

Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Service
Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

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

GENERAL PAUL D. HARKINS

Interviewed by: Ted Gittinger
Initial interview date: November 10, 1981

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Early career

Boston National Guard
West Point
Fort Bliss horse cavalry school

Fort Riley, Kansas - Cavalry School - Instructor

Fort Myer, Virginia - F Troop - Third Cavalry

Second Armored Division

North Africa Landing, World War II - Deputy Chief of Staff
Operation Torch
Western Task Force
Sicily invasion

Europe - Third Army
General Patton
When the Third Cracked Europe

West Point - Assistant Commandant

Pentagon - Chief of Plans 1951

Korea - Eighth Army - Chief of Staff
Commander of Forty-fifth Division Infantry

Pentagon - MAAG Chief International Branch

Izmir, Turkey - Greek and Turkish Commander Armies in NATO - Commander

Hawaii - Deputy Army Commander
Vietnam situation
General Maxwell advice
Vietnam - Commander of U.S. forces

President Kennedy Appointment - Four Stars

North Vietnam Training
Infrastructure

Strategic Hamlet Program

Farmgate program

Combat
Fighting units
Diem
Tran Van Don
Big Minh
Presidential palace bombed

Laos
U.S. raid
Harriman plan
Ho Chi Minh Trail
Communists

Saigon, Vietnam
Ambassador Nolting
Embassy country team
Ambassador Lodge
Ambassador Diem's coup
Buddhists versus Catholics
Thich Tri Quang
Ambassador Richardson
Fact finding visits
U.S. policy
Viet Cong activity

Nhu and Diem Murders
U.S. reaction to
Assessment of progress
Effect on military situation

Big Minh Regime
Popularity

Tran Thieu Khiem

Embassy Reassignments

Trueheart

Nes

Lodge

General Nguyen Khanh

Background

Assessment

U.S. policy

Halberstam reports

Press relations

U.S. reporters

Return to U.S.

Debriefings

Ambassador (General) Taylor

Taylor-Khanh relations

U.S. war attitude

Mansfield Vietnam visit

Telegram (coup) fiasco

INTERVIEW

Q: General Harkins, will you begin by giving us a brief sketch of your military career before your assignment to Vietnam in 1962?

HARKINS: Oh, my goodness, that starts back in 1922 when I joined the Boston National Guard just to learn how to ride a horse because I figured only soldiers and millionaires could ride horses on the weekends. And I ended up forty-two years later in Vietnam without a horse, but I went to West Point from the National Guard. Then I joined the horse cavalry at Fort Bliss and then went to the cavalry school in 1933. I stayed there for six years; I was an instructor after two years in courses there.

Q: Was that at Leavenworth?

HARKINS: No, this was at the cavalry school at Fort Riley.

Q: All right.

HARKINS: And I took the advanced equitation course. Then I stayed on there as an instructor in riding for four years. Then I went to Fort Myer. While at Riley, I served with General [George] Patton for a while; he was the director of instruction for a short term.

And I went to Fort Myer and he was the commanding officer of the regiment at Myer, the Third Cavalry, and I had F Troop with the Third Cavalry. From there I was on maneuvers with the Second Armored. I joined the Armored Division because that was the thing to do for horse cavalymen in those days. I was on maneuvers in Louisiana and got a telephone call. General Gay had called, Colonel Gay at that time. He was with General Patton. He asked me if I wanted to go with them, and I said, "Where are you going?" And he said, "I can't tell you." And I said, "Sure." (Laughter) So I went as deputy chief of staff for the Western Task Force, and we landed in Africa just about thirty-nine years ago yesterday, as a matter of fact, the eighth.

Q: Operation Torch.

HARKINS: Yes, Operation Torch. After that, we went into Sicily, which I had a lot to do with the writing of the invasion of Sicily. We had a bet, General [Geoffrey] Keyes, who was General Patton's deputy commander, General Gay, myself and General Patton all bet how long it would take to do Sicily. General Patton said ninety days, General Keyes said eighty-five, General Gay said ninety-five, and I said forty-five. We did it in thirty-eight, so I won thirty dollars. (Laughter)

Q: Thirty dollars. Which was more then than it is now.

HARKINS: Then from there we went up to Europe and had the Third Army. General Patton had the Third Army, and as you know, we went through [Europe]. I wrote a book as a matter of fact, When the Third Cracked Europe. It's a short book; I did it in conjunction with the Army Times.

From Europe I came back and went to West Point where I was assistant commandant for two years, and then I was commandant for three. In 1951 I went to the Pentagon with General [Maxwell] Taylor who had sort of adopted me after General Patton - I was with him for several years. I ran into General Taylor. He was the G-3 of the army at that time, and I was made chief of plans. He went to Korea and he had me ordered over to Korea. He was the commander in Korea and I was his chief of staff in the Eighth Army. Then I commanded the Forty-fifth Division Infantry, and that was sent home, so they gave me the Twenty-fourth Division. I stayed in Korea for another six months.

I came back to the Pentagon and I was in the international branch which ran the MAAGS and the missions all over the world. We had missions and MAAGS in forty-two different countries, so I got to see the world going out and seeing them. Then General Taylor came back and was chief of staff and he sent me to Izmir, Turkey, where I commanded the Greek and Turkish Armies in the NATO chain. I was there for three years in Izmir. From Izmir I went to Hawaii where I was deputy army commander to General I. D. White.

From there I was sent to Vietnam, stayed there two and a half years, and I retired from Vietnam in 1964.

Q: I had a misapprehension. I thought you were Commander U.S. Army Pacific.

HARKINS: No, I was deputy. General White was the commander.

Q: I see. I see. Had you been able to monitor developments in Vietnam while you were in Hawaii?

HARKINS: Oh, yes. We had a little task force there. As a matter of fact we had a task force that was going into Laos if anything happened in Laos, and I was the commander. I had a marine brigade and an air wing and we were in the Philippines already. All the planes were lined up on the runway, but nobody ever knew about it, and we had five thousand men there. I'd go to the club at night and play bridge in civilian clothes, of course, and nobody knew that I was lieutenant general and sitting there ready to invade Laos. But they made a deal with Laos, and we were called back.

Q: Right. What was your general impression of the situation in Vietnam before you arrived?

HARKINS: Well, you could see after the French left it was deteriorating because that's when they asked us for help. And that's when we decided to go ahead and help them. They were trying to stop the communist inroads through the Viet Cong, and they just weren't qualified to do it at that time. They didn't have the know-how, and their army wasn't - you see, the French wouldn't let them command anything. There was only one general in the whole Vietnamese Army under the French, and he was a sort of a figurehead. And they'd never let them go and see the Montagnards. That was taboo as far as the French were concerned.

So they learned a lot after the French took out. The Montagnards, of course, wanted to have their own government and that was difficult. Then there were two or three sort of private armies; they were the Cao Dais and the Hoa Haos and they were all fighting each other. Finally they had to put the regular army against them and disarm all these religious groups. It was sort of a mixed-up affair for a while.

Q: Now, General Maxwell Taylor visited Vietnam in order to report to President Kennedy just a few months before you were assigned to Saigon. Did you have a chance to talk to him on his way back?

HARKINS: Well, yes, we had him out to dinner, as a matter of fact, and he didn't do too much discussing. That was on the way out. On the way back, he stopped and he called me from the airport, I think. He said, "Get ready to put your finger in the dike."

Q: Were those his words?

HARKINS: Those were his words, and I said, "Thank you very much."

Q: Oh, my.

HARKINS: So he went back and reported. I guess that was in December or it was in late fall, and on New Year's Eve, I got a call. He said, "Be prepared to go to Washington on the day after New Year's." I said, "For what?" He said, "Well, never mind. You're going to Washington." So I flew back to Washington and went down to see the President, President Kennedy, down in his Florida home - Palm Beach - and he told me I was going to be the commander in Vietnam and that I was then made a four-Star general as of that date. He said it would probably be a month before I went out there but be ready to go. I went out in February.

Q: Was the President, would you say, concerned especially?

HARKINS: No, he didn't seem to be at that time. He said, "I want you to go out and help President [Ngo Dinh] Diem do everything he can to stop these communist inroads and build up his army. There are about eight hundred advisers there now, and if you need more let us know and we'll do everything we can to help."

Q: What was the usual tour for an officer commanding the MAAG?

HARKINS: Well, I think at that time it was about a year

Q: About a year?

HARKINS: Yes.

Q: Well, that was pretty - I think General [Samuel] Williams was there four.

HARKINS: Yes, that's true, and then I think General [Lionel] McGarr was there for a couple of years, too.

Q: Just about a year and a half. That's why I was curious. Was there anything special about the circumstances of his leaving?

HARKINS: No, apparently when General Taylor talked to McGarr, he wasn't too impressed. But I think McGarr was more or less right, because General Taylor said he should prevent all the infiltration. Well, you know when you have nine hundred miles of jungle and then a few soldiers and just tiger paths and elephant paths, it's pretty hard to defend a whole front like that. He said, "Well, it's an almost impossible thing to do." Which it was. Particularly the infiltration from Laos.

Q: Your impression was that General Taylor was not happy with General McGarr's performance?

HARKINS: That's right. And then as soon as I went out there, McGarr was relieved.

Q: Did you get a chance to talk to him?

HARKINS: *Oh, yes. I visited him two or three times.*

Q: What did he have to say?

HARKINS: Well, he said it was just impossible to guard the border like that, and he told me that when the war was over, [when] the French gave up, the North Vietnamese took about thirty thousand youngsters up North and trained them, and after they had trained them, sent them back to rejoin their villages. They were sort of indoctrinated - they were brainwashed, really - and they became believers in the communist cause. They formed little cells throughout the villages and all over Vietnam and when they got them formed, they were told to stay still and keep undercover until they were told to rise up. And they were told to rise up about, I guess, 1959, 1960. That's when the war started in forty-three different provinces, and they had forty-three wars going on.

Q: I've heard that quote several times.

HARKINS: Well, that's true. Every province was different.

Q: What were your initial impressions when you arrived in Vietnam? I mean, the sorts of things you notice when you step off the plane.

HARKINS: The first thing I noticed was the security; I mean, you couldn't do anything. All the windows had steel blinds on them, and all the curtains were pulled down. I said, "Let's open this up and get some daylight in here." That's the first thing. Even the house I lived in had steel shutters closed tight.

Q: Were those left over from the French war?

HARKINS: No, they were left over from McGarr's doing.

Q: I see.

HARKINS: I said, "Let's put some light on the subject so we can see out." And we did. I was always - I guess I was born an optimist - a little more optimistic than the people there who had been there.

Q: What was Saigon like when you [were there]?

HARKINS: Saigon was just a good old French city, the Pearl of the Orient.

Q: What was the security situation in the countryside?

HARKINS: Very loose, because what they did, the Vietnamese had built forts, and they had about sixteen thousand forts at different crossroads and canals and things like that. They'd man those forts at night and they'd patrol all day. Well, when the Viet Cong found that out, they just did all their night work, and nobody was patrolling. They had to live there

with their families, the Vietnamese did, and that wasn't too good, too, because they had to protect their families. So I finally got them to get rid of most of these outposts or forts, and I think they were down to about six thousand after -

Q: That's still a pretty considerable number.

HARKINS: Yes, yes. They kept them on where canals would cross down in the Delta area, on roads, important roads, but it just pinned them down. You knew where they were.

Q: How was the advisory effort going when you arrived?

HARKINS: It was coming along, just very, very slowly. They were still having siestas in the afternoon, which I stopped. I mean, you couldn't fight a war and go to sleep from twelve to three and then not expect the enemy to do something.

Q: Was it a five or six-day week as well?

HARKINS: Yes, at that time. We changed that, too.

Q: Was the Vietnamese government making much progress with its various reform programs?

HARKINS: I think that's what caused the people in the North to tell the people in the South to rise up, the ones they'd sent back. Because when we took over in 1954, we initiated what was called a five-year program, and that would build more canals, build more roads, build airfields, build up the army. And it was going very, very well. As a matter of fact, the Vietnamese were exporting about three hundred thousand tons of rice a year. Well, when you could do that and still feed all the people in Vietnam, you can see the programs are going well. They were going so well, that's when they were told to rise up. That's when the little cells in the different villages started raising hell. They'd go immediately to the head guys and knock them off: the province chiefs, the village chiefs, the schoolteachers, the people in the government. If a village chief could sleep in the same bed twice in a row, he knew his place was all right. But if he couldn't, it was not.

Q: The strategic hamlet program was getting a lot of publicity about this time. How was that going?

HARKINS: Well, that didn't start really until -

Q: Hadn't started yet?

HARKINS: No, no, it hadn't started until 1963.

Q: Okay.

HARKINS: That was more or less under Mr. [Ngo Dinh] Nhu, Diem's brother, and the

British helped with it, because they had done it in Malaya, I think it was pretty good as a matter of fact. We had goals of getting at least 75 to 80 per cent of the people in the hamlets. And the trouble was that these little cells went right in with them, because they were part of the village, so that you were putting the VC in the hamlets as well as the people.

Q: How do you deal with a problem like that?

HARKINS: Well, that's the trouble, you couldn't. Because they were so indoctrinated that they told the people there, and they'd persuade many of the peasants because the peasants weren't the most brilliant people in the world, you know. They'd believe what they hear.

Q: There was a lot of speculation - I'm not sure when it begins, but from very early times - about advisers engaging in combat. We were constantly, I understand, having to reassure the press that this was not the case.

HARKINS: Well, that was one of the things. They did go on patrols with them, but they had instructions not to shoot back or shoot unless they were shot at first. So they actually - I know there was a big to-do when one of the advisers got killed, and that was just north of Saigon. He was the son of an army officer whom I knew, and I got all sorts of chit-chat on that because they didn't think the advisers should go out to combat. But you couldn't teach them how to Patrol or anything else unless you went along with them.

Q: That's a very fine, I suppose. What about the air element? There was a lot of speculation that U.S. pilots were flying missions, for example.

HARKINS: They were flying with the Vietnamese, yes.

Q: Was that the Farmgate program, I think it was called?

HARKINS: Yes, and of course they didn't have many planes. I think they only had forty-five planes in the whole country at that time, and when they put them between Danang and Hue and Dalat, the South in Saigon, you had about three or four planes in each place.

Q: Right. How serious was the infiltration problem?

HARKINS: It was bad when I got there, and it got worse and worse.

Q: How good was our intelligence about that?

HARKINS: Not too good in the beginning, and that's why we increased the intelligence effort. The first thing we did, I guess we brought in, oh, eight or nine hundred intelligence people to see if they could improve. Because the Vietnamese didn't know what to do with intelligence. I mean, if they captured a Viet Cong lieutenant or something, they'd immediately leave their post and bring them all the way into Saigon and present him to Mr. Diem. That's the way they did their intelligence, without talking to them and asking them where they came from and how big the outfit was and things like that. They didn't use that. They didn't know much about intelligence.

Q: Was there some disagreement about this? Because I recall reading a National Intelligence Estimate of about 1961 which was prepared by the CIA which said that they estimated that 80 to 90 per cent of the Viet Cong main force units were local recruits, and they tended to play down the infiltration problem. Was this an item of controversy?

HARKINS: Well, I think in the beginning there weren't very many big Viet Cong units. I think most of them were about platoon size or squad size that would do all the infiltrating. I think the first time we noticed a Viet Cong battalion in action was at the Battle of Ap Bac - I used to call it My Aching Back - but that's when they did use a battalion. And we flew a parachute regiment down to drop into the fields and surround them. But when they get down, the whole battalion would disappear. They'd just disappear in the jungle and the swamps and they weren't a battalion anymore, but they were available.

Q: We suffered some heavy losses in that engagement, I believe, didn't we?

HARKINS: No, not too bad. I mean, the Viet Cong took Ap Bac, but we took it back, the Vietnamese took it back the next day. So I mean it was just like going through France, you'd lose a city and then take it the next day. Yes, we did suffer some casualties.

Q: The press got hold of that in a big way.

HARKINS: I remember.

Q: Is that why you called it My Aching Back?

HARKINS: My Aching Back.

Q: There are some things that lead off of that I want to come back to later, but were you still pretty worried about the possibility of an invasion from the North at that time? How big a factor was that in our thinking?

HARKINS: It was pretty big, because we had a lot of stuff up there on the front line, I mean, the Vietnamese. But the main thing was the infiltration from Laos and Cambodia. That was the thing that was-bothersome.

Q: How much of your military resources did you have to devote to guarding against the possibility that they might cross the DMZ, as they had done in Korea, for example?

HARKINS: Oh, I can't remember the exact figures, but I think that probably five or six divisions were up there in that First Corps area.

Q: Pretty considerable. What we called I Corps?

HARKINS: I Corps, yes. Then there were a couple of the Second Corps and then there were more around Saigon and then the Delta area had the rest of them.

Q: Right.

You mentioned the British in Malaya and so on. Were they active in Saigon in offering advice and designing programs and so on to cope with the insurgency problem?

HARKINS: I had close contact with their adviser who had also been responsible for the strategic hamlet program of the British in Malaya.

Q: Was that General [Robert] Thompson, I believe?

HARKINS: Yes, I think his name was Thompson. And he was very fine, very helpful as a matter of fact.

Q: Were our relations with the British, would you call them cordial?

HARKINS: Oh, yes, very much so.

Q: What about Diem? You can find all sorts of opinion about Diem. What were his ideas on combating the insurgency?

HARKINS: Well, to me he was fine. He knew more about that part of the world and the different people in it than anybody I ever knew. He was a stubborn individual, but I got along very well with him and I saw him two or three times a week probably. He was always very gracious to me. As a matter of fact, I'm the only one he spoke English to.

Q: I didn't know he spoke English.

HARKINS: Oh, yes.

Q: I thought he always spoke French.

HARKINS: He did. Except to me.

Q: Well, I'll be.

HARKINS: He lived in America, you know, for two or three years.

Q: Yes. At Maryknoll Seminary, I think.

HARKINS: And we got along fine. I had quite an admiration for him, because he wasn't storing wealth away. He wasn't cheating any. He only had two suits, one white to greet visitors and one brown one when he went in the field, and every time we went in the field, he'd take some money along and give it to the honor guard or the province chief or the village chief. He'd go out and he knew agriculture; he'd teach them how to sow seeds and how to transplant rice and things like that. And he was really - he had appointed all the

generals. There were I think nineteen generals in the whole Vietnamese army, so he knew them all personally. Yet some of them were opposed to him, and I couldn't understand that. Because the first time I met General Don, he said, "We're not going to get anyplace until we get rid of Diem." And he was a major general.

Q: This was Tran Van Don?

HARKINS: Yes. And I couldn't believe that, because everybody thought Don was one of the finest generals there. Well, he was, but he was a sort of political general. He wasn't a combat general.

Q: He was very senior, I think, wasn't he?

HARKINS: Yes, he was senior. And [General Duong Van] Big Minh, who had really helped Diem put down the Hoa Haos and the Cao Dais, he was given a desk job in Saigon as a security adviser to the President, and he saw him once a week on a Saturday morning. But I couldn't ever get Big Minh to go out with me and see what the war was, I don't know why. But I'd go in and report to Diem as to what was going on in the different villages and provinces, because I was out every day. I don't think there was a place in Vietnam I didn't visit. I'd come back and tell Diem what was going on, and Big Minh would usually go with me to see the President, and he said, "Why don't you go out like General Harkins?" Well, he didn't have the plane, he didn't have the personnel. I took him out once or twice, but it was hard to get him to go out. As a military adviser, I don't know what he did, as a matter of fact, because he didn't know what was going on.

Q: I've heard it rumored that Diem kept Minh in Saigon because he was afraid of Minh's political clout because Minh was so popular.

HARKINS: Yes, he was. That could have been true. Yes, I guess he was under the gun.

Q: In February, as I recall, of 1962, I believe it was, two pilots - renegade pilots I suppose you would call them - bombed the presidential palace. Do you recall that incident?

HARKINS: Indeed I do. I had just got there.

Q: Tell me about that.

HARKINS: That was the first attempted coup, and I heard the bombing about seven o'clock in the morning. I looked out and there from my hotel room I could see the palace was burning.

Q: Oh, my. What were your thoughts?

HARKINS: I thought, "What do I do now?" I still hadn't shaved yet. So I got over to the office and I drove up to see that the palace was still burning and finally I found out that Diem was fine and was in his office and I went down to see him. And he said, "Well, we captured one of them. I shouldn't have put him in the air force, because I had put his father

in jail years ago."

Q: Do you remember the name by any chance?

HARKINS: No, I don't.

Q: I haven't heard it mentioned.

HARKINS: He said, "If I'd realized what I'd done to his father, I wouldn't have made him a pilot."

Q: How did they capture him?

HARKINS: I think one of them got shot down. There were two planes. One escaped, I think, into Cambodia, and the other got shot down.

Q: I'd heard a story that ever after that, Diem required his personal approval for anybody to take off with five hundred pound bombs aboard. Is there any truth in that?

HARKINS: I don't know about that, but I wouldn't be surprised.

Q: Were there any aftereffects of this? Diem, naturally, I suppose this had an impact on him.

HARKINS: That was the second attempt at a coup and when I visited him shortly after that, he said, "Well, that's the second one." And he said, "Sometime I'm going to get shot right in the back of the neck."

Q: He told you that himself?

HARKINS: Yes. He said, "Sometime they'll get me that way."

Q: My goodness. Well, not too far from the truth.

HARKINS: That's what happened, yes.

Q: Let me get you to talk about Laos for a minute. How did the Laotian situation affect the Vietnamese situation?

HARKINS: Well, it was just a camp for the Viet Cong. And the trouble was, we could send Vietnamese patrols across the border, but then they put a stop to that - and I think the State Department put a stop to that - that you couldn't go into [Laos].

Q: Why did they do that?

HARKINS: I don't know. So we still sent the patrols, and where there was the border along South Vietnam and Laos, [it] wasn't marked at all. It was just watershed, really, at the top

of the hills. There are two or three roads that go, and they'd pick up the road sign and take it with them and put it back when they came back.

Q: They're carrying the border along.

HARKINS: But they wouldn't allow the Americans to go. And the planes couldn't fly within a mile or two of the border.

Q: I see.

HARKINS: So it was an impossible thing. If the Viet Cong came over and made a raid, say up around Pleiku and places like that, and you got the division to chase them back, you couldn't follow them. You weren't allowed to. So it was a sanctuary for them. Remember President Nixon ordered a raid into Laos and got very severely criticized about it.

Q: Of course that was a very large-scale operation.

HARKINS: Yes, it was. But they broke up a big training camp down there.

Q: It was rumored - not rumored, it was reported pretty reliably, I think, that many South Vietnamese were alarmed at the compromise settlement that was made finally in Laos.

HARKINS: Oh, absolutely. Particularly Diem. That's when the battle cry went up "We've got to get rid of Diem." He told [Averell] Harriman - Mr. Harriman, he made the deal and said they were going to put anon-communist government in Laos. Three guys, two of them were communist and one wasn't. And Mr. Diem told him point blank, he said, "If you put that government in Laos, and put a communist government next to my borders, I'm going to withdraw my ambassador from Vientiane." And Harriman put the government in, I think that was May of 1962, probably, and he did pull his ambassador out of Vientiane. Well, here we are trying to run a foreign country, and he said, "Okay. We'll start the cry, 'We've got to make some changes. We've got to get rid of [Diem].'"

Q: Was Diem afraid that we might do the same thing in Vietnam someday?

HARKINS: What do you mean?

Q: Sell him out.

HARKINS: I don't think so, as far as I know. He might have to some of the other people but not to me, I never felt that way. But it could have been.

Q: If I mentioned the phrase to you, the Averell Harriman Memorial Highway, does that bring up any memories?

HARKINS: No.

Q: That's what certain people I know called the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

HARKINS: Oh. That's a new one. I hadn't heard that before. (Laughter) It's a good name for it.

Q: Do you think it's a good name?

HARKINS: Yes. He and [Roger] Hilsman.

Q: Oh, Hilsman. Well, we'll come to him I hope. How did you regard that settlement in Laos at the time?

HARKINS: I sort of felt that they were making it more difficult for us, because here was a communist country on the border of one we didn't want to be communist.

Q: Of course, they were not saying it was communist. They said it was -

HARKINS: No but it was run by two communists, one who didn't have much to say. He was sort of a figurehead. I think there were two brothers. I think they were cousins, but they were related, yes.

Q: Let me ask you to talk about the relations within the American country team in Saigon. How were your relations with Ambassador [Frederick] Nolting, for example?

HARKINS: Absolutely perfect. He was one of the best I've ever seen and ever dealt with.

Q: Tell me about him.

HARKINS: Well, he's just my type of man. He is a very fine ambassador. He went out with me on most of my trips. He got around the country. He was entirely different from [Henry Cabot] Lodge. Nolting would get out and see what was going on throughout the country, and when Lodge came over, he said everything that happens in Vietnam happens in Saigon, so he never left. When we'd go on trips, Nolting and I and Diem would probably go together in a helicopter or a plane, and when Lodge got there, I was always with Diem and he was in the second plane, and he didn't like that at all. And he didn't like going around one bit. He was a loner. Well, I can't say all I want to say about him.

Q: Well, we'll come back to it. Under Ambassador Nolting, were there ever disagreements between you and Nolting?

HARKINS: No. Never. We just got along just hand-glove, really fine.

Q: I see.

HARKINS: He was something like Ambassador [Ellis O.] Briggs, who was in South America when I went down to visit and also he was in Greece, and to me he was fine.

Q: Now, you were in a position to have had some experience with relations between MAAG

chiefs and ambassadors, I suppose, from your previous Pentagon experience. Was it common for a MAAG Chief to have difficulties with his ambassador?

HARKINS: I never noticed it particularly. I visited them all over the world and they never complained about it.

Q: I've heard it said that sometimes there was tension because the ambassador is always bringing the bad news and the MAAG chief is the guy with the goodies, and the head of state tends to try to play one off against the other if he can get away with it.

HARKINS: Well, I wouldn't be surprised at that. I know when I would report on the up side, people would say, "Well, it isn't that way at all." At least you had to make them feel that way, and I think it was, everything was going fine. But I knew that if anything happened to Diem the thing would collapse, and it did. And I tried my very best not to let that happen, but I was sort of overruled.

Q: That's another thing I want to come back to. How did Ambassador Nolting get along with Diem?

HARKINS: Fine.

Q: Would you [say] more or less like you?

HARKINS: Yes. Every time he went he asked me to go with him, and every time I went I'd ask him to go with me. But sometimes we could get together and go or sometimes we'd just go alone. But we always reported to each other what the conversation was and what we were going to talk about with Diem.

Q: Did Diem speak English to Nolting?

HARKINS: No. French.

Q: For some reason that really intrigues me. I had never heard anybody say that Diem spoke English to them before, and I just assumed that he couldn't speak English.

HARKINS: Well, he wasn't really articulate, but we understood each other. And we were walking along one day and speaking, [he said], "You know, you're the only one I speak English to."

Q: Do you speak French?

HARKINS: Oh, I've studied it, but I couldn't do the technical business. I could listen to the conversation and know what they were talking about. But when I get into technical discussions or anything like that, I wouldn't know the words to use.

Q: How would you, in general, characterize the quality of the country team in Saigon?

HARKINS: When [John] Richardson and Nolting were there, they were fine, it was great. When Lodge came over, and [William] Trueheart was there, it was not good.

Q: Now Trueheart preceded Lodge, though. He was there under Nolting, wasn't he?

HARKINS: He was there as deputy of Nolting, and he was on the other side of the fence. He wanted to get rid of Diem.

Q: He did?

HARKINS: You see, Nolting was away when things happened here.

Q: That summer of 1963.

HARKINS: Yes. He had a month's leave; he hadn't had a leave since he'd been there. And Trueheart took over then. When Nolting came back he asked me what on earth had happened, and Diem told Nolting that if he had been there it wouldn't have happened, but under Trueheart things just started to go wrong.

Q: When we talk about the coup, I want to come back to that a little bit.

HARKINS: You mean in August.

Q: Yes, sir. Well, beginning in August right. Were there problems, dissensions between agencies in Saigon that you know of? I'm thinking of nothing in particular, but I'm picking the CIA and AID, for example.

HARKINS: Well, I think that under Nolting there weren't any problems, under Lodge there were.

Q: Does this have anything to do with the timing of the thing? Or do you think Lodge caused the problems?

HARKINS: Lodge caused the problems.

Q: Okay.

HARKINS: Now, in his book, which I didn't read all of it except for what involved me, he said that he had a secret channel that he couldn't show to me. He had a secret channel with the President, President Johnson, and he was very sorry, that I was his close friend, but I wasn't in on it. Well, I'm not sure that's the truth.

Q: That you were his close friend or that was the reason - ?

HARKINS: I had known him ever since 1925. We were both from Boston.

Q: Didn't you both go to Boston Latin I heard somewhere?

HARKINS: I went to Boston Latin, I don't know whether he did or not. But he used to be a very close friend of General Crittenger's, and he used to come down to Fort Bliss on maneuvers, and I got to know him very, very well. But when the reports came in in Washington, General Taylor and Mr. [Robert] McNamara would get them and go up and see the President, and the President would say, "Well, what does Harkins think about that?" And they'd say, "Well, he doesn't think anything because he hasn't seen the messages." He said, "Well, I want him to see the messages." I'm not sure that there was a secret channel, because I'm sure Taylor would have known about it.

Q: When did Diem's problems begin in your opinion?

HARKINS: In the Laos -

Q: In the spring of 1962?

HARKINS: Yes. When they put the communist government into Laos.

Q: Could you be more specific? How did this begin Diem's long, slow decline?

HARKINS: Well, that's when Harriman told him he couldn't pull the ambassador out of Vientiane, but he did. And then the State Department just didn't like that.

Q: I see.

HARKINS: From then on they weren't very favored toward Diem.

Q: Some people who have written on this subject could make a good deal of State Department versus Defense Department attitude. Is that a good way to put it?

HARKINS: Yes. I think that's true. We were trying to save Diem and build up their army, and they were trying to get rid of Diem and that's what caused the attempted coup in August.

Q: I see. Of course, the problem as it was reported begins with the troubles between Diem and the Buddhists, as they were called, although of course they weren't all Buddhists. What were the sources of discontent in the country with Diem?

HARKINS: Well, it's hard to say, because actually in the five-year plan, not only in building canals and roads and airfields, Diem, who was a Catholic of course - there were seventeen people in his cabinet and there were only three Catholics in the cabinet; Vice President [Nguyen Ngoc] Tho was a Buddhist and all the others were Buddhists -

Q: Did the cabinet have much power, however?

HARKINS: -and he built as many pagodas as he did churches, but they were also infiltrated from the North. I mean, at least they were brainwashed, and they started these things about raiding pagodas and things like that. Then the press got on it, particularly led by this guy [David] Halberstam from the New York Times. If you ever look up the press reports in those days, you'll find Halberstam would write them and then hand out the circulars to all the other press guys and they'd actually put in the same thing, change a few words here and there. But Halberstam was a Jew, and he didn't like Diem. He was on the side to get rid of Diem and they wrote about "Thirty bonzes killed in a raid on a pagoda." Well, there were no bonzes killed in any raid on any pagoda all the time I was there.

Q: Is that a fact?

HARKINS: And they talked about Buddhist battalions fighting Catholic battalions. Well, there weren't any Buddhist battalions, as such, to fight Catholic battalions as such. And those are the reports you get back here.

Q: Still, there seems to have been a lot of popular unrest in Hue, for example, in that summer, led by people like Thich Tri Quang, I believe.

HARKINS: He was a Buddhist, and his brother was a communist up in North Vietnam. I think he was a press man, as a matter of fact. And again, it's a matter of brainwashing and causing this upset and another plot to get rid of Diem. And the Buddhists - they just blow everything way out of importance, as far as I'm concerned. As a matter of fact, I guess when I talked with General [Le Van] Ty who was there - he died as a matter of fact while I was there; he was the head guy of the Vietnamese Army, T-Y-I asked him about the Buddhist things. He said, "Well, when the French took a census when they first came over there, they'd go into the religious [question] and ask the people what they were. Well, actually, they were ancestor worshipers. They worshiped their ancestors. They lived and died in the same place their ancestors did. Well, that wasn't a religion to the French, so they said, 'Okay, you're a Buddhist.'" So they named 90 percent of the people Buddhists, and they weren't really, truly Buddhists.

Q: How many practicing Buddhists do you think there were, perhaps, in the country? Is there any way to tell?

HARKINS: Ty said there's probably about - I forget the population, but it was I think seventeen million in the whole country. And he said probably about 30 per cent.

Q: And how many Catholics?

HARKINS: About 10 per cent.

Q: About 10 per cent. Now, in the summer of 1963, things began to come apart, it seems. Can you tell me what was your view of how that happened, what the progression of events was?

HARKINS: Well, this is the Harriman-Hilsman thing. They sent a telegram. The CIA had been working with the generals, led by Big Minh, for the overthrow of Diem.

Q: Was that Richardson's boys?

HARKINS: I think he had gone with Nolting.

Q: Well, Richardson left about October, I think, early October of 1963.

HARKINS: Well, I guess it was still him then. But his people had been working with the State Department and the CIA to get the generals, telling them that if they overthrew Diem, we'd back them.

Q: I thought Richardson was pro-Diem. Or is that a mistake?

HARKINS: He was.

Q: He was?

HARKINS: But he went along with the new regime of Harriman-Hilsman to get rid of Diem. So they sent a telegram to have somebody contact the generals and tell them what they would do if they overthrew Diem.

Q: Was this the famous August 24 [1963] telegram?

HARKINS: Yes. Twenty-third or -fourth. So they nominated this guy named [Lucien] Conein - CIA man - and Conein went up to see Big Minh, and through [Tran Thien] Khiem, K-H-I-E-M, who I think was chief of staff at that time, Big Minh said, "No, I don't want to see him. I want to see somebody in authority." So Mr. Lodge, who found out that Big Minh wouldn't see Conein, immediately sent back word to the State Department and in a flash message, I think. So the message came back and said, "Well, have General Harkins see him." So I was dragged into it and told what was going on. I got hold of Khiem and asked him to come down to my office. I didn't want to go out to see him at his place, because he had been G3 and we had worked on different things before. So he came down to the office and I just saw him all by myself and told him what I was going to propose. And he said, "Well, I'll let you know." I said, "If Big Minh is ready, let me know." Well, he got the word back from Big Minh, he said, "They're not ready. The generals weren't ready." So when I had to report that to Lodge, that ended that right there. Big Minh said the generals weren't ready. Well, as a matter of fact, they weren't.

Q: What was holding them up?

HARKINS: Well, they didn't have everything organized. There were about twelve of them that would go along with the generals, and the others were on the fence, particularly [General Nguyen] Khanh, who headed the First Corps up in the north. He was not in on it at all. Then when they finally took over in November when they killed Diem, there were thirteen generals on the committee, and you just can't run a country by a committee. It

doesn't work. And it didn't work. I mean, the strategic hamlet program collapsed, the officers in the field, the corps commanders, didn't know whether they were going to stay on, whether they were going to hold their jobs or whether the generals would change them. Some of them came running in to me to see what should they do. Like [General Van Thanh] Cao down in My Tho came up to see me. He was not put in house arrest or anything, he wasn't in on the thing. He was one of the generals, but he didn't go along with it. He said, "What'll I do?" I said, "You better hold your job as long as you can." And Khanh didn't come in at all until the twenty-eighth of January when he sent word to me that he was growing a beard and he wasn't going to shave it off until he took over.

Q: That's another thing I want to come back to. To back up for just a second, as I recall there were of course many fact-finding visits by various people in Washington. I had two hundred and fifty a month. One of the things I was going to ask was how you ever got any work done, but -

HARKINS: I'd just go out.

Q: One in particular that sticks in my mind was made by General [Victor] Krulak and Mr. [Joseph A.] Mendenhall. Do you remember that one specifically?

HARKINS: Yes, very well. Krulak went all over the country. I gave him a plane and he went every place. He talked to advisers. Mendenhall stayed in Saigon.

Q: Who did he talk to?

HARKINS: He talked to the Ambassador, the staff there in the embassy. That's when they went back and reportedly the President asked if they had visited the same country.

Q: That's a famous story. I suppose General Krulak talked to you?

HARKINS: Oh, yes, very much so.

Q: Now, later, just a few weeks after that visit, General Taylor and Secretary McNamara visited. This may have been the third time they came in tandem, I lose count. This was the visit, as I recall, that resulted in a selective suspension of aid to Diem.

HARKINS: That's right. Unless he did certain things.

Q: Right. Certain reforms were carried out and so on. Hadn't we told the generals earlier that a suspension of aid should be regarded as a signal?

HARKINS: Not that I know of.

Q: I'd read that, I think, in the Pentagon Papers, that we had told the generals that this was our signal that we were ready.

HARKINS: It could have fit in very well, because soon after they made that announcement General Don came to see me and said; "We'll have a¹- new president - " This is on the twenty-eighth of October, I think. He said, "We'll have a new president by Saturday."

Q: Did you believe him?

HARKINS: I sent the message back to Washington, and I said, "This is what Don says." And they had the coup. Admiral [Harry D.] Felt was there - was it the first or the second?

Q: He had just left, I think, when the coup took place.

HARKINS: No, because the coup was on when he was there.

Q: Oh, it was? I see.

HARKINS: And they kept the airfield open until his plane took off.

Q: Oh, my.

HARKINS: And I got a message to him in the air. I said, "The airfield's closed. Don't try to come back because they're having a coup." That was a Saturday and I was home for lunch, and all hell broke out because I lived near the palace. The soldiers had gone through my place, the people on the roof of the palace were shooting down at the soldiers in the streets and several of the bullets coming into my house, in the front yard, particularly.

Q: Was Mrs. Nolting still there?

HARKINS: No, Nolting wasn't there. Lodge was there, though. I came home to see if Mrs. Harkins was all right. I called her first, and we had big concrete archways downstairs, and I said, "Just get under one of those archways and stay there until I get there." And I had a hard time getting home, because the troops were going to attack the palace, which is right close to where I lived. I got back and then I went to the office and found out that Diem had escaped. He and his brother Nhu had gone out through, I don't know, some tunnel and ended up in Cholon.

Q: I've heard that that tunnel story was not true, that they simply walked out. Do you know for sure?

HARKINS: I think they had a secret passage.

Q: You think so?

HARKINS: Yes. To get away. Now, where it came out, I don't know. But when Khanh had taken over and I went through the palace with him and he took me to a stairway that led down, he said, "This is how Diem and Nhu got out." And it was so far down, I didn't want to go down to walk up the thing. It really went down to the depths.

Q: Were you able to keep track very well of what was going on during the coup?

HARKINS: At that time, yes. Well, yes, I saw Big Minh all the time, and I saw Don. I saw Khiem, and when we went out to visit the country, I mean, I always rode with Big Minh. And there was Khiem and Don usually in the same helicopter with me. It was a French helicopter, one of their own. So I kept right alongside them all the time. But the Buddhists rose up again and the VC took advantage. They'd been trying to get rid of Diem ever since 1954, and it took about one day to do what the Viet Cong had been trying to do for six years.

Q: I've heard it speculated by some fairly knowledgeable people that the-coup caught the VC by surprise -

HARKINS: By surprise, Absolutely.

Q: -and stole a lot of their thunder for a time. They weren't quite sure how to handle that.

HARKINS: That's right. But then when they realized what had happened, they rose up in the villages and said, "Tear these hamlets down and pull down the fences," because we had put barbed wire around most of the strategic hamlets. They cut all the wire up, filled in the ditches and everything else.

Q: Do you know why Richardson was sent home?

HARKINS: No, I don't.

Q: I've heard it speculated that this was supposed to be a signal.

HARKINS: I imagine he wasn't getting along with Lodge. They didn't see eye-to-eye. He was a very close friend of Nhu's, Richardson. I didn't know Nhu too well. I had met with him once or twice. I met with him with General Taylor one day. I had a French interpreter, a young colonel, with me and we went along together. Nhu was talking French and General Taylor was an expert in French, you know, and in order to get out he turned to the interpreter and said, "What is he talking about?"

Q: Really?

HARKINS: And he said, "That French is something I haven't heard before." And the interpreter said, "Well, I didn't understand part of it either." And I don't know what it could have been, because I couldn't understand it.

Q: You don't know the explanation for that?

HARKINS: No.

Q: At one time the State Department was pushing the line, I think, that if Diem would get

rid of Nhu, that they would settle for that.

HARKINS: I think so. I think that was the beginning. When Madame Nhu left the country, they probably - blood is thicker than water, you know, and Nhu and Diem were brothers and Diem wouldn't get rid of him. Now, what they could have done easily, and I think for probably all intents and purposes was to put Diem in house confinement with his brother in Dalat. But it didn't work out that way, because this young captain who finally captured them out at Cholon shot them.

Q: I was going to ask you if you knew who pulled the trigger and who gave the order.

HARKINS: I don't think anybody gave the order. I don't think he was supposed to, but he had them and had their hands tied behind their back in this half-track and just put a bullet right through their heads.

Q: I've heard a lot of speculation - have you read Tran Van Don's book? It's not very old, I think.

HARKINS: No.

Q: He says Xuan gave the order, Mai Huu Xuan was the hatchet man on that job. Mai Huu Xuan. He was, I think, chief of security for Minh. But he thinks Minh gave the order and Xuan had them executed.

HARKINS: I don't know. I hadn't heard about Xuan.

Q: Well, it's just one of many versions, because I think -

HARKINS: I don't think that Minh would have them shot. I really feel in my own heart that I don't think he would.

Q: What was the reaction of Americans in Saigon to the coup? I guess it was mixed.

HARKINS: Mixed. I think the embassy and the CIA now - that's another thing. When everything settled after the twenty-third of August attempt, they took off military law and things were going along pretty well again for a while. Then in Lodge's book, now, I was supposed to be very close working with the Ambassador, and I did with Nolting. But he said that he worked with CIA, and this guy Conein again contacted the generals without informing me. That's true, because I didn't know it, but he'd been working with CIA and this man Conein, other generals had, until the twenty-eighth of October when Don came in and told me that they were going to change the government. Later on I found out that they had been working behind my back, which is not a very good way to run the country team.

Q: I've seen you quoted - I don't know whether it was accurately or not - on October 30 making a very optimistic prognosis for the war and the general situation in Vietnam, or maybe it was October 31. It was very close to the coup, a day or two before. Were you

quoted accurately?

HARKINS: I don't think so. I don't remember the quote.

Q: Well, I have a copy of it here.

HARKINS: I felt that way, and I so reported to Taylor and McNamara and as a matter of fact, Mr. McNamara said, "Well, get ready to bring a thousand American troops home." And we started working on that right away.

Q: Well, what I would like you to comment on is if you knew that there was a coup in the offing, didn't that affect your optimism in any way?

HARKINS: No, not particularly, because I think things in the country, all over the country, were going in our favor at that time. The army was taking over and we had built up the CIDG, the Civil Defense [Civilian Irregular Defense Group], and the province troops, and they had things pretty well under control as a matter of fact at that time.

Q: Now Lodge, I think, reported a couple of months after the coup when things began to slide downhill, when it became obvious that the military situation was turning around, that in fact the security situation had been deteriorating since the previous spring or some such.

HARKINS: He didn't know anything about it. He never left Saigon.

Q: And he wasn't taking your advice on this kind of thing?

HARKINS: No, no. We didn't see eye-to-eye at all. I think if Nolting had stayed there, things would have been much different. But every time Lodge would stab me in the back he'd tell Mrs. Harkins how pretty she was.

Q: How much time did Ambassador Lodge spend at the Cercle Sportif?

HARKINS: Do you mean playing tennis?

Q: -And swimming. I've heard that he spent a lot of time there.

HARKINS: Oh, I think he probably went over in the afternoon every day. I don't know. I never went there, as a matter of fact. I wasn't a tennis player at the time. I didn't have time to, in the first place.

Q: Now, Diem's other brother, [Ngo Dinh Can], who was up in Hue, I think, that made quite a story, how he was handled. He was arrested and executed, I think, well after the coup, sometime after the coup. Did this case pose some special problems for you?

HARKINS: No. No, I don't remember the Can incident too well.

Q: Well, it was mainly a political thing.

HARKINS: There were so many people being done away with.

Q: Can you describe how all of this affected the military situation?

HARKINS: Well, as I say, the commanders didn't know who to turn to, and they didn't know whether they were going to keep their own jobs or whether they'd be colonels tomorrow, or the generals didn't know if they would be reduced in rank or if they'd be the next ones to go. And they were looking back towards Saigon for guidance, and guidance wasn't coming out of Saigon, because as I say, you can't get guidance from twelve guys who don't see eye-to-eye all the time. So that really they were looking for their own jobs and staying close to home and not getting out with the troops and seeing that the war was carried to the VC.

Q: Why didn't Minh assert himself and give direction to all of this?

HARKINS: I don't think he was that strong. I think he was a popular man, but I don't think his decisions were very good, and as a matter of fact, that's when General Khanh said, "We're not getting any guidance from Saigon and I'm just going to take over."

Q: Were you able to establish a good relationship with the new regime, the Minh regime?

HARKINS: Yes. I got along fine with them, because I knew them all, except one named Thien, I think. He had been out of the country, and I didn't know him at all. But he was a pretty important guy.

Q: Can you give me some assessments of character of some of these guys? What was your assessment of Big Minh? That he was popular?

HARKINS: That he was popular, but as I say, he was not a decision-maker as far as knowing what to do in the country. Khiem was probably the strongest of them all. He was sort of the one that held them together as chief of staff.

Q: That was Tran Thien Khiem, I think.

HARKINS: K-H-I-E-M.

Q: Yes, right.

HARKINS: And Don, as I say, he wasn't a good military commander. I think he would have been a good ambassador someplace. He was a very polite, nice, easy-going type of man, but not the type that would carry on military thing and go out and see that things were done.

Q: Did none of Minh's regime impress you particularly as a take-charge sort of type?

HARKINS: No, I don't think there was anyone who showed the leadership, and that's probably why he didn't get any decisions out of them.

Q: Now, a couple of weeks after the coup there was one of many Honolulu conferences.

HARKINS: One a month.

Q: The country team was there, Secretary [Dean] Rusk was there, Secretary McNamara was there, General Taylor, McGeorge Bundy was there, I know that you were there. I don't know what transpired. Did you give a briefing on the military situation? Can you recall?

HARKINS: I usually did. At all those briefings I was asked to give my -

Q: Can you recall anything special that transpired then?

HARKINS: Not particularly, that one, no, because I told them what the truth was then, that the whole strategic hamlet program - well, I'm not sure now whether this is after Khanh took over or-

Q: No, this is before Khanh.

HARKINS: Before Khanh took over.

Q: This would have been probably November, still, of 1963. My information is that you gave a fairly optimistic report and that McNamara expressed a good deal of skepticism, but I don't know if that's true.

HARKINS: I don't recall. I mean, we had so many different conferences. As a matter of fact, somebody from the Joint Chiefs of Staff was to visit me every month I was there, and of course, Admiral Felt would visit me frequently. Then if they didn't visit, I would have to go back to Hawaii. So it was really a monthly trip. I don't know how many times I've flown the Pacific Ocean, coming and going. You could leave Honolulu, say, at twelve noon and fly in daylight all the way to Saigon and get in to Saigon at 7:00 p.m. the next day. But it would still be daylight.

Q: What kind of thing did that do to your biological clock?

HARKINS: Well, I had a couple of bunks on the plane.

Q: I see. I know that one thing resulted from this conference, at least I have seen a document that says that there was a directive put out that planning begin, I gather contingency planning, for clandestine operations against the North, what later became the 34-A operation. Do you remember the origins of that at all?

HARKINS: No. No. I don't. Sorry.

Q: That's fine. Now, McNamara came again, I think in December of 1963, to Saigon and visited, and I have some indications that he carried back a recommendation that contingency planning begin for bombing the North. Do you remember anything about that visit? I'm sorry I don't have the documents for that period, but I just don't have them.

HARKINS: No, I don't.

Q: Okay.

HARKINS: You see, I didn't have any control over the bombing out there. That would come from CINCPAC, probably.

Q: Okay.

HARKINS: And although I was probably in on it, I don't recall that I was in on any of the planning.

Q: Well, it would fit that CINCPAC would have made the recommendation. My records show that Mr. Trueheart went home in December. Do you remember that?

HARKINS: You mean to stay home?

Q: Yes. What I'm curious about is the background for that. Was this a routine change or in line with a policy change?

HARKINS: I think probably a policy - no, I'm not sure because Trueheart was more or less of the opinion that it was good for Diem to be gone, and so was Lodge. He'd been there quite a while, I think.

Q: Well, I'll tell you. Frankly, I've heard that he was sent home because he'd made you his enemy. And I thought I'd just ask you if there was anything to that.

HARKINS: Enemy?

Q: Yes.

HARKINS: I don't know in what sense you'd mean an enemy.

Q: Well, in the sense that he'd been anti-Diem and you were pro-Diem.

HARKINS: Yes, that's true. Yes, that's true. Yes, he was anti-Diem.

Q: Well, my source said that he had crossed you, and that deputy chiefs of mission don't cross chiefs of MAAG and get away with it. Is that true?

HARKINS: I had nothing to do with his relief.

Q: Okay. Now, this is curious, because as I understand it, Mr. Trueheart was replaced by David Nes, and Nes only lasted about six months before he was sent home. Do you know anything of that story?

HARKINS: No, because after the Khanh - I knew Nes, but I'm not sure of the reason why [he was relieved]. Lodge had so many likes and dislikes. As I say, he was a loner. He liked to do everything by himself and if his deputy would do something, and he might be away or have a different interpretation, it was up to Lodge to tell them, "I can't work with this man. Have him relieved'."

But after - well, [William] Westmoreland came out as my deputy in January and he'd been there two days or three days when Khanh took over and said, "What do we do now?" I said, "Nothing. You just sit and wait and see what happens." Then I knew Khanh very well, and Lodge had to call me and say, "Who is General Khanh?" He had never met him, and yet he was a corps commander up in Hue. I told him he was probably the best general in the Vietnamese Army, I mean as far as the military was concerned. So when he took over, Lodge didn't know him very well, and when we went out on trips, Khanh would take me along with him and, as I say, Lodge would be in the second seat of the second helicopter.

The first Sunday after he took over, we met him at the airport at six o'clock in the morning for breakfast, and then we went out and got some helicopters and flew about fifteen miles north over Saigon and landed, and there was an artillery battery there, four guns. He went up and I said, "What are you going to do?" They were all pointing north, and he said, "I'm going to shoot to the North." So he went up and I stayed in back because it was his day, and he had the whole press corps there; there must have been about thirty of them, photographers and all taking pictures of him. And he'd turn around and say, "Where's General Harkins?" The press looked around, and I said, "I'm right here. I'm back here." He said, "Come up here." And Khanh put his arm around me and turned to the press and said, "I just want to tell you that General Harkins is not my boss, but he's the best friend Vietnam has, and I just want you to publish that." And they never did.

Q: They never did? What did Lodge make of a statement like that, do you suppose?

HARKINS: He wasn't there. He wasn't asked to go.

Q: Did you say that you knew that Khanh was going to make a coup?

HARKINS: Yes, he told me.

Q: Does this put you in a kind of predicament?

HARKINS: He put it this way, when I went up to see him and he had this beard which is a funny little goatee - they don't grow [them] very much.

Q: I think they grow [them] but only when they're old and respected, don't they?

HARKINS: He said, "I'm not going to shave this off until I've taken over." And I just told him, I said, "Oh, General Khanh, we don't want another coup." So about two days [later] he sent his American adviser, who was a Colonel Wilson - I think his name was Wilson - down to see me.

Q: Jasper Wilson.

HARKINS: Jasper. And he said that Khanh was going to come down to this corps commanders' meeting in Saigon, but he wasn't going to stay in the house with the other generals. He was going to stay with me in my quarters, Wilson's quarters. And he says he has a friend, a parachute battalion commander in Saigon, and I think they had five companies in the battalion, and he put a company around each of the five leading generals - Minh's house, Don's house, [Le Van] Kim's house, and [Ton That] Dinh's house, or whoever they were then, Din's, I think. And when they found the troops there, they said, "What's this?" They said, "We understand there's going to be a coup and we're to protect you." So at four o'clock in the morning they went in and arrested the generals.

Q: These are the generals that became known as the Dalat generals, I think.

HARKINS: Yes, they took them out to the airport and met Khanh, and he said, "I'm the commander now." And then they were sent to Dalat, I think.

Q: Does this put you in a rather peculiar position when you know a coup is coming and you're supposed to be the adviser to the senior military man? I told them back in Washington that it was coming up, and I said, "I've already got this word." And they didn't do anything about it.

HARKINS: They didn't.

Q: No. They took over.

HARKINS: Well, as the adviser to the head of government, and you know that he's about to get knocked out of that chair, doesn't that put you rather in a compromised position if you know that this is coming? Well, it's hard to figure those things out, because I knew that Don had told me that they were going to get rid of Diem, but I didn't go up and tell Diem, and I knew that Khanh was going to do something. I wasn't quite sure how he was going to do it, and I didn't go up and tell Big Minh. They weren't getting along anyway - the generals - so maybe it was a change for the better. I thought it was.

Q: You thought it was a change for the better with Khanh?

HARKINS: Yes, I did. Because one man was running things then, and he was strong enough to make decisions.

But I left and they had a meeting in June in Hawaii and I wasn't invited to go, so I knew something was up. Well, I was sixty then, anyway, and I had to retire that year, and that

was a good way to get me out, to say that I was going to retire. Westmoreland went with Lodge. I didn't go. So I don't know what happened. But I was sort of depressed at that, and I knew my days were short, that Westy was going to take over. I made arrangements to come home by a slow boat and I was told that I had to fly home.

Q: Let me ask you about a couple of things -

HARKINS: The President wanted to see me.

Q: Yes, I think I sent you a copy of that document. Now, McNamara visited again in March and made a very well-publicized trip, I think, around the country with Khanh, with his arm around Khanh and saying -

HARKINS: And Taylor, too. They said the President told them to have their hands holding his hand up in the air, that we are behind him.

Q: And he was chanting a slogan, too, as I recall, and he got it wrong. Do you remember that?

HARKINS: What?

Q: He was chanting a slogan in Vietnamese, as I recall, and he got the inflection wrong, and everybody laughed at him. I've heard this story. Tran Van Don tells this story. He said the phrase was "Vietnam Muon Nam," but he got the inflection wrong. It's supposed to mean "Vietnam a thousand years," but the way he inflected it, it came out "Vietnam go to sleep." (Laughter)

HARKINS: Yes, you had to be careful in Vietnamese. I know my wife started to take it up and studied Vietnamese, and we went to dinner one night with [Nguyen Dinh] Thuan, who was the secretary of defense at that time. He turned to her and said, "I understand you're taking Vietnamese." And she said, "Oh, I've only had three lessons. I find it very hard." And he said, "Well, say something." And she said something that she thought was "How do you do" and he laughed like hell. She said, "Why are you laughing?" And he said, "Would you say that again?" So she did, and he said, "Well, what are you saying?" She said, "How do you do?" And he said, "No, you're saying 'Hello, dearie.'" So she quit. (Laughter) She decided she wasn't going to get in trouble anymore.

Q: How often during that spring when obviously the military situation was beginning to get bad, you said that the Viet Cong battalions were beginning to be encountered pretty regularly, and they were beginning to chew up some South Vietnamese battalions. Was the subject of introducing American troops beginning to be discussed at this time?

HARKINS: No, not while I was there. No.

Q: Not yet. Not even as a contingency?

HARKINS: No.

Q: At some point, and I haven't determined exactly when, Khanh began to talk - at least privately, later publicly, but at least privately - about extending the war in some way or other, marching north or moving north. Did he talk to you about this?

HARKINS: No, but I think that was his line of chatter when I went out that Sunday after he'd taken over, and he said, "We're going to carry the war to the North." Well, shooting four guns off fifteen miles north of Saigon wasn't going to carry the -

Q: Not very far north, was it? Well, what did he mean, do you suppose? What did he have in mind?

HARKINS: I think he probably wanted to go up and I think he probably had an idea that he'd probably take his army and move right north across the Seventeenth Parallel.

Q: Well, did you give him any advice on that score?

HARKINS: No, I didn't, because we weren't for it, I don't think, at that time and it would take a lot of backing, a lot of supplies and a lot of things we didn't have.

Q: Now, the media have come up a couple of times. Some reporters' names have come up, and I wanted to ask you a few questions on that score. Can you describe how your relations with the media evolved during your tour? How did they start out? How did they end up?

HARKINS: Well, they started out fine, and they ended up very poorly. I think because of the way they reported things like Halberstam reporting things that just weren't true.

Q: Can you give me examples of that?

HARKINS: Well, I think that his reporting that the bonzes were killed and the raids on the pagodas, that wasn't true. I think the Catholic battalions fighting Buddhist battalions, I don't think that was true. I mean, within the Vietnamese Army. Of course they were fighting Buddhist battalions, but there weren't Catholic battalions fighting Buddhist battalions within the [Vietnamese Army]. And then four or five other little things that he took up to the press. As I say, he handed out mimeographs and sort of had the press eating out of his hand. And I was walking along with him one day and I said, "What's the matter? I know you're Jewish, I know Diem is Catholic," and I said, "Are you letting that bother your reporting?" And he turned to me and said, "How do you know I'm a Jew?" Well, I wasn't sure of it at the time, but then after he left and was relieved from that - as a matter of fact, the New York Times people came over and they relieved Halberstam. They sent him over to Poland, and he tried to do the same thing in Poland, and Poland kicked him out within thirty days. He should have been kicked out of Vietnam in the beginning, but the Times, I don't know -

Q: I know one of the big stories that he broke was one that you've mentioned about the

story of Ap Bac, the battle of Ap Bac.

HARKINS: How we got slaughtered there. Well, they said, "What's happened down at Ap Bac?" And I said, "Well, nothing. They got defeated, the village troops got defeated, but we sent this parachute battalion down. We lost the city for a day and then we took it back." I said, "That's war. We went in and took the whole thing right back." So I said, "There's nothing wrong with that. I mean, they had the courage to go in there, and win it back."

Q: Of course he reported it as a defeat for government forces.

HARKINS: It was in the beginning, I mean, they were just driven out of town. But they were the province forces; they weren't the regular army at that time. I think there were the village forces and the province forces.

Q: Now, he cites as one of his principal sources on this story, an American adviser who was down there, I think with the Seventh Division under General Van Thanh Cao. Did you have a lot of trouble with that sort of thing, with advisers talking to the press?

HARKINS: Just one.

Q: Just one.

HARKINS: Just that particular one. He was always outspoken. And when he was down there when I wanted Cao to go out and see what was going on, he said, "Well, I can't. Your adviser has taken my plane and he's flying around."

Q: Oh, boy. This was John Paul Vann we're talking about, right?

HARKINS: Yes. Then he went back there and got killed over there.

Q: Yes, as a civilian, I guess.

HARKINS: Yes. I don't know what happened to him.

Q: He was killed in a helicopter crash.

HARKINS: Was he?

Q: Yes. Now, Halberstam plays up Colonel Vann as a superb field adviser and so on and so on. What is your version of that story?

HARKINS: Well, I told him one time I didn't know whether to promote him or demote him. I said, "Sometimes you're so fine and sometimes you're just too outspoken." And I said, "That doesn't help me in my job when you're..." And I think he did talk to Halberstam quite a bit. But he was a very opinionated sort of a man. Quick-tempered.

Q: Was he good?

HARKINS: I think in advising the military, yes, he did very well. But then some of them tried to be province chief and you couldn't do that. You had to let the Vietnamese be the province chiefs.

Q: Now, his boss, Vann's immediate boss, as my information has it, was a man named Daniel Boone Porter, who was the adviser to the IV Corps colander, I guess. He was a full colonel. Do you remember a Colonel Porter? Daniel Boone Porter was his full name. He lives down the road down at Belton, I believe. A Texas A&M graduate.

HARKINS: I probably knew him but I don't pin the name down.

Q: Well it's not that important. How was Ambassador Lodge's relations with the press?

HARKINS: Oh, I think he got along fine with them. He had them to his house for breakfast and things like that. I'd invite the press - not all of them at a time - but if we had some dignitary there and we'd give a dinner party, I'd invite one or two of the press to be there. I got along with them very well until they started reporting things that weren't true. I know one Saturday they had a report come out over the wire and somebody had said, "'Have you seen this report by this reporter just sent'" - and I forget which one it was, AP or UP or something - "that ten thousand troops have invaded Pleiku? What do you know about that?" And I said, "Well, I don't know anything about it. I can't believe ten thousand troops are going to invade without me knowing it." So I immediately got on the phone to Pleiku and I put out a refutation of that that afternoon because I talked to not only the province chief, I mean my adviser in that province, the corps, and he said, "No, that isn't true at all. We're still here and have our patrols out at the border." So I denied it, and the press room called me up and said, "Why did you deny that?" I said, "Because it isn't true."

Q: That would have been a little unusual for the VC to put ten thousand troops together, wouldn't it?

HARKINS: I guess they were North Vietnamese coming in. I think we've pretty well covered the waterfront.

Q: Now, we've mentioned a couple of reporters. We've mentioned Halberstam several times, Neil Sheehan I suppose was there.

HARKINS: Yes, he was there. I don't remember their names.

Q: Do you remember any good ones? Any that struck you as particularly well-versed, objective, good reporters.

HARKINS: What was the girl's name?

Q: Marguerite Higgins, perhaps?

HARKINS: ...Marguerite Higgins. She was very good.

Q: Was [Jim] Lucas there when you were there?

HARKINS: Yes, Lucas was there. I've seen him on TV many times, and I've met him someplace out in the West Coast, I believe, he was out there. He was a go-getter, I mean, he was down there at the palace running along the walls as soon as - when they overthrew Diem.

Q: Now, I believe you said you did not attend that last Honolulu conference in June, right?

HARKINS: No, I did not.

Q: Now, you were presented the Distinguished Service Medal later that month, June 24, I think. Can you give me any of the details of that? Anything that stands out in your mind about that visit?

HARKINS: To Washington?

Q: Yes.

HARKINS: Oh, I was told that the President wanted to see me, and he wanted to present me with this medal, the Distinguished Service Medal. And I said, "That's very fine." Then they wanted to have a review for me at Fort Myer. And I said, "Oh, tell them I don't need the review. _____ the troops." But they insisted, so I said, "All right." So I made a farewell, short talk there. And Mr. McNamara had a dinner for me and the President was there. I talked to him and he said, "I want to see you in the office," and I said, "Let me know." So the next day I called to make an appointment with him to see him, and they said, "Well, he's busy. He's out of town now for the next three weeks and getting ready to run his campaign." Well, I found he'd gone down to Texas for a while, and I never did get to see him.

Q: You never did get to see him then?

HARKINS: Never did see him. They didn't want me to see him.

Q: General Harkins, did you have a debriefing to go through when you came back to the United States?

HARKINS: They called it a debriefing, but I did the briefing, it seems to me. I went up to see Congress. I talked to Mr. [Clement J.] Zablocki, is it?

Q: Yes.

HARKINS: And I talked to his committee, and I never did get to see the President, and talk

to him. And of course I talked to Mr. McNamara and Secretary Rusk, but it was me doing the talking rather than a debriefing, as such. I don't know what they would call a debriefing.

Q: Was it a sort of end-of-tour summary?

HARKINS: Yes.

Q: Can you recall the kind of picture you tried to present to Mr. Rusk and Mr. McNamara?

HARKINS: Well, at that time, I thought Khanh was doing pretty well and I thought he'd bring the whole thing together, but apparently when General Taylor went out there as ambassador -

Q: Which was just about this time, wasn't it?

HARKINS: Yes. As a matter of fact, I had an office in the Pentagon, which was just in case I wanted to do anything or see anybody. I didn't. I wasn't going to write a book about it then but I did have some notes and they told me I was going to have this review and I wrote a little speech for that, that was just a one-page affair. But Mr. - the press man for Mr. McNamara - I can't think of his name right now.

Q: [Arthur] Sylvester?

HARKINS: Sylvester. He came over to see me, and when I left Saigon, I said, "You know it's a funny thing." Khanh had a dinner for me and invited Ambassador Lodge, and that was in 1964. And I'd get up and thank Khanh and made a few remarks. I said, "It's an odd thing to me that here we are in the middle of a war over here, and the commander's being sent home when here we are in the middle of an election back in the United States and, Mr. Ambassador, you're staying here. You should be running for president." He looked at me, sort of shocked, and I got home, was in this office [when] Mr. Sylvester came [and he said], "You know, Mr. Lodge is home now." I said, "No." He said, "Yes, he only stayed a week after you did."

Q: Oh, my.

HARKINS: And he said, "We're going to send a new ambassador."

Q: You had no intimation that Lodge was leaving whatsoever?

HARKINS: No, not at all. Not at all. I was surprised. He said, "We're going to send a new ambassador," and he said, "Do you know who he is?" I said, "Yes, I can guess." He said, "Who? Nobody knows." I said, "General Taylor." He looked at me, and he said, "How did you know that?" I said, "It was just logical." (Laughter) So then they said, well, he's the one. So he went out there.

Q: Why did you think it was Taylor, and what was your reaction? How did you feel about

that?

HARKINS: I don't know. I thought he'd probably do fine, because he knew so much about Vietnam. But then he and Khanh didn't hit it off at all.

Q: Do you have any insight into why that was?

HARKINS: No.

Q: Have you talked to General Taylor since that time?

HARKINS: Yes. I've talked to him, but he just didn't get along with Khanh. I don't recall what he said, but he said, no, he wasn't the man as far as he was concerned.

Q: Did you have any occasion to consult or advise about Vietnam?

HARKINS: No. No. When I came back, and as I say I met myself coming home giving talks around town to the Rotary and the Kiwanis and the schools and the churches and things like that, women's clubs, engineering clubs. I really was on the soapbox four or five times a week. Then everything turned around [against] Vietnam, I mean the attitude of the country here turned against it.

Q: When would you time that more or less? Was there a specific time? Would you say that it was at Tet in 1968 or was it before then?

HARKINS: I think it was right before then, because all the things you get from the press and the TV and everything were horror stories.

Q: Right.

HARKINS: And the bloody war. It was really gruesome as a matter of fact, and that turned the attitude of the people and in particular the youth who didn't want to go over there and get into that mess. Then people stopped asking me to speak because the war - because we went over there to help a country stop communism and we were asked to go over there. We didn't go over there on our own. We were just asked as defense if we would help, and we did. Like we've done for so many other countries. But it didn't sit right with the American people, and I just stopped talking about Vietnam because I only had the one story.

Q: Looking back now - and I'm sure you have many times - what seemed to you to be the significant personalities, the significant turning points or changes in policy? Were there any crucial points when the thing could have turned around and wasn't?

HARKINS: I think the first upsetting thing was a visit by Senator [Mike] Mansfield around Christmas in - what was it, 1962?

Q: I think that's right.

HARKINS: He came over, and he didn't leave Saigon. I was there, so - and he had been there once before in 1954 or 1955, and he talked to Diem. Now, when you talk to Diem you've got to listen an awful lot.

Q: That's my information, too, yes.

HARKINS: And Mansfield liked to talk, and this first visit he had was for about four hours. And he couldn't get a word in edgewise, I mean, Diem did all the talking. Well, on this visit, the second one, he came back and he didn't leave Saigon. He went to see the President, Diem, and there was a six-hour meeting. I wasn't with him. I don't think the Ambassador was with him. So he came back and reported to the President there had been no change in seven years from his visit in 1954 to this visit he made then. And I don't think he meant it the way it sounded. I think he meant it that he didn't get a word in edgewise. But the changes that had gone on in Vietnam were really terrific: the schools, the villages, the roads, the airfields. Oh, there were tremendous changes, the harvest, the crops, and all those things. Really, the five-year plan was really going, but the way Mansfield put it, there'd been no change in six years. And it really was the beginning of "we've got to have new leadership."

Of course, then the Harriman-Hilsman thing [happened] in August and trying to overthrow the government when the message came to Lodge, and Lodge showed it to me and he sent Conein over and Big Minh wouldn't see Conein. Then Lodge went back to Harriman and Hilsman with this message saying that they wouldn't accept it unless there was somebody in authority. Then the word came for me to do it. Well, I had got nothing from the Defense Department; these were all State Department messages. So I put a flash on the wire for General Taylor saying, "I have been told to go to see the generals to overthrow Diem." I said, "This is from the State Department. I have no advice from the military, Defense." Taylor was playing tennis at the country club, McNamara was out of town, the President was down in Hyannis Port, and none of them knew the telegram had come. President Kennedy said, "Who is running this country?" And he had a meeting at nine o'clock from them on Vietnam and what was going on out there, and that was another very upsetting thing.

Q: Well, now, I've heard versions of that story which say that Hilsman did get the telegram cleared before it went out.

HARKINS: He did not. He got it cleared by [Michael] Forrestal, and he had it cleared by Harriman. But Hilsman didn't last long after that, you know.

Q: I think he left in February of 1964.

HARKINS: Well, I think it was sooner than that, wasn't it?

Q: No, he stayed on for the first couple of months of the Johnson Administration and left in February of 1964, although I think the decision was made before that time.

HARKINS: Well, he was a West Pointer - class of 1941, I think - and when he first came out to visit me, he said he knew all about guerrilla warfare. He had been in Burma, I think, during his career. And he said, "The only one I have to see - Mr. Kennedy, the President, said, 'I want you to see Harkins and talk to Harkins, and see how things are going.'" So that's really the only time I met him personally.

Q: What were your impressions?

HARKINS: Well, I didn't know his background, but I don't think he was the expert he said he was on guerrilla warfare.

End of interview