between the American civilian officialdom in Vietnam and the Vietnamese officials.

You see, another thing that convinced me of that - I was having no trouble, my officers were having no trouble with our Vietnamese counterparts in army, navy or air force. We had our differences, we had our arguments, but nothing to cause a person to be mad about it five minutes after the conversation ended.

Q: That reminds me of something you mentioned last time, which was that your relationship with the senior officers was so good, they were so open with you, that when talk of a coup would come up, they had no hesitation about discussing this in front of you, and you were able to influence them to go along this line.

WILLIAMS: That is correct.

Q: But it occurs to me that we didn't mention what was behind such talk. Why would they be discussing a coup at all, what was their reason?

WILLIAMS: I was never too sure about that, but some times there was talk of coup, around campfires and there was a lot of it on the radio, international radio. They would say, "Well, Hanoi Radio says such and such. French Radio says such and such." I don't know whether they ever quoted American radio, Voice of America or anything like that. I don't remember that. I think those broadcasts instigated, and on top of that, you want to remember that the officer corps was primarily French oriented - they were Vietnamese second. The senior officers had served in the French army, either in the Colonial army or in the Regular army. They were educated by the French, if they had any education. And the French didn't like Diem. He had literally thrown them out of the country. Just a lot of French-oriented people were talking against the Vietnamese government.

On top of that, they were rather young and what else did they have to do if they couldn't do other things but sit around the campfire and bitch about something. I've seen the same thing in the American army, except I haven't heard anyone in the American army sit around and bitch about having a coup d'etat. But they bitched about the CG, they bitched about the commissary, they bitched about supply, they bitched about the Adjutant General, and you name it, and the American army officers will sit around and bitch about it. Nothing serious, you understand. Well, they were doing the same thing, except these generals and colonels were mostly younger - they were younger than the average colonel in the American army at that time.

Q: And these were the top-ranking Vietnamese officers.

WILLIAMS: They were the top-ranking, yes. For instance, Big [Duong Van] Minh who later became the instigator of the coup d'etat - the man who had Diem murdered - he'd been a first lieutenant in the French army, colonial army. Don, who was next to Minh -

Q: Is this Tran Van Don?

WILLIAMS: Yes. He'd been lieutenant or captain in the French army. Tran Van Don had been aide-de-camp to Emperor Bao Dai. You could go right down the line. Some of them had been born in France, some of them had been educated in France. Some of them had merely been with the French army. General Ty, who was the oldest and a senior, and very likely the least efficient of all, had been a sergeant in the Colonial army and had even gone to World War I in a truck transportation corps. I ran into them in World War I on one occasion. We called them at that time, solder vernacular, I don't know what the correct name is, we called them Annamite. I remember one time that I was sent to find one of the battalions in my regiment that had failed to get where they were to go, and I ran into one of these truck companies, and there was one of these what I now know to have been a Vietnamese officer in the leading truck. When I talked to him, he couldn't understand me, but he asked me what kind of insignia was painted on the door of the trucks of the convoy that our soldiers were riding in. He showed me some dragon or some damn thing like that that was painted on the door of his truck. Well, I didn't know, but if I'd known that, he could have told me where that column of trucks were, presumably.

But old General Ty had been a sergeant in France in that outfit. He came back and was an officer in the Vietnamese army under the French at the time that the Japanese came in. When he found out - he told me he was a battalion commander by that time - that the Japanese were really fixing to take over from the Vichy French and not collaborate with them like they had heretofore, he warned his battalion. He said they were out in a field at-t~he time. He told his troops such and such is going to happen, and said, "I think now it's every man for himself. I'm going to the jungle." He told me he took off, and said his whole damn battalion just disappeared.

When the French got back, after Great Britain and the United States gave Vietnam back to the French after World War II, Ty came out of hiding, Big Minh came out of hiding, the rest of them who had been hiding came out. Big Minh was arrested, put in jail, and the French were going to court-martial him, but they didn't probably because of his association with a man who later became vice president, a man by the name of [Nguyen Ngoc] Tho, T-H-O.

Big Minh told me about being in the French prison, and the way he described it, it was terrible. He said they were packed in there in what later became known in our literature as tiger cages, and he said he couldn't sit down or lie down. It was crowded in there, and [he] said there was no place to defecate. He said there was urine and feces on the floor ankle deep when he was finally gotten out. I said, "How the hell did you get out?" He said, "Mr. Tho got out, and after he got out, he got me out." The French still held desertion over him, though. They threatened to court martial him, but they didn't.

Now that was the type background of some of these people. Each one of them had a different background, and that's the reason they couldn't be taken as a group. You had to know each one as well as you could and figure him out. Now with Major General [Huu] Xuan, X-U-A-N, that led the detail that went down to the church in Cholon to get Diem and his brother and bring them back after they had surrendered by phone. He'd been in the French G-2. And at one time when I commented about this officer and asked Diem why he didn't give him more responsibility, Diem apparently had a gut feeling this man was no good, and it turned out he wasn't. Diem told me, "That man was a G-2, French army." And added, "Once a G-2 in the French army, always a G-2 in the French Army." Well, what he referred to was the Intelligence Section.

So they had all kinds of backgrounds, and you ask, now what would cause them to do this? Maybe boredom? If nothing else, maybe just to see what my reaction would be. I don't know.

Q: Now, some authorities say that one of the sources of disagreement in this area involving the embassy was that the embassy believed generally that Diem's problems, wherever they may have been in the country, resulted from his gradual loss of political clout, of authority, that he was alienating too many people in the country, and they advocated therefore certain reforms which Diem didn't want to carry out, and that the military argued that making Diem act against his will would cause him to lose face and only aggravate the situation. Do you recall an argument along those lines?

WILLIAMS: At the moment I can't say that I do. It doesn't sound mysterious to me because the whole thing began to turn into a can of worms, there's no doubt about that. But what they were referring to as the reforms, I haven't any idea. It sounded like a lot of hindsight talking to me.

Q: Did you have any specific advice to Diem about how to handle the insurgency, for example? What were your ideas on what was behind the growing acts of terror in the countryside?

WILLIAMS: I certainly had advice to him about handling the insurgency. What was behind it was nothing to me except a bunch of people that were reds, communists, that were just attempting to take over the country. That's all there was to it.

Q: But where were they coming from? Were these infiltrated communists, do you think, or had they been left behind from before?

WILLIAMS: I thought and still believe the hard core of them, the leaders, were from the North. When the North and the South divided, we know that almost a million people came down from the North to the South, and General Mike O'Daniel honchoed most of that.

Q: Yes, we talked about that last time. That's right.

WILLIAMS: There were certain numbers of them, but very few, that left the South and went North. Now, one group of those people, several hundred and I don't know exactly how many - I say several hundred because that's the figure I have in my mind - were stopped short of the border and were held by the North Vietnamese for several months. And all the young men in that group then were married to Vietnamese girls that lived in that vicinity. Now, when they went ahead and moved on further north, the husbands went but the girls were not allowed to go. So that put these young men who had been born and raised in the South but had sympathy toward the communists, moving up into the North, but their wives and any children that were coming on were living back down South. Well, now this might seem far-fetched, but to me it wasn't far-fetched at all when that was told to me, because knowing the tremendous loyalty in the Vietnamese family which comes first - the family comes first, the State second, then the Church about third - but the family comes first of all. Those men were going to come back to the South to get their wives and their children. That gave them a perfect bed to come back to and an area to come back to after being thoroughly indoctrinated in the North and then to spread from there out throughout the country.

Q: Now, if I read you right, what you're saying is that these men, and men like them, formed the cadre who organized and directed the insurgency. Am I reading you properly on this?

WILLIAMS: That's right.

Q: Now, most authorities would agree with that, I think. Most of the people that I have read would certainly agree with it. Where they disagree some time is where did the followers come from and what motivated the followers that these cadre organized and got together? What is your opinion about that?

WILLIAMS: I think it's not too big a question. First of all, this thing that I just related here, of course I had no personal knowledge of that, that was merely told me by the Vietnamese how they kept those people there for a while and married and then they took the men on and left their wives and families back. That of course came to me just by hearsay.

Now, where did the followers come from? It's not too hard to understand. Your hard-core Viet Cong came down from the North, and they'd start prying around these villages, and they would try to get help from the villages because they had to have food, they had to have money support, they had to have places to hide and so on and so forth. Now, they would come into a village that was just as innocent, more so, than a little town in Texas or Louisiana and they'd say, "All right, we want help. We want assistance. We want food, we want a place to hide, we want money, we want some piasters" and so on and so forth. People would say, "Nothing doing." And they'd say "Fine." And later they'd come back at night, they'd pick out the head man, what we would call the mayor, his wife and then his children, and when the people got up the next morning, there would be a stake or something of that nature standing up in the main street of the town, and there would be the mayor's head on it, his body down at the bottom of it, and very likely his wife's body also. If she was pregnant, she'd be gutted, her baby out, and by that time maybe the hogs had started working on them.

Now, just a few things like that, and you've got some innocent farmers that don't know very much, except how to work in a rice field, and the next time some man comes in and he says, "I want some piasters, I want a place to hide, and I want you to do this, that and the other," they're going to hesitate a hell of a long time before they say, "No, no way." I hate to think it could happen here, but I tell you, I believe that a small town in the United States could be intimidated, some town, just as well as you could intimidate some villages in Vietnam. They had no communication, there's few telephone lines, the roads were very poor. If anyone went from one place to another, they walked, or they rode a bicycle. Yes, those things could happen, and in that way a man, an outfit could build up a very good following.

Now, I know that these things, the instances like this did happen. We'll take a Civil Guard detachment that's out here guarding a bridge, or something of that nature. I relate this as positive facts of things that happened. Maybe a half dozen Viet Cong would come, and tell these guards, "we want you to surrender." It'd be always in the night, see. And they'd say, "No, we won't surrender." Remember they are around the bridge or around a little old building that they're guarding or something of that nature, and their wives and their children are living there in little shacks, and I'm talking about really shacks, something you can throw up in fifteen minutes. They're carrying old 1898 French rifles, and the ammunition for it will fire and some of it won't. They said, "No, we won't surrender." Maybe they've got a corporal or a sergeant in charge. Hadn't as much training as a good Boy Scout in the United States.

The V.C. come back the next night, they stop at the nearest village, they round up all the villagers. Say there's a hundred villagers. They put them in a column of two's and march them down the road. They don't march them up close to this little fort. They'll march them up within a hundred yards of it maybe, it's dark. They order, halt, start shouting and hollering. They do. The Viet Cong goes back to this little outpost and says, "You're completely surrounded. I've got two or three hundred troops here. We're going to put you to the sword, we're going to kill you and your women and children if you don't surrender now. Are you going to surrender or not surrender?" And the guards say, "Boy, come on in."

Now, those things happened repeatedly. I used to complain about that and wanting to do something with the Civil Guard and give them some kind of training and equipment. I said, it's beyond this argument about who is going to train the Civil Guard. Someone's got to train them, someone's got to equip them, someone's got to organize them, because incidents like this happen, and I related instances of that nature. I was able to say this happened at such-and-such a place at such-and-such an hour on such-and-such a night. I'd have the information right at my fingertips, and today I'm talking in generalities, and I don't have details of times and places. I'd say, now as soon as that happened, these V.C. can go back to their villages and say, "Look, you think the government of Vietnam is defending you? Look what we just did. We just knocked off this outfit up here on this bridge, we just knocked off this outfit over here on this radio station." And I said the natives will believe it. "They're not knocking them off, they're using their own Vietnamese villagers to do it under the cover of darkness." So that's actually digging the foundation right out from under the Vietnamese government. Our officials couldn't see it, or didn't want to see it. Or simply were afraid to face facts.

Q: What was their explanation?

WILLIAMS: None.

Q: They just didn't accept your explanation.

WILLIAMS: Didn't accept it. Often claimed I'd been misinformed.

Q: So terror was a very effective weapon?

WILLIAMS: Very effective. And not only they didn't accept it, but I had long since started working through the Vietnamese military to have them give me a report, as well as they could, of any time any incident of this type that I have just discussed happened. Say, once a week I'd take a consolidated report like that and I'd take it to a country team meeting, and I'd say "All right, now, here's the information I have as to what terrorist activities have happened during the last seven days, which we're not doing anything about and we're keeping the Vietnamese from doing anything about," and I'd read the report. They wouldn't accept them. They'd say, "Let us have that data, and we'll check it through our sources." They'd come back a week or fourteen days later and they'd say, "Our sources don't jibe with yours."

Q: What were their sources, do you have any idea?

WILLIAMS: No. And I'd say, "Well, why do you think the Vietnamese military gave me reports like this?" They'd say, "They're trying to pull the wool over your eyes. They're doing that to get more military aid." I said, "They're not getting any military aid at all for the Civil Guard or Self-Defense Corps. This has nothing to do with military aid. This is what's going on in the countryside that the army has no control over, and no one else has any control over because the Civil Guard's supposed to be sitting on these places." I was just hitting a stone wall.

Q: Were your people, your American people in the field corroborating some of these stories?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. However, they couldn't corroborate all of them, because maybe there wouldn't be an American within miles of one of these places.

Q: Some people say that in addition to terror, the Viet Cong had another ace in the hole, and that was the business of land reform. You've touched on land reform already, you mentioned Diem's program. Some of Diem's critics say that the problem is that Diem didn't follow through on the land reform program, that is, that there was a program, all right, but that not nearly enough land actually changed hands. Not enough landless peasants wound up with some land. Did you have any insight into that?

WILLIAMS: I wouldn't know about numbers.

Q: It wasn't your business to check on that?

WILLIAMS: No. The only thing I would know about that would be in the conversation with Diem he might casually mention, "Well, we've settled so many people at such-and-such a place or in such-and-such an area." But, you see, so many times when Diem would bring up a thing like that you just spoke about, I'd caution him by saying, "Mr. President, you know I have great sympathy with what you're doing, but I have no control over those things. I have none whatsoever," and I said, "Odd as it may seem to you, that's entirely the civilian, American civilians are handling that business, and anytime I even bring up the subject, they often take offense that I am bold enough to bring it up."

Q: Why would they take offense?

WILLIAMS: Because they'd say it was none of my business.

Q: I see. So why was Diem bringing it up to you, then? He was a smart man, he knew you couldn't do anything, I suspect. Why?

WILLIAMS: I don't know, unless he knew that I was trying to get those things back to report through military channels, which I would, and he very likely knew that I was trying to defend him before the other Americans. Those people were pretty smart; I think they knew what was going on. I'm not so awful sure that there weren't American civilians that would tell Diem, or if not Diem but members of the Vietnamese government, many things that - in other words, I don't believe that all people in USOM were in sympathy with what USOM was doing. I'm not so awful sure that all people in the embassy were in sympathy with what the ambassador wanted to do. I'm not sure of that.

Q: We've mentioned a lot about Diem. Do you have any recollections or any opinions to share with us about his brother, [Ngo Dinh] Nhu? We hear an awful lot about him after 1960, that he was sort of the real bad guy-

WILLIAMS: He was the man that wore the black hat to hear the Americans tell it. My relationship with Nhu was very, very scant. He didn't speak English, and I didn't speak French. Certainly not enough to carry on a conversation with him. I had very, very little contact with him-,some, not much. I must say I had more contact with Mrs. Nhu, and that was very limited, than I did with Mr. Nhu. But a certain group of Americans considered Nhu as the black-hatted guy, and they objected to the political party that he organized-

Q: That was the Can Lao, wasn't it?

WILLIAMS: That's right. Can Lao? Yes, as I recall that was the name of it. And I don't know whether that was a labor union, or if it was anti-labor union or exactly what it was, but it was a political party that the President did not belong to because I asked him flat out. I asked, "Are you a member of the Can Lao Party?" He said, "I am not, and I have nothing to do with it." He said, "My brother is with the Can Lao Party." He may have been the dastardly villain that the Americans, some Americans, made him out to be, but I doubt it. Neither do I think Madame Nhu was the dragon lady that she was painted to be, not by any manner or means.

Q: She became rather famous for making certain statements to the press later on, and the one that sticks in my mind at this time for some reason is that after 1963, she went on record as saying that the Americans were to blame for it all. Somehow, it was all our fault. How did that strike you, when she said that?

WILLIAMS: Well, first of all, I wasn't so awful sure she said that, if she was correctly quoted. Was this after Diem and her husband were murdered? I'd like to go back just a little bit.

Q: All right.

WILLIAMS: Madame Nhu spoke English, and she was a very, very attractive woman, and a lot of people were mesmerized by her beauty. I wasn't because I was totally indifferent to her, and why I don't know, but I just was. I engaged her in conversation, she engaged me in conversation, and she used to take me to task for things, occasionally. For instance, I remember one time she invited me to a house party she and Mr. Nhu were having down on the coast, and I declined.

Q: Was this in Saigon?

WILLIAMS: No, the house party was down on the coast someplace. I declined and later the President invited me to the same party, and I accepted. And the first time she saw me, which was at the party, she said, "I invited you to this party and you declined, and the President invited you and you accepted." I said, "Well, what the hell do you expect me to do?" (Laughter) "Of course I accepted when the President invited me. That didn't mean I wanted to come." But nevertheless, we'd have arguments like that.

But now I'm really drawing on my imagination, because there's several things I told the President that he did long after I was gone that may have been good and may not have been. I told him one time that I thought he should send someone to the United States to give the Vietnamese side, his side of the problems that were going on. And I said, "Someone who's thoroughly familiar with them." All right, he sent Madame Nhu. She got over here and the press started tearing her to pieces. I think maybe - now this may be egotism on my part, but I'm not too sure it is - I think maybe Madame Nhu came to the United States because I told the President he should send someone over here to give his side of the problem. Now, Madame Nhu's father was the ambassador to the United States, and they were at cross-purposes.

Q: Do you know why?

WILLIAMS: Well, her father was anti-Diem, and I think he was pro-Bao Dai, but I'm not positive. But I know that they were at cross-purposes, and I know that that worked out to her disadvantage, and actually to serious disadvantage, because when she went to various and sundry places, and the bills at those various and sundry hotels were sent to the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, which is common custom, the way it's done throughout the world, they were not paid. So the American press didn't come back and say the Vietnamese ambassador refused to pay Madame Nhu's bills, they came back and said, Madame Nhu jumped a hotel bill in Los Angeles. I read that in the press myself. Well, hell, that woman's as honest as I am, she wouldn't jump a hotel bill. Then she was painted as the dragon lady and all that kind of stuff, which was terrible. Among other things she organized women out there, she had a good women's club going there that was getting to be almost nation-wide, and she had a hell of a lot of people in that thing, and I think she was wielding a lot of power, as much power possibly as her husband, maybe more.

But she also had the Americans at a disadvantage either because of her good looks or because of her sharp tongue or something. Very few of the foreigners would contradict or argue with her. I was not one of them. I'd argue with her. Anytime she said something

I thought was wrong, I'd say, "You're just as wrong as you can be." Actually Mrs. Williams would, too, because she and Mrs. Williams were fairly good friends, not very close friends, but pretty good friends. I remember one time that they were up in Dalat. Mrs. Williams was visiting her up in Dalat, which was a summer resort up in the hills. One of Madame Nhu's little boys started whipping a dog with a bicycle chain, and Mrs. Williams told him to stop. He stopped. Mrs. Nhu said, "Why should you stop my boy from whipping that dog with a bicycle chain?" And Mrs. Williams, who was a dog lover and we always had dogs, said, "Because that's not the way a child's supposed to do and you ought not to let your child do things like that." Well, I doubt if there's anyone else in Southeast Asia who would ever talk to Madame Nhu that way. But she liked it. I guess she liked it. She continued to have a pleasant relationship with us. But that's not answering very much your question about Mr. Nhu.

Q: Well, you've told me what you recall, and that's what we're after. Let me get back to the problems created by the growing terrorism or insurgency, whichever name you care to put on it. Did we adopt any new policies by 1960 to deal with the problem of security in the countryside?

WILLIAMS: You mean as a nation? You mean MAAG?

Q: I mean MAAG in Vietnam. Wasn't there a counter-insurgency plan or something of that nature?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: What was the nature of it?

WILLIAMS: I can't remember the details of that.

Q: Were there special counter-guerrilla units formed?

WILLIAMS: No. If so I can't remember them at this late date.

Q: Okay. Speaking of that, do you remember when the Ranger Battalions first made their appearance in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese Ranger Battalions?

WILLIAMS: I'd say along about 1957 or 1958. I'm guessing. I'd like to say something of that nature about these special detachments.

Q: All right.

WILLIAMS: I mentioned that in this U.S. News and World Report business. I was told to organize, train, and equip the Vietnamese army, navy, and air force, and their marines, and their paratroopers. The marines came in as part of the navy and the paratroopers as part of the army. Now to do that, I had to have some kind of organization, because an American army, as you well know from your own army experience, cannot requisition equipment unless you requisition against an approved Table of Organization and Equipment. All right, the Vietnamese had none. So anything that I was getting from the United States I was either begging, borrowing or stealing it, and I was finally told, "All right, you've got to have more formal tables of organization and equipment out there for us to work against. I said, "Fine, that suits me fine. That gives me talking points with the Vietnamese."

So, taking this up with the President and the Secretary of Defense right straight on down, I told them what was necessary and of course they accepted my word for it. I said, "I want to form a Board of army officers who have had experience." Some had had some combat experience at least. Some had administrative experience, and to determine, through this board, through trial and error, tests, and things of that nature a proper Table of Organization and Equipment for their army to start with. So that's what we did.

Q: Is this when you first formed the first Vietnamese division, the eight thousand men-

WILLIAMS: No, Mike O'Daniel had done that without any table of organization or anything else. He'd just taken anything he could find because the French had little detachments here, there, and yon. Nothing bigger than a battalion, and he'd just thrown those people together the best way he could. He was just like marching through mud, he was having a terrible time because that's the way the conditions were. I was a little bit better off because he'd done a certain amount of preliminary work.

Anyway, we formed this Board and we finally came up with what I called a Vietnamese division, and I worked with the Board, not directed them or anything of that nature, but nudged them this way and that when they were going off on tangents. And [I] told them we wanted a division that could work in the jungle, in the swamps, in the mountains, those were the main terrain features, and I didn't want a Japanese division, nor an American division, nor a Korean division nor anything else. I wanted a Vietnamese division that could be theirs. So that's what we got. Now, those divisions were built so they could be broken right on down as far as companies and platoons. Some people that didn't know any better later said, "All right, General Williams and his people organized the Vietnamese division like an American division." Well we didn't do any damn such a thing, and if anyone had taken the trouble to take a Table of Organization of a Vietnamese division and look at, they could see that it didn't resemble an American division as much as it might resemble the Japanese or the Korean division. Actually the supply was based on the Korean labor force type, so what in the world do they call those people up in Korea that the Koreans had with their army up there-

Q: Katusas?

WILLIAMS: Katusas, yes. No, wait a minute. Katusas were the soldiers that were with the Americans. I'm talking about the men that carried those A-frames on their backs, that they had instead of trucks. Korean Labor Corps? Or Korean Service Corps? Well, anyway, they had a corps of those people. We used those people as examples when - those were those photographs I saw with you the other day where we built things that looked like bicycles that had two hundred and fifty pound loads on them. And the motor transportation amounted to nothing. Well, you could break those down to squad, platoon, companies - any size you wanted to, to go after guerrillas or to fight a set-piece battle. There's nothing wrong with that organization, and any military people to this day will admit there's nothing wrong with it, and as a matter of fact, there was no change made in that organization as far as I know as long as American military were in Vietnam, and up until 1970 - when did we come out, 1972, wasn't it something like that?

Q: We came out in 1972, I believe.

WILLIAMS: Yes. They made no changes in the Vietnamese Table of Organization all during that time. So there wasn't anything wrong with it, but people that didn't know wanted to do any picking that they possibly could. The reason people were talking about Motor Divisions was because these "stringers" that would come in there and write foolish things, they'd see a parade in the city of Saigon, for instance, and the Vietnamese would pull in every old tank they had, every half-truck, bulldozer, anything else that would run, they'd put that in the parade down the street and people would look at that and say, "My God, here's a motorized division." Well, it wasn't any more a motorized division than I've got a motorized division sitting here in my carport. The stringers just didn't know.

But it's easy to pick, pick. A few days ago we saw a headline here in the San Antonio papers: "Navy Goes to San Salvador." You pick that up and read it. Then you read they'd sent down five goddamned sailors to help the San Salvadoran people learn how to run the motors on those motor boats that they had. But there's a headline two inches high: "U.S. Navy to San Salvador." You might not remember it, but I can tell you that type of reporting was going on back in 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960 and right on through. It was just terrible. What did the U.S. press have to gain?

Q: But you read about it, it sounds like gunboat diplomacy all over again.

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. Now, there's talk about advisors. Someone wrote me a letter the other day and said, "We'd like to have your opinion on the advisors to San Salvador. Isn't that the way we started in Vietnam?" My answer to that was advisors in Vietnam didn't cause the war; they had nothing to do with the war. I stayed there until 1960, the war didn't break out until sometime after Diem was overthrown in 1963. I think it broke out in 1965. Well, American advisors didn't cause that war. It was American policy that caused the war indirectly. American policy in overthrowing Ngo Dinh Diem. And we know that's recorded history now. No question about it. But here an intelligent person writes and said "Isn't this the way we got started in Vietnam, by sending advisors?" Well, memory is short, and historical memory, and you're getting to be a historian, or are a historian, and you know that as well or better than I do.

Q: In this Table of Organization which you developed with much agonizing and soul-searching and so on, where do the Ranger Battalions fit into this organization?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember that detail. But I know that the Vietnamese wanted Ranger Battalions.

Q: This was a Vietnamese idea, then, the Ranger Battalions?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes, as I recall.

Q: I see. What purpose were they supposed to serve?

WILLIAMS: Oh, the Americans had them.

Q: I don't understand.

WILLIAMS: America had Rangers just like we've got right now. So the V.N. want them.

Q: I see, I see. Did you agree with-

WILLIAMS: I didn't argue with them about it. As long as it didn't bother going ahead with the organization of the division. You just can't have everything your way, you know.

Q: I see.

WILLIAMS: The U.S. Green Berets have a great deal of glamor about them.

Q: When were they introduced? When did they start coming in?

WILLIAMS: I don't know, but I tell you the first U.S. batch that came in there almost got us in trouble. This was done almost without my knowledge; in other words, someone had set it up, and it had not been the Vietnamese. But someone wanted one of our Ranger Battalions, or one of our Green Beret Battalions, I'll call them, that was up in Okinawa, they wanted them to have some training in Vietnam.

Q: Was that what they called a C team, do you remember that designation? I think that's the higher headquarters of a special forces detachment, that's the largest detachment. But that may be a later development, I may be getting ahead of things.

WILLIAMS: Could have been. But anyway, this was instigated by someone other than the Vietnamese, because the Vietnamese came to me and said the Americans want to bring a battalion of the Green Berets in.

Q: What Americans now?

WILLIAMS: He didn't say. As far as I know, it was someone in Washington or Hawaii. Not our advisors. They wanted to do this for training, and I said okay. But we must remember that at that time we were under a terrible handicap, because we had only four hundred and forty-two advisors which we had when the Geneva accords were signed, or adopted - we never did sign them. So this International Control Commission made up of the Poles, the Canadians and the Indians always checked very closely any additions we had to MAAG, and we had to defend every one of them. You bring in one extra typist, you had to defend it as though you were bringing in two combat teams. I said, "How are you going to get by with this business?" They said, "Oh, we're going to bring them in over the beaches." I said, "Okay. Where do we want to put them?" "Oh, in such-and-such a place." Now all this had been arranged, not through MAAG.

Q: What did they mean by over the beaches? Did they mean under cover of night, or...

WILLIAMS: That's right. They were going to land in rowboats or motor boats.

Q: Okay. A tactical landing.

WILLIAMS: That's right. Come in over the beaches. No ships in sight. Okay. Now that was done, and this was going to be kept a great secret. So they brought in this battalion, and they coiled up there in the hills, over on the east coast.

Q: Do you remember about where that was?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I'd say it was up around that enormous big bay up there.

Q: Cam Ranh?

WILLIAMS: Cam Ranh Bay, yes. Close to Cam Ranh Bay. And the Vietnamese were going to work with them, and the Vietnamese detailed some of their troops to work with them, say, a battalion or a couple of companies, something like that. All this was in great secrecy, and I knew that if anything happened and the secrecy was broken that I was going to have a terrible lot of trouble with the Control Commission made up of the Indians and the Canadians and the Poles. And I was having plenty of trouble with those people anyway. So about the first thing that happened after the battalion had landed they took a half a dozen or so of these Green Berets and they put them in an automobile or a truck and moved them by road down towards, and in the general direction of Saigon, but only, oh, say, about ten or twelve miles from where the battalion was coiled in the hills. And turned them loose and said your compass direction is such-and-such, now go through the jungles and get back to your battalion.

Q: Strictly a training exercise?

WILLIAMS: Strictly a training exercise. In a few days, word came to me, "We can't find our people." I said, "What do you mean you can't find them?" They then explained to me what had happened, you see? And I said, "Well, I'll find them for you." So I got some Vietnamese soldiers, or officers, in that vicinity, and I said, "There's some Americans lost in these damn jungles between here and the coast and God knows where they are because they've got compasses, and they're supposed to be able to navigate - all you got to do is march straight east and you will come to the coast anyway." And the Vietnamese went in and found them. The goddamned Green Berets had gotten lost. Ten miles from the coast. So help me! Then I began to get skeptical about these people.

So the next thing that happened, I got information that there had been a terrible accident out there, and so I got there as quickly as I could. You see, I was staying away from all this stuff, because I wanted to be - if the Commission had said anything to me about it, I'd have said, "Gentlemen, what the hell are you talking about?" See? And the Vietnamese government theoretically were, too, because all this was under cover. I went out there, and there was a Vietnamese officer dead, there was an American captain dead, of the Green Berets, there was an American warrant officer with one arm gone, and that was just about it.

I said, "What the hell happened?" Well, here's what happened as they explained it to me. We had a convoy moving down the road, and we had certain Vietnamese here and we were teaching them how to handle a convoy, and so a fire fight started, simulated, and they wanted to add a little bit of zest to it, so they had some sticks of dynamite. Now, these people are sitting around an open fire, and they'd light one of these sticks of dynamite with the fuse on, and they'd throw it like that, and exploding it, imitating artillery fire. Now, that's like a state fair in Texas in 1914. Two militia companies having a sham battle. To my mind, that's what it sounded like. What happened, the warrant officer threw one stick of dynamite and it failed to go where he wanted it to, and it killed an American captain. It also knocked off his own arm, and it did this other damage.

Hell, I said, the soup's certainly in the fire. But I didn't know how much so, but how we got out of it I don't know, because a few days later - of course they evacuated these people and then later evacuated the battalion. They pulled out again over the beaches. A little bit later, I saw or was sent, rather, a clipping out of a newspaper that was published in Okinawa that said Captain so-and-so, and gave his name, his organization and so forth, was killed during an exercise in Vietnam on such-and-such a day by a premature explosion of a stick of dynamite. Now, if the Viet Cong or Hanoi had been smart enough to be reading the newspapers, they would have wondered "Now, why was this captain of this Green Beret outfit that's stationed in Okinawa, what the hell is he doing in Vietnam with a stick of dynamite?" You see? It gave away the whole show. Now, if Hanoi picked it up I don't know because I never heard a word about it, I didn't hear anything about it from the International Control Commission, no Vietnamese ever said anything to me about it, and no American ever said anything to me about it to this day.

Q: Now, something occurs to me. You said that these Green Berets were primarily on a training mission.

WILLIAMS: That was my understanding.

Q: Was it their training or the South Vietnamese?

WILLIAMS: Their training.

Q: Their training.

WILLIAMS: As far as I was concerned, or as far as I was told.

Q: Now, you may not know the answer to this, but it occurs to me that this is a legitimate question. Why send them to Vietnam where all the problems which you have mentioned exist? Why not send them to the Philippines where you don't have an International Control Commission?

WILLIAMS: That would be a good question, wouldn't it?

Q: Same terrain, isn't it?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I haven't the slightest, foggiest idea.

Q: All right. Were you there when the Special Forces came in to stay, then? I think this is in 1960. I think this is in the spring and summer of 1960.

WILLIAMS: I can't remember but it must have been after my departure on 1 September 1960.

Q: Okay. Can you think of any other important developments in that last nine months, eight or nine months that you were in country? The reason I'm asking, I have seen reference in the Pentagon Papers, one edition of them, which says that there was something called a counter-insurgency plan, which was developed late 1959, early 1960, and that the Green Berets and the Ranger Battalions were involved in it. But I don't know much more than that.

WILLIAMS: Well, my memory's just not that good.

Q: Okay, okay. Was your successor General [Lionel] McGarr?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Were you able to brief him before you left?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. He was there, oh, maybe ten or twelve, fifteen days before I left.

Q: What kind of a picture did you paint for him, as you can recall?

WILLIAMS: I laid everything flat out on the table.

Q: How did it look?

WILLIAMS: I didn't think it looked very well. I didn't know General McGarr. He had been the commandant of the Command and General Staff College, I've been told, and I'd also been told he'd been in the 3rd Division during World War II. So since Mike O'Daniel, my predecessor, had commanded the 3rd Division in the latter stages of World War II, I wrote and asked Mike what he could tell me about McGarr - I forgot his first name.

Q: Lionel, I think.

WILLIAMS: Lionel McGarr. His nickname was "Split Head."

Q: Was that because he parted his hair in the middle?

WILLIAMS: That's what I was told. Mike O'Daniel wrote back and he said, "He's the best regimental commander I ever knew in combat." So, the Vietnamese were of course probing me, who's going to take your place and so and so forth, and I said, "I don't know this officer," but I said, "General O'Daniel tells me he's the best regimental commander he ever knew, and so he must be pretty good, because General O'Daniel was a hell of a good division commander." So that was the only thing I could tell them, and I just told McGarr everything that I knew that was going on. That's where I left it with him. I was told later that General McGarr didn't like things the way he found them, and that surprised me, but then I was told that that was not unusual because that was his method of operation. Any outfit he went into he always took it apart and put it back together according to his own ideas, some people do that.

I hadn't put the two things together, but while he was commandant of the Command and General Staff College, I had sent back to the United States to the Command and General Staff College a few Vietnamese general officers. I was told later, much later, much later, several years later, that Diem had possibly developed an idea that some of his officers who had gone to school at the Command and General Staff College when McGarr was there as commandant, had gone in collusion with McGarr as to a coup d'etat. I thought to myself that's ridiculous, because knowing the Vietnamese officers as well as I did, I didn't believe any of them would be bold enough to go to a stranger, an American officer at the Command and General Staff school, and talk about a coup d'etat that was not going to take place until four or five years later. It just didn't make sense. Now of course, whether Diem actually thought that or ever expressed that opinion I don't know because there's any number of things that I was told that Diem expressed an opinion on, later, that I don't believe he did at all.

Q: What was your impression of General McGarr, or did you have a chance, really, to form one?

WILLIAMS: I didn't have a chance to form any definite impression of him at all. I thought he was very impatient to get started, and I could understand that. I tell you, I was so busy there at the last, I didn't have the time to sit down and try to analyze my successor.

Q: Now, he didn't last nearly as long in that.

WILLIAMS: Oh, he didn't last at all.

Q: What was the scuttlebutt on that?

WILLIAMS: Well, of course, the only thing I can tell you is pure gossip, which I don't like to participate in. I was told that he was relieved because of heart trouble. Now, whether he was or not, I don't know. I was also told that things had gotten into very bad condition, and he possibly was relieved because Washington thought he wasn't getting along very well.

Q: With who? With the Vietnamese?

WILLIAMS: Well, certainly not with Diem. An officer told me that after a while it became infrequent for him to be sent for to come to the Palace to talk with the President, and one time after he hadn't been to the Palace for maybe a month, when the President sent for him, he asked some of his staff, "What in the world will I talk to the President about?" Well, of course, something had happened there, and I have no idea what it was, because it had not been unusual for me to be at the Palace two or three times a week and anywhere from one to four hours at a time, and talk about everything under the sun. So for the President to go for a month without sending for the chief of MAAG, I just can't understand what the hell was going on.

Q: Something obviously was not right, is that your feeling?

WILLIAMS: There must not have been the close association there that Diem had with me. Maybe it'd be a good idea to interview McGarr.

Q: We're going to try. We're going to try. We're going to try to get to General Harkins pretty soon, too.

WILLIAMS: What did you think about these other people? What about Major General Ruggles and-?

Q: I've written them all letters.

WILLIAMS: What about this man here at 5th Army Headquarters?

Q: I don't remember that name. (Interruption)

Now, you left country in September of 1960, is that correct?

WILLIAMS: First day of September, yes.

Q: And a couple of months later there was an attempted coup. It failed. What was your reaction when you heard about that?

WILLIAMS: I thought it was ridiculous. The man who attempted to pull that coup was a brigadier general or maybe a colonel at that time by the name of Tri - T-R-I - and he had command of the paratroop brigade. It actually wasn't a brigade; he had about eight hundred paratroopers. But they like to call it a brigade - well, in the American army today we've taken every regiment of three battalions and we call it a brigade. I'm used to thinking about a brigade as being two infantry regiments. But I thought the coup was ridiculous, and I couldn't understand why they let it go as far as it did.

Q: By "they," who do you mean?

WILLIAMS: The Americans and the Vietnamese. I think that Tri - it's known now, or at least a lot of people believe it to be true - that Tri, even if he didn't have any encouragement from the Americans, nevertheless he found no opposition from them. For instance, there's a man by the name of Gene Gregory and his wife who were Americans, and they ran a newspaper in Vietnam.

Q: Was that the Times [of Vietnam]?

WILLIAMS: The Vietnamese Times I think was the name of it. I know that he was out of the country and she was there by herself; and she appealed to the American embassy for help, and she was ignored. Gregory resented that bitterly. But anyway, they asked me, someone asked me at one time - maybe it was you, but I think it was someone much earlier, a long time ago - what I would have done if I had been there, and I have said, I'd have gone up there and gotten hold of Tri and told him to get his damn paratroopers back in barracks or I was going to kick his ass clear across Saigon, and he would have done it. He would have done it just like that (snaps fingers) too. He's a good man, but he's had funny ideas, and one of them was that he thought he could pull a coup d'etat. But he would have obeyed me.

Q: What do you think was behind that? Why pull a coup d'etat?

WILLIAMS: Well, he possibly thought that Big Minh or Don or some of the others or Diem was going to try to pull one - maybe he thought he could beat them to it. Absolutely no understanding what he might think about anything like that. You know, to understand why a Vietnamese or any oriental will do anything, some say you have to think the way they do. Well, it's impossible for me to always think the way they do. I think sometimes I can think the way they do, but not always.

Now, what in the world Tri had in his mind, I don't know. But he certainly didn't intend to succeed, and I'm told that some of the marines, V.N. had a battalion of marines at that time - I don't know really if we had more at the time or not - but when I was there, the V.N. had about a battalion of marines. Some of the marines went down and joined Tri's outfit, and they surrounded the Palace, but one of the naval officers there called in his deputy and told him to take over the Naval Yard, that he was going to the coup. He took a company of marines and went up and told Tri he was going to help him and marched right on down and marched through the gates of the Palace, up into the Palace, and turned around and started shooting at the marines and paratroopers who were on the outside. And he became a favorite of President Diem after that, because there was a naval officer that the President hadn't paid much attention to prior to that time, who had taken a marine force and through guile had come through the lines, as they were, and entered the Palace and came to his help.

Now why did he do that? Did he know, did he have some instinct the coup was going to fall and he wanted to be on the right side? Or if he had that instinct, why didn't he say, "Well, I'm going to stay out of it entirely?" He didn't have to go up there. Why did he decide to go? Was that because of his admiration for Diem? Possibly. Diem certainly was not unpopular with the rank and file of the military.

Now, of course a lot of this that I'm telling you, I got from corresponding with Vietnamese or Americans long after I left Vietnam. Now I don't do that anymore, because there's no one over there, no Americans over there I care to correspond with, and the Vietnamese - I broke off with those people, corresponding with those generals shortly after the coup d'etat that killed Diem.

Q: Speaking of that coup d'etat, the one that ousted Diem, most Americans all during this time were baffled by the coups and the counter-coups, the attempted coups, I think because they couldn't understand what was behind it. Nobody could satisfactorily explain it. Did you ever try to explain it to anyone or could you explain it to anyone?

WILLIAMS: I have my own personal ideas about it, and it comes right back to the city of Washington in the United States. We had a man there that was Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia - I think was his title - and he was anti-Diem, there's no doubt about that, and I think some of the American embassy in Saigon were anti-Diem and possibly part of the U.S. State Department was. So this Assistant Secretary wrote a message one day to Ambassador Lodge and called up John Kennedy on the telephone who was at Hyannis Port at that time and read the message to him, and Kennedy asked, "Does [Maxwell] Taylor" - who was at that time chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff - "and McNamara" - who was Secretary of Defense - "Does Taylor and McNamara know about this?" The Assistant Secretary said, "Yes." And Kennedy said, "All right, send it."

Now, McNamara didn't know anything about it, and Taylor didn't know anything about it, and both of them said they didn't know anything about it when it finally came to light. This was Saturday about noon - Taylor knew about it Monday morning when he came to his office and the duty officer had a bunch of outgoing messages laid on his desk. He saw that, and from the description to me from a person who saw this happen, Taylor absolutely hit the ceiling and immediately got hold of people over in State and said, "Why did you dispatch this without giving me the courtesy of expressing an opinion?" I was told that McNamara did the same thing but not from an eyewitness account. The State Department people said, "Well, we sent it to your office, so we presumed you saw it." Well, that was too much. This was a message to Lodge to all intents and purposes saying we need a change on V.N. and let the conspirators go ahead. And Lodge did exactly that; he took off from the embassy and went to his quarters, and he stayed there, but he had a man by the name of [Lou] Conein I believe his name was. He was a CIA man. He was at the headquarters of the coup d'etat people, and who has since written and published the fact that he was in constant communication with Ambassador Lodge by both telephone and radio during the entire time and told Lodge exactly what was going on step by step. No one else, apparently, could get hold of Lodge, at least everyone said they couldn't. But anyway, Big Minh went ahead and pulled a coup.

Now I immediately said, "Well, what the hell was [Paul] Harkins doing during that time?" All right, Harkins' people, or Harkins himself - I can't say he did himself, because he didn't tell me personally but I believe it's been published that Harkins heard that this coup was in the mill, and he sent one of his staff officers to General Tran Van Don and asked "What about this coup d'etat that I hear about?" Tran Van Don says, "I don't know what you're talking about." So then Harkins dismissed it from his mind. Well, I could have told Harkins or anyone else that you can't send a staff officer to Tran Van Don or any other Vietnamese general's that worth a damn, and say, "What about a coup? Tell me about it." They're going to say, "I don't know anything about it." If Harkins himself had gone to Don, and if his relationship with Don was what it should have been, he could have said, "Don" - had him off in a parade ground or someplace like that and say, "Don, what the hell is this about a coup d'etat?" Don would very likely have told him the whole business. But he's not going to tell a third person. You see my point?

Q: Especially a staff officer.

WILLIAMS: Yes. And any third person, no one's going to do that. I don't believe if you're going to pull a coup d'etat in the United States you could do it that way. Well, they pulled a coup d'etat and I had told Diem - and he did it the first time when we had this one in November of 1960 - I said "If you ever get in a difficulty and they start anything like this, coil yourself and take as good care of yourself as you possibly can and start talking. And keep in conversation, because as long as you can keep in conversation, they're going to make a mistake and you can take advantage of it. And get in some troops from outside that you can trust." All right, he did that exactly in 1960. He kept talking, and while they, the people, were horsing around there, the marines came through to back him up. He called up people on the radio from outside, and they moved in their troops, loyal officers came in (snaps fingers), Tri and his paratroopers had it. That ended the coup right then.

Well, I think he tried the same thing in 1963, because he was there quite a while before he and his brother left the Palace and went over to Cholon. But now we also want to remember - and none of them deny it; Don doesn't deny it, Big Minh doesn't deny it and no one else in that outfit ever denied it to my knowledge. They told Diem that "All you've got to do is surrender and we're going to accept your surrender, put you on an airplane, then send you out of the country." I think Diem carried out what I told him as well as he could. He talked as long as he could; he saw that he wasn't going to get any further with it, and he got into an automobile and went to Cholon. There was all kinds of things in the paper at the time about having an underground tunnel and all that stuff, which was pure newspaper rhetoric, it wasn't true at all. He merely got in an automobile and drove over there. That's all there is to it. Then he got over there, and he went into this church - he was an extremely devout man. His brother was, too, as far as I know - and then he called coup headquarters and said, "We're ready to surrender." They came over and picked him up; Major General Xuan was in command of the detail.

Q: Can you tell where your - is this from more or less first-hand sources?

WILLIAMS: Where did I get this information?

Q: Where did you get this? Now I know you weren't there personally.

WILLIAMS: That's right.

Q: But I know you have contacts.

WILLIAMS: That's right.

Q: And I want to know who you're citing here.

WILLIAMS: Well, I wouldn't attempt to tell you, because I don't remember. I was corresponding with several Vietnamese officers at that time or shortly thereafter - I said after a while ago I decided to break them off, break off those contacts - but where, I don't know who told me that. Part of it's covered by General Tran Van Don in his book. Don says that when - I've got to go back just a little bit and quote a dead man. There's a Catholic priest by the name of DeJeagher - now dead-

Q: Can you spell that?

WILLIAMS: De-J-E-A-G-H-E-R.

Q: That's good enough.

WILLIAMS: DeJeagher's picture was laying here on - well, here it is right here. See that man shaking hands with Diem? That came out of my files the other day. That's Father Raymond DeJeagher, and here's the way he-

Q: And that's President Chiang Kai-shek, isn't it?

WILLIAMS: That's right.

Q: And is that Minh in the background that I see?

WILLIAMS: That's Big Minh standing back behind there

Q: He was a big man.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. He was big. He was bigger than either you or I, which was very unusual for a Vietnamese.

Q: And this picture was taken in January, 1960 during his visit to Taiwan. All right, please go ahead, Sir.

WILLIAMS: Well, DeJeagher was a Catholic priest that was teaching school in China when the communists took over China and put him in prison and kept him in prison for a number of years - and when I say a number of years [I mean], what, five, ten, fifteen, something like that - and then released him. He continued on in Southeast Asia, and he was a very close friend of the Nationalist Chinese as contrasted to the Red Chinese, and he was a very close confidante of Ngo Dinh Diem. We got to be friends. And I corresponded with DeJeagher, up until he died which was maybe a year ago. Cancer.

Well, I got a lot of information from DeJeagher, because he knew the Vietnamese inside out, and he had a thorough network with his Chinese friends in that country. So I got a lot of information from him. But anyway, I've got it very firm in my mind, and I'll give it to you the best I can.

Diem and his brother called up the coup headquarters and told them they were ready to surrender, and they said they'd send for them. Some of the people that were in the convoy that went and got them were suspicious when they didn't send an automobile for them but sent an armored personnel carrier. So they put Diem and his brother in the back of this armored personnel carrier, and the convoy started off heading towards Saigon.

Q: Why would they be suspicious on that account? What was the significance of-?

WILLIAMS: Well here's a President of a country that's surrendering and has been promised that he'll be exiled and nothing else and sent out, and he gives himself up, and they send for him. They don't send a car for him but send a closed personnel carrier for him. An armored personnel carrier.

The fact that it's closed makes it - That's right. Because they never came out of it alive. Because when they got out of that thing, or were hauled out of it, Mr. Nhu had been stabbed repeatedly, and the President had been stabbed once or twice, and both of them had been shot repeatedly. And they dumped their bodies out on the ground there at the coup headquarters. Now, Don comes into it this way as I remember his statement in his book. He said that he had come into the headquarters where Big Minh was sitting - or standing, whatnot - and General Xuan walked in and said "The mission is accomplished." Don said, "I understood that to mean that the President and his brother were there at the headquarters, and I went out to arrange quarters for them, where we're going to put them up until the time we shipped them out." He said, "It wasn't until later that I found out that they both had been murdered." And he said, "I had nothing to do with it. I didn't know anything about it." But he says, "Big Minh had something to do with it, and Xuan had something to do with it because Xuan said 'the mission has been accomplished.'" !.Jell, anyway, Big Minh's aide-de-camp, who went out to Cholon to get them, was immediately arrested, and put in prison, then immediately hanged himself or was hung. So there goes your witness. Okay. Now, what was I leading up to? What was your question?

Q: I was asking you-

WILLIAMS: Where I found out all this.

Q: Well, you had answered that. My question I think was mainly, as an old China hand, so to say, weren't you called on by friends and acquaintances and media and so forth to try to explain at various times what is behind this seeming Vietnamese passion for overthrowing the government every couple of months? 1960 was only the first of a long series of coups and attempted coups.

WILLIAMS: I don't remember whether that many people asking me about it or not.

Q: Well, let me ask you.

WILLIAMS: Well, now, will you voice your question once more? Exactly what is your question?

Q: What is behind this apparent Vietnamese passion for coups? Now, I know it's a third world phenomenon, but we were primarily focusing on Vietnam, and I'd like your opinion on that. Americans could never understand it.

WILLIAMS: Well, I can't remember of a coup d'etat - of course I'm not too sure of my history - but I can't remember of a coup d'etat in Vietnam prior to the coup d'etat in 1960 that attempted to overthrow Diem by Tri and the paratroopers.

Q: True. But after that comes a whole series-

WILLIAMS: After that, sure. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry said, "It's my turn. I want to take a whirl at it."

Q: What do you think prompted the first one in 1960? Do you think it was simply officer ambition?

WILLIAMS: I think so. And stupidity.

Q: All right, let me ask one more question about this coup business and then I want to leave and go on.

WILLIAMS: Of course I think they were needled into this by everyone you could possibly think of.

Q: You think they were urged by Americans?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I think they were urged by some Americans. They were very likely urged by some French, they were urged by the North Vietnamese, they were urged by anyone that wanted to see that country go communist. Because in my discussions with these officers prior to my leaving there in 1960, anytime we talked about a coup, we ended up with a consensus that the only people who could ever benefit from a coup would be the communists. And they agreed to it.

Q: And that ended it.

WILLIAMS: That would end the discussion until the next time someone would say, "Hell, let's do such and such."

Q: There were reports that there was widespread celebration in Saigon when the news that the Diem government had been overthrown spread. I don't know what the reports were from the countryside. I don't remember even seeing a report from the countryside. Do you have an explanation for that? Was Diem that unpopular in Saigon?

WILLIAMS: No, couldn't have been. Couldn't have been.

Q: Well, then, why the mass demonstration?

WILLIAMS: Well, I don't know. Didn't we see a demonstration a few days ago where several hundred people appeared outside the White House up there clamoring because we'd sent some four, five or a dozen, fifty advisors down to El Salvador?

Q: Oh, yes, Sir, but I'm not - you can always find a few hundred people to demonstrate for anything. I realize that.

WILLIAMS: Okay.

Q: But these demonstrations were - at least they were reported to be, and reported across the board, every reporter said this, in the thousands and thousands of people. There were mobs of people in the streets of Saigon.

WILLIAMS: It could have been. I don't know; I wasn't there, but I didn't realize anything like that was going on. Of course, there had been the trouble with the Buddhists and coming back to Madame Nhu again, American reporters used the word barbecue, and she repeated it and thereafter no American reporters was ever quoted - it was always Madame Nhu talking about Buddhist barbecuing themselves.

Q: Oh, you think it was an American reporter who used that term first?

WILLIAMS: Why, it was published, it was an American reporter who used the term, said to the President or Madame Nhu, "The Buddhists have barbecued another man down here on the street. What about it?" And so she picked up the expression and immediately it went worldwide: "Madame Nhu's talking about barbecuing the Buddhists."

Q: And she got the credit?

WILLIAMS: She got the credit.

Q: Let me change my tape.

Q: Now, General, you have mentioned, in passing, the press in Vietnam a few times, and I would like to ask you to comment directly on the press. What would you say was the general caliber of the press who were covering Vietnam in the years when you were there?

WILLIAMS: Exceptionally poor. To the best of my knowledge, they had no regular assigned reporters out there, and they were relying on various and sundry people that in the newspaper vernacular I believe they call "stringers."

Q: Now the stringer, if I'm not mistaken, is a person who's paid by the column. He's not on a regular salary.

WILLIAMS: That's right. And he might write for this newspaper today and that one tomorrow and so on and so forth. Because I asked that question one time of one of these people. I said, "Where are you getting information, and who are your reporters?" and so forth. Now who that was I was asking, I don't remember, but it was someone in a position to know. They said, "Well, we don't have anyone out here. We just rely on stringers." And I said, "Well, why I'm asking is because I read a column here by a young man," and I happen to know that fellow, and I said, "he's barely out of his teens, he's half-French, half-Vietnamese, and I don't think he was too well-educated, and if he's getting coverage like this, it's astounding because, frankly, the man's not, he doesn't know what he's writing about." And they said, "Well, that's the risk we take."

Q: I want to ask you about a couple of individual reporters in particular to see if any of these strike a memory or whatever. The reason I'm mentioning these names is because a couple of people in the military have mentioned them to me as being one kind of reporter or another, and I want to see what your reaction is. Do you remember Till and Peg Durdin of the New York Times? Does that name ring a bell?

WILLIAMS: It does not.

Q: All right. How about Hank Liebermann, also of the New York Times?

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: Homer Bigart of the New York Herald-Tribune?

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: Here's one I think you might remember. John Mecklin of Life-Time.

WILLIAMS: I recognize his name, but I don't remember if I ever met him or not.

Q: Well, I think Mecklin wrote a book called Mission in Torment. Mecklin later became the public affairs officer for the embassy. He was a reporter, in other words, who changed sides, you might say.

WILLIAMS: I didn't know him.

Q: Okay. Did you know John Roderick of the Associated Press?

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: Okay. Were you able to stay abreast of developments in Vietnam after you retired? I know you said you were in correspondence with a number of people over there.

WILLIAMS: I'd like to go back to your last question.

Q: Oh, certainly.

WILLIAMS: I can't understand why I don't recognize those names. Now, even making allowance for poor memory after twenty some-odd years, I can never remember a newspaper correspondent or columnist coming to Vietnam that didn't contact me and ask [for] an interview, if you please, or a conversation, things of that nature. And there was never one turned down, and sometimes those things would last for hours. I'm thinking of people like Jim Lucas and maybe Maggie Higgins and, well, those are the only two names I can think of right at this particular moment.

Q: Well, let me ask you to comment on those two, Lucas and Higgins.

WILLIAMS: Well, I knew Jim Lucas previously, and I remember quite well his coming to Vietnam because the Secretary of the President called me and told me that a reporter by the name of Jim Lucas and some other man were at some place - either in Tokyo or Seoul, or some place else - and wanted a visa to come to South Vietnam, and what did I think about it? I said, "I know Jim Lucas - because I knew him in Korea and I think I knew him in Europe, but I wasn't too sure - "but the other man I don't know, and Jim Lucas is a good reporter and an honest man. I can't help you with the others."

Well, as it turned out, Jim Lucas got a visa to come to Vietnam, and the other man didn't. I didn't put much importance to it until the Ambassador said to me one day right after Jim Lucas got there, "How in the world did Jim Lucas get a visa to South Vietnam?" And I said, "Why, I don't know. Was there any problem?" And I related this instance I've just related to you. He said, "No one gets a visa to South Vietnam unless I say so. I said, "Mr. Ambassador, that's a stupid, goddamn remark to make." I said, "There's thousands of people come to Vietnam that you don't even know anything about."

Q: What was his reaction to that?

WILLIAMS: Well, he just sat there and looked at me. Of course it was true. Did he know every American, every Englishman, every Australian, every Frenchman, or anyone else that got a visa to come to South Vietnam? And the Vietnamese wouldn't dare to issue a visa without handing it to him for approval? Why, that's ridiculous, see? Well, stupid things like that were being said all the time. Well, anyway, that's what caused me to remember Jim Lucas, you see?

Then he went ahead with this conversation. He said, "Is Jim Lucas a friend of yours?" I said, "Not necessarily." I said, "I know him. He interviewed me in Korea when I commanded a Division up there, and I think he interviewed me when I had a Corps there, maybe when I was Deputy Army Commanding in Korea, I'm not sure." And I said, "Maybe I've talked to him in Germany. I don't remember." But I said, "I know Jim Lucas. I'd say, yes, I consider him a friend and at least an acquaintance." He said, "All right, now I want you to keep a diary, and every time you talk to Jim Lucas or he talks to you, I want you to write down exactly what the conversation was about, and I want you to report it to me." And in utter amazement I said, "Well, shall I tell Jim Lucas that I'm spying on him?" He said, "Of course not, goddamn it, don't tell anyone!" Well, I said, "You've just told a room full of people." And I said, "I'm not going to do it. Period." And I didn't do it. Now what he had against Jim Lucas, I haven't the slightest idea, but those were the kind of things that would - people would say, "why, what the hell happened at the country team meetings?" There's an example of what happened in one country team meeting. Apropos, nothing.

Van Fleet. General [James A.] Van Fleet was Commanding General of the 8th Army, when I first went to Korea. Van Fleet phoned me one time and he said, "I'm coming down to Vietnam" - no, he didn't phone me, he sent me a TWX - he said, "I'm coming to South Vietnam and Saigon, and I sure hope to see you." Well, I'd been a Division Commander under Van Fleet, and I knew him from Europe, too, and I liked him very much and had great admiration for him, and I thought that was fine. So when he came to Saigon, he phoned me, and I immediately invited him out the next day, or sometime soon - we'll say the next day - to come out and have a highball, a cocktail or something and invited some Vietnamese general officers to meet him. And also the V.N. Secretary of State for the Presidency.

We were having little pleasantries there, and I found out that he was representing some U.S. company that was selling some kind of equipment, electrical equipment or something else. What it was I don't know, and it was as immaterial to me at the time as it is now. But he said, "I'd like to talk to the President. Can that be arranged?" And I said, "Well, General, I don't see why it can't. Sitting in that corner right over there is the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State. Why don't you tell them and very likely they can arrange it." He walked right over and started talking to them, and the next day he had an appointment with the President, and he went up to see President Diem.

The next time we had an embassy meeting, the Ambassador said to the multitude, and looking at me, "How the hell did Van Fleet get an appointment with the President?" Someone said, "General Williams arranged it." I said, "You're mistaken. I didn't arrange an appointment with the President of South Vietnam with General Van Fleet, but if I'd been asked to, I would have." But I said, "Van Fleet was at my quarters, along with several Vietnamese, and he said that he wanted an appointment with the President, and I said, 'there's the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense. Why don't you talk to them?'" And I said, "He got it." Well, again, it's just like "no one gets a visa unless I say so." He says, "No one can have an appointment with President Ngo Dinh Diem without my permission." I just looked at him and laughed. Stupid. Incredible! I'm sure the British ambassador didn't call up Durbrow and ask if he could have an appointment with President Ngo Dinh Diem. You know, that's egotism to the extent that a person may be getting on the verge of incompetence. To me it is. Was it insecurity? Inferiority complex? The case of Van Fleet. The case of Jim Lucas.

Q: That's a good story.

WILLIAMS: These other reporters.

Q: How about Higgins, Maggie Higgins?

WILLIAMS: You know, I don't remember anything about Maggie Higgins, although I'm positive I engaged her in conversation or she engaged me in conversation. But I've read her books, or some of her writings.

Q: What did you think of them?

WILLIAMS: I thought they were excellent. I thought she had a very clear grasp of what the situation was.

Q: Did you read any of the reporters who came a little later, just after you left? Like - well, I guess the most famous and obvious one was Halberstam - David Halberstam.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

Q: What did you think of David Halberstam?

WILLIAMS: Terrible reporting.

Q: Terrible. What was wrong with him?

WILLIAMS: I didn't think he knew what he was talking about in the first place, and in the second place, I thought he was trying to undermine the Vietnamese government.

Q: He was one of the younger ones who was over his depth or out of his experience, would you say?

WILLIAMS: I thought so. That's a very bold thing for me to say, because he has quite a reputation - I presume he still has a reputation - as a writer, and I don't but if you ask me a layman's opinion, that's it. I considered him pink, if not red.

Q: I think I missed Robert Shaplen. Do you ever read any of his things? Shaplen wrote one called *The Road from War*, and then he had an earlier book, too.

WILLIAMS: No, I don't remember.

Q: *The Lost Revolution*, I believe, is the name of it.

WILLIAMS: But that thing that you so graciously gave me the other day which was an extract of *U.S. News and World Report* - I'll tell you how come that thing to be in existence. I had great admiration for the man who was running *U.S. News and World Report* at that time, long since deceased. And I was reading these reports from Vietnam, which I thought were terribly slanted or some of them were downright false and didn't jibe at all with what American officers were telling me, or writing me from Vietnam or what Vietnamese officers were writing. And I read one of these articles in *U.S. News and World Report*, and I sat down and wrote this gentleman. I wrote, "I'm a long subscriber to *U.S. News and World Report*, and I consider it one of the best, most informative magazines in the United States, and I've always relied on it," I said, "but I've just finished reading such-and-such an article - " and I don't remember the name of it or who wrote-"but it's the most astounding thing I ever read in my life because it's utterly false from beginning to end. And I think you should know that some of your readers have that kind of impression of it."

Well, by George, that opened the floodgates, and either by telegram, letters or telephone calls and so forth, they asked me if I would submit to an interview about South Vietnam, and I said "I certainly will, if you'll let me read what your people write before you publish it." Well and good. In no time at all, there two of them were right here at my gate, and that thing that you brought in to me the other day was the result of it. Now, who [was] the man that I was criticizing at that time, I don't know. But-

Q: Let me ask you about that interview. Did they in fact publish what you said? Did you approve of-?

WILLIAMS: Yes. You got it, right? You gave me a copy.

Q: Yes, I gave you a copy. I have one. Okay.

WILLIAMS: Yes. And they sent it to me in draft form, and I read it and put a note on there something to the effect, "I'm not going to attempt to correct the English. You people can do it better than I can. This is okay for publication as far as I'm concerned." And by George, they did it. Now, I think I was exceptionally fortunate. That magazine's bound to get a world of letters, and some secretary saw mine and for some reason, said, "Well, here's something that the top honcho should see," and pitched it into him and that was his reaction. It could just as easily have been thrown in the wastebasket.

Q: Well, some knowledgeable person screened the mail, that's all.

WILLIAMS: It could have been. It could have been.

Q: Well, do you want to add anything about the media, anything about the press that you haven't had a chance to stick in?

WILLIAMS: No, but I think that we've got the same thing coming up right now that we had then. We have a two-inch headline coming out in a very good newspaper that says "The Navy Goes to San Salvador" and you read it, you find out they sent five sailors. They raise the question, is this leading to another Vietnam? Well, to me that's someone that's attempting to manipulate the American public to make them scared of what the administration is trying to do. That's my firm conviction. And there's so many people that have no more idea about what the advisors did in South Vietnam or anything else about South Vietnam, that they can say, "Well, is this another South Vietnam?" And everyone immediately screams.

Now, what was wrong with South Vietnam? First of all, I don't think we should have fought there, and I don't think there was any reason for us to have fought there, and I sincerely believe that if Ngo Dinh Diem had stayed alive that we would not have fought there. I think he would have come to accommodation with Ho Chi Minh. President Diem told me that he knew Ho Chi Minh very well, and Ho Chi Minh offered him a place in his government in Hanoi. They were on speaking terms; they could negotiate. I think that - and I mentioned in that U.S. News and World Report thing if I remember correctly - that every time anyone came to Vietnam - that is, I'm talking about American officialdom - they had audiences with the President, and I would say nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, I would be present, and never did I hear any of them say anything except sometime during the conversation, "Mr. President, you're doing exactly right. We're behind you 100 percent. You keep on pitching, and we're going to back you up to the hilt." From congressmen, senators, vice president of the United States - Nixon came there as vice president of the United States - generals, four-star generals from chief of staff of the army right straight on down to maybe commanding general of the U.S. Army of the Pacific - they'd all say the same thing. President Diem had an idea, I'm afraid that he got an idea, "I can go as far as I want to because the United States is going to back me up."

Q: Some people say that his attitude was, "They're going to back me up because they haven't got any option and they've got to back me no matter what I do."

WILLIAMS: He could have thought that, but I wouldn't say that I thought he thought it, because I couldn't see that far into the man's brain. The option was, of course, just for us to pull out lock, stock and barrel. That could have been done easily, just like that (snaps fingers). And any number of times I thought we were going to do it.

Q: Oh, really? When did you think they were going to do it?

WILLIAMS: Well, when I kept asking for people. As I said before, I had about four hundred and forty-two people I inherited when I took over - were there when the French were there - and we were able to increase that a little by pulling in teams to do this and teams to do that, and they'd come in and stay a few months and then go back out, and that would satisfy the International Control Commission. I wanted at least two thousand advisors there, and I needed them very badly because - I imagine they're running into the same thing down here in E1 Salvador - you have motors, you have motorboats, you have tanks, you have different kind of weapons and so forth; you have spare parts, and you have to storage them properly so that you can fill requisitions on them. You got to know where the spare parts are - you've got to have spare-part bins for this, spare-part bins for that - and you've got to have someone that's cognizant with the weapon or the material that you're using to know how to store those things and to teach someone else how to issue them. You have ammunition to store. It's just as simple as that. The two thousand advisors I wanted - I wanted advisors down a little bit below division level, and I wanted to get down to regimental or battalion level, if possible, and I wanted to get people in it that could deal more with the finance and with the supply and logistics and motors and schools and things of that nature. Not necessarily to get out there and take a carbine or an M-1 rifle and go help run down some damn guerrilla. But they wouldn't give them to me. And I don't know when they broke that, but I think it was after Diem's death in 1963 before they ever broke that. I'm not sure.

Q: Well, I know at the time of President Kennedy's death, which was just a month later, we had sixteen thousand.

WILLIAMS: No, couldn't have?

Q: Yes, Sir.

WILLIAMS: Sixteen thousand? But that was in 1963. They should have been furnished in 1957.

Q: Yes, Sir.

WILLIAMS: Well, they didn't wait until Diem died then before they started pushing them in?

Q: No, they started pushing them.

WILLIAMS: Are these troops or advisors you're talking about?

Q: Total. Total American military.

WILLIAMS: Yes?

Q: Military of all kinds.

WILLIAMS: Well, I imagine then by that time you very likely had some Green Berets in there?

Q: Yes, and they were getting advisors down at regimental level by that time.

WILLIAMS: Yes?

Q: Did any subsequent administration ever call on you for advice, consult with you, contact you in any way? Kennedy or Johnson?

WILLIAMS: Not really. I went up, was invited up to the Military Academy to make an address in May of 1961, I think. Couldn't have been 1971 - that was too long later. But on the way back, General [Edward] Lansdale asked me if I would come by Washington and serve there as consultant for a few days, and I said yes.

Q: Now let me clarify this. Was General Lansdale still working for Defense at this time, or was he retired and working for State, or do you recall?

WILLIAMS: As I remember he was in uniform. And in the Pentagon.

Q: Okay.

WILLIAMS: So I'd say he was with Defense. And I did that. While I was there, someone - and I don't know who it was, but anyway, I was sent down into the bowels of the Pentagon where Max Taylor and Burke, Admiral Burke-

Q: Arleigh Burke?

WILLIAMS: Yes. And Bob Kennedy were investigating the debacle of the Bay of Pigs, and I was given a desk in a small room there, and they started throwing large, manila envelopes at me - larger than I'd ever seen before, at least two feet by two feet square - and on the upper left-hand corner, they had on there the White House, and down at the bottom it was addressed to - if I remember correctly - General Taylor. These were plans, contingency plans. And I was told to go through those plans and to make comments as to whether or not they were up to date, or if they were workable or whatnot and so forth. So that's what I started doing.

Q: Now what did these contingency plans - what were they for? What contingencies were they for?

WILLIAMS: Fighting anywhere in the damn world that you could think of, as I remember.

Q: Okay. All right. These were not specifically Vietnam?

WILLIAMS: No. But my memory is vague.

Q: General military situation.

WILLIAMS: That's right.

Q: All right.

WILLIAMS: And at first, I was going about it in very careful manner and making detailed comments, and finally it got to the degree I would take one of them, glance at it, scan it, and write across it "Obsolete. Worthless," and throw it back out.

Q: Were they so bad? Were they that far out of date?

WILLIAMS: Yes. To me they were, yes. And while I was doing that, I was called out one day, and Bob Kennedy and Taylor were there - Burke was not - and Kennedy started asking me questions about Vietnam.

Q: Can you recall any detail of these questions?

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: What was he after? What was he trying to-

WILLIAMS: I don't know. When he got through asking questions - Taylor didn't say anything, he just sat there and listened. Kennedy started out by saying, "I've heard a great deal about you, and I want to ask you some questions." I said, "Okay." And, of course, I must admit, I didn't look upon Bob Kennedy with the great reverence that some people did. To me he was just another young man. The fact that his brother was President of the United States and he'd been appointed Attorney General didn't make a damn bit of difference to me. He looked like he might be a very young Major in the army, as far as I was concerned, which was possibly a wrong attitude to take, but it wasn't anything disrespectful. But I didn't look upon him as one of America's great heroes, martyrs, as he turned out to be, unfortunately.

But anyway, he asked me a lot of questions, and when he got through, he said to Taylor, "I've learned more about Vietnam from General Williams than I have from anyone else since I've been in this headquarters, in the Pentagon." And he said, "Don't let that man get away." Then as he went out the door he said to me, "As I've said before, I've heard about you, and you're supposed to be a pretty hard person. How would you like to go to Vietnam as ambassador?" And I said, "I wouldn't like it at all." And he said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, I'm not a professional foreign affairs officer, and when political appointees go in jobs like that, the State Department old hands tear them apart." I said, "They'd crucify me before I'd been there six months." And I said, "That's the only reason why I think it would be wrong for me to go out there as an ambassador." Frankly, I doubt seriously he had the slightest intention of me ever going out there as ambassador, but, hell, you can't tell from the people that they have appointed.

Q: Now, let me ask you this. Since you express that opinion, what did you think when Max Taylor went as ambassador? Because clearly the same objections would apply.

WILLIAMS: No, Max was a politician in addition to being a superior army officer. Max is a very astute politician, and his association was so close with the Kennedy family - they named one of the children after him - that the foreign affairs cadre over in the State Department couldn't have touched him. I don't think they could. They may have; I don't know. Well, anyway, I guess I was a little bold when he said, "I've heard about you, and you're supposed to be a pretty tough nut to crack." He said, "How would you like to go out and be ambassador to Vietnam? I said I didn't want to. And I said, "Now, as far as being a tough nut's concerned, you're getting a pretty good reputation yourself." I said, "All I hear is that you're one of the hardest people around Washington, D.C." And I said, "If people are calling and referring to me as an old son of a bitch now," I said, "they're going to be calling you one at the same time, if they're not already doing it." Kennedy looked at me and laughed, and said, "Adios" or something like that and walked out the door. He seemed to be a very pleasant fellow. Now I wouldn't say that that was asking me for advice, but no one else ever did. Now, I will say this, that after [General Creighton] Abrams became the CG in Vietnam-

Q: Now this would be about the summer of 1968, wouldn't it? I believe that's correct, because [General William] Westmoreland came back about June of 1968.

WILLIAMS: Okay. It would be after that. Well, then, maybe it was before he became CG. But we had a mutual friend. An officer that had served with me quite often. He retired - major general, he's dead - and he had served with me in Vietnam, too, and I knew Abrams fairly well. Abrams and I had known each other some time. We weren't intimate friends, but we were pretty close to it, and I'd known him since Germany. I knew he was busy, and I never was presumptuous enough to write him and tell him that he should do this, that and another, but I had a friend that was on his staff that was very close to him, so when I had ideas I'd write this friend of mine and say, "Next time you're talking to Abe, you might suggest this, that and another. And whether you attribute it to me is immaterial, but it might be something for him to think about." And sooner or later I'd get back word, well, Abe bought it or he didn't buy it.

Q: Do any of these stand out in your mind, any of your suggestions or ideas?

WILLIAMS: None that I'd care to talk about now. Both these people are dead, and the war's over. But I didn't think the war was being fought properly, but I also didn't believe that Abrams had much control over it. I didn't believe that CINCPAC had a hell of a lot of control over it, nor the U.S. Army of the Pacific, and I think now historically we know it was controlled almost entirely from the Oval Room at the White House and was terribly bitched up. There's where I cross with you and your friends, or the people that employ you. But-

Q: Well, you won't cross us. That man is dead and gone, too, after all. (Laughter)

WILLIAMS: Yes, but this all goes into his building. Now, not long ago, Roche, who used to be a terrible liberal and has changed considerably-

Q: You're speaking of John Roche, now?

WILLIAMS: Yes - made a remark in one of his columns that he walked into the Oval Room one day, and there was Lyndon Johnson and Bus [Earle G.] Wheeler and McNamara fussing over a damn map on the wall, deciding which one was going to stick a pin in to show where the next bombing target was going to be. Well, that's absolutely ridiculous. You can't fight a war that way, and we found it out. We got ourselves in a terrible jam. If you read - I don't know whether you have time to do it or not - but if you read some of the analysis now of our air force activities during the Vietnamese War, you'll find out that our B-29s that, or 52s, whatever those biggest bombers were, that were flying out of Guam, very, very small percent of those - less than 5 percent ever bombed North Vietnam. They were bombing in South Vietnam. On the other hand, we were taking fighter bombers and sending them up to North Vietnam and losing aviators almost every day. That was mismanagement, entirely mismanagement.

Some of these aviators have written, and it's been published in such a thing as the Armed Forces Journal and other military publications - I think I'm quoting the Armed Forces Journal correctly - where that some of the very senior officers in the air force, or at least the field grade officers resigned because of the damn ridiculous orders they were getting as naval aviators flying off of carriers and going over Hanoi. I remember reading one of them not too long ago where he said that on such-a-such a night they went in there and not a plane was allowed to carry a bomb; the only thing that they could carry was flares. And he talked about their losses and so forth. Hell, you can't fight a war like that. We would have won that war easier than I could drive from here to San Antonio - city of San Antonio - if they'd let us alone. Now, if Westmoreland couldn't have done it, they could have jerked him and put someone in there that could have done it. They had plenty of people could have done it. Abrams could have done it.

Stop to think how ridiculous this is. Now an army officer of some experience, Abrams didn't even command the air force in Vietnam. He didn't command the damn marines; he didn't command anything but army. Westmoreland was the same. You had no unified commander. Even President Diem - when I was told in the greatest confidence to find out what President Diem thought about unified command - I asked him - and I was told never to let anyone know I did it. Well, hell, that's so long ago it doesn't make any difference now. But anyway, he didn't know what unified command was, and I started in back in World War I and told him how the Allies had to finally decide on General Foch to be commander, to coordinate things and how in World War II, why, we had a unified command down in Africa, and finally in France we had unified command with General Eisenhower operating with [Omar] Bradley and [Bernard] Montgomery as subordinates.

I said, "Now, that's unified command. Now, if we have a fight here, and American troops come in, is everyone going to go and have their own show or are we going to have one man in command and let him fight the damn war?" I said, "Now, our concept is that, like Eisenhower's headquarters at least - so I was told - that if you have an American commander, you have a deputy that's opposite. For instance, Eisenhower's deputy was a man named [Arthur] Tedder; he was a British flier." And I said, "Right on down the line. If we have a war over here, if you have a Vietnamese commander, then you ought to have an American deputy commander or vice versa." Diem said, "Who would do that?" I said, "If the fight's tomorrow, it'll be me. How long that'll last, I don't know. He said, "If it starts tomorrow," he said, "you'll be commander." He said, "You'll command Vietnamese forces as far as I'm concerned." Well, hell, we would have sold on that thing. Lord, goodness, here and I've passed that on to people that told me to get the answer to that question, who were military people. But, by George, we ended up - the army commander over there commanded army, the navy commander commanded navy, the air force commander commanded air force - and hell, who in the world organized and coordinated? Nobody. You can't fight a war that way, and we found it out.

Q: And the ARVN went one way and we went another way.

Q: My impression is that once the war heated up that CINCPAC virtually got shoved out of the circuit and maybe it was-

WILLIAMS: I'm afraid they did.

Q: -between JCS and Commander, MACV.

WILLIAMS: I'm afraid they did. We have had American aviators publish articles in which they said they'd be on carrier, and a telephone conversation would come through directly from the President of the United States to a carrier telling them what they're going to do on their next flights out. Well now, my Lord, you could say that as much as this nation idolizes George Washington, hell, old George Washington couldn't have done that. It's impossible. So that's where we lost.

Now then, where did Vietnam get its bad name? Okay, they started their draft, or they had their draft going and the draft didn't work properly. If a kid had money enough to go to school or any reason to get excused from the draft, he got excused from the draft. Thousands of them went to Canada; that paid off because later when the administration, another administration came in, that said, "King's X. Everything's free. Come on back." Okay. Now we had a lot of kids going to school and they said, "All right, I'm in school because I'm a student. All right, I'm going to graduate next year. What the hell, the army going to get me?" Well, the best way to stop that is to start bitching about the war. So your students started, and they were ably assisted by all agitators, both pink and red as well as white. All these agitators immediately helped them, and the first thing you know all the students throughout the United States were saying what a horrible thing Vietnam is. First thing you know you have the entire American public mind poisoned about Vietnam. That's why I was very glad to see Mr. Reagan come out the other day and said it wasn't criminal to be a soldier in Vietnam during the war. Well, that's just an old soldier's viewpoint of things.

Q: I want to ask you a wide-open question.

WILLIAMS: Okay.

Q: Will you compare the performance of the country team under Ambassadors [G. Frederick] Reinhardt and Durbrow?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Would you do that for me?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Under Mr. Reinhardt we had a good, working country team as far as I could tell, and we had no dissension. I never knew of any serious dissension taking place there. It was just the difference between daylight and dark. Now, I don't say that because Reinhardt and I were personal friends, we were not. We were on good speaking terms, but he was the ambassador, he represented the country. I never saw him do anything that would cause me as an American to be embarrassed, and I never saw him get up, for instance, in front of a mixed crowd and strip down to his shorts and put on a belly dance. Vulgar things like that. Reinhardt was a gentleman, and he conducted himself as such. At parties and so forth, if he got up to give a toast, he got up and read a toast off a card that he'd written in French. Everyone accepted it, and he was just what I considered a top-rate American ambassador.

Q: Very professional?

WILLIAMS: Very professional, and I thought very understanding. Now, that doesn't mean to say that Reinhardt and I didn't have differences, but any differences we had were absolutely minor. He phoned me one time, "Tanks are going by my quarters over here, been going by here for an hour - going down to the docks, being loaded up. The French are shipping all these tanks out." He said, "Why don't you stop them?" I said, "Fine. The French have the bayonets; I don't have any," and hung up. That's all there was to it. The French had a regiment of Foreign Legionnaires right there. They could do anything they wanted to, and they did do anything they wanted to. Mr. [John Foster] Dulles came over there. I told him, "The French are stealing us blind." He says, "Hell, I know it. There's nothing unusual about that," or words to that effect.

Anything that Reinhardt and I ever had differences on amounted to nothing. I had quite a bit of admiration for him. No one would disparagingly refer to him as a "ladies shoe salesman."

Q: How did things change when Ambassador Durbrow came in?

WILLIAMS: Well, I don't think I can elaborate on that any more than I have already. I think they got petty. If Reinhardt had been strongly adverse to President Ngo Dinh Diem, he never indicated it in my presence. I'm sure that none of the American staff there - I'm talking about USIS and the CIA and USOM, certainly not MAAG - if anyone had any idea that he was violently opposed to the Vietnamese or to the regime of President Diem, he gave no indication of it by word or action in my presence at any time. He conducted country team meetings in a professional manner.

Q: Do you think the difference between Reinhardt and Durbrow was a matter of policy or personality?

WILLIAMS: I think, well, I'd start off first by thinking it was personality, or it could be that Durbrow was getting new instructions from stateside or maybe he wasn't. Maybe his messages back stateside were written in such a way that State could take them this way or that way because I, when I got my hands on them, I used to study those things line by line and paragraph by paragraph and often when I'd get through with a couple of pages of a dispatch that had been sent back there, I couldn't tell what the hell - whether he was for or against the subject.

Q: You didn't ordinarily see the dispatches between State and the Ambassador.

WILLIAMS: No.

Q: Did you see them under Reinhardt?

WILLIAMS: Yes, as far as I know.

Q: But that stopped with Durbrow? Was that abrupt?

WILLIAMS: I don't know whether it was abrupt or not. I never had any occasion

to question anything that was put out under Reinhardt. There could have been things that I didn't know about, wasn't familiar with, but I became very cognizant under Durbrow because - here's an instance that occurred which I thought was not exactly right. The chief of staff of CINCPAC sent me a message and said, "We want your detailed analysis, comments, et cetera of a message sent by the embassy to State Department, number such-and-such on such-and-such a date. Soonest." I called for it; we didn't have it in MAAG files. I picked up the telephone and called the embassy and I said, "Do you have such-and-such a communication?" "Well, let us check. Yes, we do." I said, "Will you furnish me a copy of it?" "Yes, we'll send you a copy." Now, who I was talking to, I don't know - some clerk up there. So they: sent me a copy of it, and I sat down and read that thing, page after page, with utter amazement. So I sat down, in longhand myself, and wrote out almost sentence by sentence my objection to the concept that had been advanced in this-

Q: Do you recall what the substance of the matter was?

WILLIAMS: No. It was a policy paper. And when I got through, I had it typed up and proofread it and so forth and signed it and sent it to CINCPAC. The first thing I knew, the Ambassador phoned me and said, "We have a message from State Department saying that they don't entirely agree with my letter of such-and-such a date, and furthermore, you don't either." And I said, "Is that such-and-such?" And he said, "Yes." And he said, "Why did you coherent on it?" I said, "I had a direct order from CINCPAC to comment on it and direct it to them soonest without delay. I asked your office for a copy of it, and they gave me a copy, and I sat down and made my comments and sent them in."

Then he issued an order, a directive. It was really a whopper. He said, "Hereafter, you will send no communication of any importance to CINCPAC or any other headquarters outside of Vietnam without it being proofread and approved by this headquarters, by this embassy. I said, "All right, but you want to remember that I may get instructions to answer a communication by fastest method possible, and that means that I'm going to get an answer out within less than twenty-four hours. If I sent it up here for you to proofread and approve, and you let it lay on your desk for two or three days or a week or so - which has happened in the past on various papers that I've presented," I said, "that's going to get me into a terrible jam." He said, "I'll take care of that." So, after that, anytime that I sent to a high headquarters a comment on anything or any paper of any importance at all, I had to send it to the embassy and get it initialed by the Ambassador before I could dispatch it. And sometimes that would be anywhere from twenty-four hours to ten, fifteen days.

Q: What did CINCPAC think of that?

WILLIAMS: They told me not to pay any attention to the Ambassador's directive.

Q: That kind of puts you between a rock and a hard place.

WILLIAMS: Yes. But you see, CINCPAC was my immediate military superior. And here you see a MAAG chief is put in a delicate position. He has a military superior that's giving him orders, he's got a civilian superior that's giving him orders, and no man - the Bible says it - can serve two masters at one time. And anytime you try it, you're going to get in a jam.

Now, I found out that this was not an isolated case. I had people visit me from Japan and the Philippines and people I could trust and talk to - army officers - and I'd say, "What the hell goes on here?" I said, "This situation here is outlandish." I said, "We're just at each other all the time, and I get some of the craziest orders that a person could conceive of." And any number of times, well, several times, they said, "Why, you don't know half the story." "Why, you're getting along fine down here." "You ought to see what's happening between the Ambassador and the Chief of MAAG up in Tokyo." Or they said, "Do you have any idea what's going on between the Ambassador and the Chief of MAAG over in Manila?" I said, "It couldn't be worse than this." "It's much worse." So I thought to myself, "Well, that's something the American government's got to work out; that's beyond me."

Q: General, looking back now, do you see any turning points, any crucial decision, any point in time during your tour in Vietnam when you were still there, that you wish had happened differently or that you wish you had done differently? Anything crucial, anything that stands out in your mind at all.

WILLIAMS: No, I can't think of any one thing. I've often said that anytime there's trouble between two people, or two headquarters, probably both are partially responsible. One might be more responsible than the other, but the other's going to be partially responsible. So I thought many times, "What could I have done to have kept better relations between MAAG and the embassy?"

Q: And you're speaking of Durbrow's tenure now?

WILLIAMS: Yes. And I don't know what in the world I could have done and still carried out the orders that I had, the directive I had when I went over there. Then too, I've often wondered why I wasn't able to make an impression on Big Minh and Don and those people that would have lasted longer than three years. I had a letter - first of all, when I left there, President Diem told me that he was soon inviting me back to visit Vietnam as a guest of the country. And I had a letter from him to that extent after I'd been home about a year, and it said, "You'll hear from me through the Vietnamese embassy." Well, I never did hear from him, or I never did hear from the Vietnamese embassy. Now, I'm sure that if he sent such an invitation, it was stopped on purpose by the V.N. Ambassador who's on a different side of the fence from myself.

I had at least one Vietnamese officer, general, of some importance write me one time - prior to the coup - and said, "You promised that you were coming back, and if you're coming, you must come soon. You have been gone too long now." Or words to that effect, see? And I thought to myself, "Well, now, if I had taken the bull by the horns and realized that it was possible that the Vietnamese Ambassador or the American Ambassador was keeping me from going back over there, I should have applied for a visa and gone over on my own and talked to these generals and said, 'What's going on here? I've been gone too long. What the hell are you people plotting?'"

Now, this is going to sound egotistical as hell, but it's possible that if I had had enough foresight to do that, or enough intelligence to do that, or enough get-up-and-go to do it, I could have stopped something. I might have stopped that coup d'etat, then - carry my theory on - if Diem had lived, had stopped the damn war and saved how many thousands of American soldiers that were killed in Vietnam.

Q: But could you have made any difference with Lodge in the picture in the way that he was?

WILLIAMS: I doubt it seriously, but maybe I could have neutralized him, if that's the proper word. I wouldn't have attempted to confront Lodge.

I would merely have talked to the Vietnamese. How strong, what kind of hold he had on the Vietnamese, I don't know. I don't believe he had very much. But he could have.

The other day, you were asking me a question about Lansdale, and I said I hadn't corresponded with him very often. And cogitating on that, I wondered if you had something particular in mind, because I think maybe that I've corresponded with Lansdale more than my answer may have indicated. I don't know exactly what I did answer you when you asked me about Lansdale.

Q: I asked you if you had much contact with him after he went back to the States in 1956, and the reason I ask is because I know that he was continuing to work on Vietnamese problems while he was in Washington, and I thought perhaps that had been an occasion for you to correspond.

WILLIAMS: Well, we have corresponded. Not over anything of particular importance that I can remember.

Q: I was thinking specifically of the time when you were in Vietnam between, well, I guess about 1957 and 1960. I thought perhaps there was an official connection there, since he was continuing to work on Vietnam back in Washington.

WILLIAMS: No. We have corresponded to this extent. He writes to me occasionally, I write to him. His wife died; he wrote and told me about it. He married one of the people that worked for him when he was over there. He's very happy with his new life. I think he's consulted by the Military History Division of the Department of Army at times; it's run by a brigadier general by the name of [James L.] Collins.

Incidentally, you asked me a question here one time that I could have elaborated on. Collins's people have been down here; one of them came down here and spent a week at least going through my files and xeroxing records and taking them up there. I don't have much to do with them anymore because I've lost faith in them. They sent me a draft and said they were preparing a history on Vietnam, and they sent me a draft covering the period 1954 to 1960 and said, "If you have any changes or suggestions, make them on the margin, and we'd appreciate it."

Well, I mulled over that a little while and I sit down at this old typewriter and took out some foolscap paper and wrote them five or six pages, almost paragraph by paragraph of what they'd said was wrong and what I thought was wrong and sent it back to them. Then I wrote to an officer up there, an ex-officer that I'd known that had written some books and had been kind enough to send me an autographed copy - and I think his name was [Charles] MacDonald. Does that name mean anything to you? I told him, "If you're still with that outfit up there, you sure better do some looking around. I've got this thing down here and I've written a number of pages." I said, "The stuff that the historical section put out on World War II," I said, "I used some of those things as reference data." Well, hell, here's one of them right here, for instance. That's Rearming the French. That's put out by that office.

But I heard no more about that. Then I got another letter from some other man - I don't know who he was, I don't remember his name - he said, "We're making a pictorial history of the Vietnamese War and we find that we have no pictures for our pictorial history prior to 1960, and we're about to go to press. Can you furnish me any pictures that could be included in such a volume?" Well, I wrote back and I said, "I'm sure that I have a lot of pictures here, filed away in this place and that and another, but I have none immediately available." And I said, "Here's two or three that are available, and I'll send those to you." And I sent them to him, and I got back an answer. He said, "Well, these are fine and we'll hold them and see whether we use them or not, but we were looking for something less formal." He said, "We're about to go to press until we discovered here that we had nothing prior to 1960." So I wrote back and I said, "How in the hell can you put out a pictorial history of South Vietnam and have it start some time in 1960?" I said, "You remember the French fought a war out there, and we got our nose in it in 1954, and that's six years before your history begins."

Q: I was going to say you need to go back to about 1945, I would say, if you want to pick it up at the beginning.

WILLIAMS: So that's the last of those people, and as I say, I've lost faith in them. So when they start talking about records - other people have talked to me about records. People at the University of Texas, egged on by some of my University of Texas alumni friends, communicated with me, and I answered their letters and so forth, and they suggested eventually that I put my files down in the University of Texas museum at E1 Paso, Texas. One of my very good friends was Slam Marshall. His records are there. Then for some reason or another, somehow or another, the Hoover Institution of War, Peace and Revolution got hold of my name out at Stanford, and they wrote me a letter, and I started corresponding with them, and I ended up by shipping lock, stock and barrel.

Addendum

WILLIAMS: As this is the end of this interview let me summarize by repeating that when I was sent to South Vietnam in 1955 my Directive was a) to organize, train, and equip a South Vietnamese army, navy, and air force; b) that I was to support the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

This Directive was not changed during my tour in Vietnam which was extended from the normal two year tour to five years.

I would be remiss if I did not include remarks about the U.S. military personnel assigned to help me as Chief of MAAG. Without exception the officers, NCOs, and soldiers assigned by the army, the navy and the marines, and the air force, especially the army, were of a high caliber. Far above the average. Several of the army officers went on to higher rank and some eventually retired as general officers. More should have.

We had no disciplinary problems among the U.S. military and the use of drugs or the excessive use of liquor was unknown. No commander could have asked for better help. The problem was the numbers were inadequate for the tasks at hand. This shortage was not corrected until several years after I'd left Vietnam.

End of interview