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INTERVIEW

Q: Mr. Nes, may we begin by simply saying that the account in David Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest of your assignment to Vietnam and so on is accurate, according to your recollection, is that right?

NES: Yes, it is. It's quite brief and written in his usual amusing style, but I would say that it gives the picture as it was.

Q: Very well, sir. Well, let us simply go on from there. Would you describe what kind of preparation, briefing, the State Department provided for you before you left?

NES: Perhaps I should preface this by saying that I was in London as the American diplomatic representative at the Imperial Defense College when a telephone call came through from the State Department asking me to return immediately to discuss a new assignment. I was not told what they had in mind. This was in December [1963]. The Imperial Defense College had not concluded its year and I was scheduled to make a brief address and give a paper at the conclusion. I did return to Washington and then ensued

the various meetings incident to my assignment described by Mr. Halberstam.

However, during that time I got no briefing whatsoever on the substance of the situation in Vietnam, but considerable advice and instructions as to the administrative side of things there. I think everyone concerned, from the President on down, realized that administration and the executive side of an ambassador's job in heading up a mission was not Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge's strong forte. And they thought if they sent out a deputy who was experienced as a deputy, that he could somehow pull together the country team operations, which are normally the foundation of coordinating the responsibilities of all the various government agencies in a country. They thought that I could do this more or less with Ambassador Lodge's approval but with' out his active participation, because he had made it quite clear that he had no intention of meeting with the heads of agencies there on a regular basis. He just didn't operate that way. So that my briefing was devoted almost exclusively to the administrative side of things in Saigon and not to the substance.

Now after these interviews in Washington, I was permitted to return to London and wind up my personal affairs prior to going out to Saigon in January. During those very few days I had access to British intelligence reports on the background and life particularly of Ho Chi Minh, which they in turn had gotten from the French. So I was able to learn something of the background of the communist movement in Indochina, of the infrastructure which had been built there, and also of the very extensive control of the movement from Hanoi. This all came from British and French intelligence; I got nothing from my own government at all.

In December at about this time, the NATO council had its annual meeting, and I got a wire from the department asking me to meet Defense Secretary [Robert] McNamara in Paris and fly out on his visit to Saigon. They thought this would provide an adequate briefing. Well, I did go over to Paris and I met with Secretary of Defense McNamara and we boarded his private plane, which was I think the tanker version of a Boeing 707. It had no windows. We started our take-off from Orly, which halfway down the runway was I think you call it aborted, with a terrible screech of tires and quite a lot of gaffuffle. The pilot had gotten the plane off the runway on the side and asked us to evacuate immediately since there was a danger of fire. The cause of this was apparently, through the mist and fog another air transport plane was sitting across the runway and we had not been properly cleared. We had to get another plane, of course, and flew on to Saigon. I was immensely impressed by the fact that the Defense Secretary spent almost the whole trip with immense briefing books.

But when we got to Saigon and began our meetings with the country team members there - Defense, CIA, the embassy and so forth - I was somewhat disheartened by the fact that almost a half an hour of conversation was devoted as to whether the artillery batteries of the Vietnamese Army should be equipped with six or four howitzers. I somehow thought that this wasn't a subject of sufficient importance to take up the time of the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and so on.

But just to state this in brief, the State Department briefed me on the administrative problems but did not brief me on the substance of the Vietnam situation. Whatever I got, I got from the British and French in London.

Q: It seems a little strange that you didn't get any more than that. Would you ascribe this to a belief that you don't need to know much about the country to administer the internal affairs of an embassy?

NES: I think a lot of it was there just wasn't time. I flew back to London. I was in Washington two days, including my visit with the President. I flew back to London again, went over to Paris, went out to Saigon, returned to London, finished my affairs and then flew out to Saigon. And there was never more than a day or two in any one place; it was one of those very hectic periods.

Q: Was there a sense of emergency about your going?

NES: Always a sense of emergency with anyone that was assigned out there. I think there was some sort of a feeling in the top of the State Department and the White House that the more rank you sent and the more publicity you gave to it, the better off you'd be as far as your overall effort was concerned.

Q: Well, would you describe your initial impressions of the personnel, the programs and so on?

NES: In Saigon? I noticed the question here has to do somewhat with the morale of the American community. I thought the mission when I arrived was very well staffed. I thought the morale was good. I thought most people believed in the cause; they believed that we should do what we could to prevent South Vietnam from falling under the domination of the North. There was a great deal of disagreement as to how this could be done or whether it could be done. Those who knew the country well and knew the history of Vietnam, I think, had grave doubts as to whether an insurgency that was so well imbedded, that had been put in place for more than twenty or thirty years [could be successfully confronted]. The French, who knew the country far better than we [did], couldn't cope and finally had to leave. [There was doubt] whether this type of insurgency which received its direction, its logistical support, its morale, everything, from the North and from China, could ever be handled on a counterinsurgency basis. I think there was a lot of disagreement within the mission on this.

The military, I thought, had the best that we could send out there. I think in dealing with a situation which was so largely political they were somewhat over their heads. I felt that had they been faced with the Russians on the plains of Germany they'd have given a very good account of themselves, but this was not World War II and it was not the preparations for World War III in Eastern and Western Europe.

Q: Could you define in any way who took what side on these issues? Were there splits within agencies, for example? Was CIA more pessimistic than AID or anything of that

nature?

NES: As I recall, the greatest degree of realism as to what we faced in Vietnam was evident in the CIA. I knew Mr. [John] McCone very well, who headed the agency. I knew [William] Colby quite well. And I think they felt pretty much as I did, that counterinsurgency wasn't going to succeed and that either we had to make a far greater military effort and occupy North Vietnam, or we'd better find some way to extricate ourselves.

AID, I think, was probably more optimistic and felt that somehow through their programs we could win the minds and the hearts of the people, the great phrase at that time. The military were doing the job within the limitations that were levied upon them by Washington. I think that there was division there between officers who served largely in the provinces, who were in touch with the deficiencies of the South Vietnamese forces, who knew better the strengths of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. I'd say at the level of lieutenant colonel and major, there was considerable realism as to the problems that we faced. Not so much with the senior officers.

Q: Could you ascribe that to anything?

NES: I think just familiarity. I think that those who were actually in the provinces and trying to advise, equip and train the Vietnamese forces were much closer to the situation than those in MACV.

Q: But surely they reported their doubts.

NES: I think they did. I think they did. But there is always an inhibition in reporting to superiors the things they don't want to hear and this has gone back to the days of the Greeks and the Romans.
Q: Yes. All right, sir. I didn't want to ask-

NES: Mr. [John] Richardson had been relieved as chief of station I believe in October [1963]. He was succeeded by [Peer] de Silva.

Q: There was a gap though, there was about a three-month gap, and I don't know who was in charge in the interim and I thought you might-

NES: I can't remember either. I remember de Silva very well.

Q: He came in December.

NES: Right.

Q: Just about the time that you did.

NES: Right. Because he, of course, was involved in the bombing of the embassy and had

some glass in an eye and so forth, and I saw him subsequently. But I don't recall who was in that gap at all.

Q: Had Ambassador [Frederick] Nolting left any kind of legacy, any lingering imprint on the embassy or its operations?

NES: Not really. I think he and his deputy, Bill Trueheart, who you may have already interviewed, I don't know - were quite close. As you know, I think Ambassador Nolting felt that our opposition to [Ngo Dinh] Diem, which eventually probably led to the coup which overthrew him and to his death, was a mistake. It deprived the country of the only sort of recognizable control over the province chiefs and the security apparatus that existed, and once this went, disintegrated, the generals that took over in succession after that never were quite able to pull it together again. Whether he was right or wrong in that, I'm just not qualified to say, but I know that he felt this strongly, and this is probably in the record.

Q: Did you talk to Ambassador Trueheart?

NES: Bill Trueheart? Before he left?

Q: Yes. What was his state of mind? I've heard reports that he was nearing exhaustion.

NES: Well, I didn't get that feeling. I thought he was in full possession of everything when he left. He certainly was clever enough to leave his dog with me to ship back. I thought Bill was a good officer and had just run into the same buzz saw that I did and everybody else did eventually out there.

Q: How did Ambassador Lodge impress you initially in his performance of duty?

NES: Well, you know, I had known him briefly in that Libyan experience and also I knew him when he was in New York. Because during his tenure as our head of the U.N. Mission there, I went up on various occasions to handle issues that came up regarding the Far East at that time, Korea and Japan. I got to know him then and saw him almost daily. He certainly was a very impressive and personable man. I think his relationship with the top people at the United Nations when he was there and with the top people in Vietnam, particularly the Vietnamese government, were excellent. His French was good. I think he was a good diplomat. As I've mentioned before, as an executive he was poor; he had no flair for administration, he hated it. I think he was in some ways a prima donna, but very often that's necessary and an advantage. I don't know what sort of a person he'd have been in a top political job, whether as president or vice president, but he might have been pretty good.
There are stories about his working habits, his hours and so forth, that circulate.

Q: Can you, should I say, confirm or deny-?

NES: Well, we come to another question here. From what vantage point did you observe

the [Nguyen] Khanh coup of late January 1964? I think that illustrates things pretty well.

Q: All right, we'll discuss it in that context.

NES: The military in the provinces, the advisers at the provincial level, had begun to sense that something was afoot and that generals were thinking of moving in and replacing the government which succeeded Diem. And these reports, of course, came through the CIA and into the embassy. So during the afternoon of the coup, when it became apparent that this was a distinct possibility, we had sort of a crisis center organized. I was the deputy; I was the head of it. The Ambassador was fully aware of this, but he went home as usual and he gave me strict instructions that coup or no coup, he wasn't to be disturbed until the next morning. So the coup went off and we got the telegrams off to Washington as best we could during the night. I went over after he had finished breakfast and briefed him on the situation.

But he followed a fairly relaxed daily regime, which I personally think may be a good idea. I think these ambassadors that get into the office before anyone has had a chance to pull things together and read the traffic out of Washington and digest it, and stay there until all hours of the night and exhaust everybody really aren't doing the mission or their staff that much good. I think you can run a mission or I think you can run any job, as President Eisenhower certainly demonstrated with the presidency, with a pretty relaxed time schedule - if you trust your staff and if you turn things over to them and if you delegate authority.

So I would never take exception to Ambassador Lodge's work habits per se, because had I ever reached that position, I might not have gone as far as he did, but I certainly would have had a game of golf once a week and I wouldn't have been in the office till ten o'clock every night. So I think you can do it. It was sort of a joke around that he'd leave the office and go to the Club Sportif and swim in the afternoons, then he'd take a nap and then he'd go home and go to bed at night. He'd never be disturbed until eight in the morning and so forth. These are all true, but I don't think it's really too relevant as to whether he did a job or not.

Q: It may account for why he's still as vigorous as he is at eighty years.

NES: It probably does. It probably does.

Q: It has become a cliche that Americans failed to understand the nature of the war. Can you recall how we perceived the nature of the war at that juncture?

This is a pretty big question. My impression is that at the policy level we perceived it as a communist effort on the part of China and the Soviet Union, through the regime of Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam, to absorb another area of Southeast Asia through the use of so-called insurgency. [I also think] that this was more or less a demonstration project for them to prove they could do it without involving the crossing of frontiers, as they did in Korea, and which of course brought immediate U.S. reaction in the form of conventional

warfare in South Korea. They thought that they could do it through propaganda and through an insurgency effort indigenous to the country that they happened to be interested in, whether it was South Vietnam, whether in the future it would be Cambodia or Laos or what have you.

We therefore visualized this demonstration as a test of American ability to deal with it through counterinsurgency. As you may remember, we established a counterinsurgency school in Washington, which incidentally I was asked to investigate and report on after I returned from Vietnam, and that was an interesting sidelight experience. [The thought was] that you countered an insurgency by using the indigenous forces, using Americans to train, [providing] equipment, through imaginative propaganda, through AID efforts that would benefit the people of the area, in this case South Vietnam, and so forth [and also] that this operation in South Vietnam was the real test of will between the communist side, which was trying to win areas through insurgency, and the American side, which was trying to prevent it through counterinsurgency. And I think that many people at the policy level looked at it in these terms.

Q: Did you look at it in those terms?

NES: Not after I'd been there for about a month.

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

NES: Two things. Reading the life of Ho Chi Minh, including the fact that he was a pastry cook for a top restaurant in London at one time.

Reading of his success in establishing this massive infrastructure in the South. Reading the history of French involvement and the problems they went into and their final demise after Dien Bien Phu. Seeing on the ground that you'd cut off a tentacle in one province and it would spread in another province, that the Viet Cong were very adept and skillful in using terrorism not as a sword but as a rapier. That to take out a village chief in the night and disembowel him and hang him up in a village square in the morning was a very effective means of seeing to it that the people in that village and the surrounding countryside did not support the government. This was widespread throughout Vietnam, as you know. All of these things put together convinced me by as early as April after I'd only been there a few months, that continuing the type of program that we were putting so much stock in just wasn't going to succeed.

Q: Did that bring you into conflict with anyone else on the country team?

NES: Not so much on the country team as in Washington, I think. You've seen the letters I wrote to Bill Sullivan and one or two telegrams I sent in when I was charge d'affaires while Lodge was away. I think in the State Department and the White House they began to feel as early as April or May that perhaps Nes wasn't quite on their team, and I think maybe you can find more of that evidence in the [LBJ] Library in Austin.

Q: It's very possible.

NES: But unfortunately, I've always been very frank and I've always put whatever I felt was right above a career. I think I was helped by the fact that, together, Mrs. Nes and I are financially independent, so I could quit the State Department at any time I wanted or be booted out, it would make absolutely no difference at all. But with respect to Vietnam and later the Middle East, I just felt very strongly that we were on the wrong track and said so, and this is not very popular.

Q: I believe it's also Halberstam who intimates in one place that this got you on the wrong side of the military in particular. Do you recall anything of that nature?

NES: Yes, I think the thing that got me on the wrong side of the military was the fact that I felt our effort to organize, equip and train the South Vietnamese forces on a conventional war basis at that time was not meeting the situation that we had on the ground. That to build up this tremendous force built on three corps or four corps, I forget, maybe it was four corps, and divisions and brigades and regiments and so forth, was really fine in meeting a situation such as we'd had in Korea, when you had a massive invasion from the North. But at that time there was no evidence that North Vietnam planned to introduce division strength units into the South, which of course they did later after we signed the peace accords. But this type of structure and training and equipment just wasn't the best thing as far as meeting the insurgency was concerned. I think you'll see that in some of the memoranda I wrote both to Lodge and subsequently to Senator [J. William] Fulbright when I got home. I think anyone that takes exception to the way the military are doing things is apt to run into some difficulties. And yet General [William] Westmoreland and I remained good friends throughout, and I see him now in Charleston, play golf with him.

Q: Were there special problems involving Cambodia at this time? I seem to recall that you got some special responsibilities involving South Vietnam's relationship to Cambodia. Would you reiterate what you just told me then regarding this cable of February 18 in which you noted that external developments would probably be more important than the counterinsurgency effort in determining the outcome of the struggle?

NES: What I had in mind at the time was the degree to which, first of all, North Vietnam would continue and increase its involvement in the South, the extent to which they would be bankrolled and supported by China and the Soviet Union, the extent to which we could obtain the cooperation and support of our principal allies in the area, Australia and New Zealand and so forth, the extent to which we could obtain like cooperation from our Western European allies, in particular France, where De Gaulle seemed to have been thwarting our efforts through his proposals for neutralization. These were the external factors I was thinking of.

Q: How important was De Gaulle's neutralization campaign, if we can call it that? What difference did it make within the South?

NES: I think that many South Vietnamese intellectuals who were French-spoken and French-educated, who were a little bit on the fence as far as the entire situation in the South was concerned, perhaps looked on neutralization as a means of getting the communist influence out of the country, at the same time perhaps bringing back a closer relationship with France, which they looked on with considerable nostalgia.

Q: I see.

NES: And I think it was this group that were greatly influenced.

Q: Were these the people that were called the attentistes?

NES: That's correct, that's correct. They were still out in full force every day at the Club Sportif in Saigon, swimming and playing tennis, running their plantations, paying a little hush money to the Viet Cong.

Q: I see. One issue that was being discussed at this time, I believe, was whether or not American dependents should be evacuated. Did this have any connection with the beginning of clandestine operations against the North called 34-A Operations?

NES: I don't think they were really connected. The possibility or the desirability of evacuating dependents was a lively subject from the time of my arrival there. I think a decision was inhibited by the fact that this would demonstrate to the South Vietnamese government a certain lack of confidence in their ability to handle the situation. The discussion of the issue became much more lively after several guerrilla attacks on American installations in Saigon itself. As I recall, there was one attack on a movie theater where Americans were attending, on a baseball field and so forth. After that the departure of dependents was, during my tenure at least, put on strictly a voluntary basis and many of the wives and children did leave and many did not. Most of the senior families were still there. General Westmoreland's family was there, Mrs. Lodge was there, my family was there and so forth. But it was a very live subject. I have an idea that probably Ambassador Lodge felt that the risks to American lives were really not sufficient to undergo the lack of confidence which this would have engendered throughout the country,

Q: Were these clandestine operations also being discussed at this time? Were you involved in that at all?

NES: 34-A?

Q: Yes.

NES: Well, involved to an extent that we talked about a tit for tat operation type of thing. And of course we did have clandestine operations going along the coast with boats going in and so forth. But they were not nearly as extensive during my tenure as of course they became later.

Q: I believe we were also sending penetration agents over the North, were we not?

NES: We were, yes.

Q: Air drops. Yes?

NES:
Yes.

Q: Do you have any insight into how successful those were?

NES:
No, I don't. None at all.

Q: Can we talk about the press a little bit? That was a very lively topic, too, I think.
NES: I'd like to go to the next to the last question first-

Q: All right.

NES: The policy in the embassy was that no one, repeat no one, talk to the press except Ambassador Lodge.

Q: In any connection whatever?

NES: Any connection. And so our public affairs officer, who I believe at that time was Barry Zorthian-

Q: He would have just been a brand-new arrival, wouldn't he?

NES: A brand-new arrival. He was left a little in limbo as far as that was concerned. Now, he did have the totality of his public relations campaign throughout Vietnam, the usual USIA operations and so forth, but Ambassador Lodge wanted to handle the press himself. Now, there were the military press briefings I think every day on what was going on in the provinces and so forth, but they were limited entirely to the military statistical approach to that sort of thing, as you remember.

Q: Which was referred to as the five o'clock follies even then.

NES: That's right. That's right.

Q: So the press policy was rather restrictive?

NES: Very restrictive. I had no contact with the press whatsoever.

Q: I see. Then you can't even comment on how the press regarded the press policy.

NES: I can't, I'm afraid.

Q: How did the press like Ambassador Lodge?

NES: I think they liked him. I think they liked him. He was quite adept at handling the press and the other media representatives. He was very able in giving the impression that they were receiving information when in effect they weren't getting anything. (Laughter) Which is pretty good. I think he got along fine with the press, as far as I know. Now what they may have said on the side, I have no idea, because I had no contact with them at all.

Q: I see. There was a policy change, I think it was in June of 1964, which reversed that situation, that gave Barry Zorthian real responsibility for dealing with the press, and apparently Ambassador Lodge either suggested it or certainly did go along with it, and it seems a rather strange flip-flop. Do you have any insight into that?

NES: Well, if it took place in June, it was on the eve of Ambassador Lodge's departure. So it may have been stimulated by the fact that he was leaving and no longer had any particular interest in personally handling the press. But I don't remember that at all.

Q: Did you ever talk to Mr. Zorthian about the state of affairs in which he found himself rather limited in his activities?

NES: We did discuss it from time to time, but I think he realized that Ambassador Lodge wouldn't be there forever. He was a good soldier and he just conducted the affairs of the USIA in a way that didn't interfere with the Ambassador's directive.

Q: I see. When did you learn that you were leaving Saigon?
NES: While I was shaving. I heard it on the BBC.

Q: Oh, my.

NES: I heard that General [Maxwell] Taylor was being assigned as ambassador and that Ambassador [U. Alexis] Johnson, who was the top career ambassador in the Foreign Service at that time, was being assigned to replace me as deputy. I think my wife and I were given a week to get out.

Q: Would you like to talk about why the rather strange circumstance under which you left? That doesn't seem like the usual way State Department does business.

NES: Look, nothing that involved Vietnam at that time was usual. My assignment was unusual, as was that of my successor and predecessors, and I think the departure of all of them was unusual from Foreign Service traditions. I think that certain quarters in Washington had been unhappy with my views as long ago as April. Ambassador Lodge had been unhappy with my attempts to bring some sort of order into the administration of the mission through the pacification committee, which we saw as a device of really

running a country team without calling it the country team. General Westmoreland and I cooked this up between us, and it worked very well until Ambassador Lodge caught on that in effect we were running a country team without him.

Q: Now you must forgive me for interrupting, but if he was not running things, as seems to have been the case, what objections did he have to somebody else running it?

NES: I think it was sort of a dog in the manger type of attitude, you know. I would have thought that he would have been delighted to have the day-to-day coordination of the various parts of the mission taken out of his hands so that he could concentrate on dealing with the Vietnamese, on dealing with Washington, on dealing with the White House. I'd have thought he would have been delighted, but he wasn't, and he resented it very strenuously. What's in the file, I don't know, but I imagine there are things in the file on that.

Q: Did he discuss this matter with you?

NES: Yes, he did. Yes, he did. He didn't make any bones of the fact that he didn't want this pacification committee meeting to proceed in the way that it had, and it just really sort of fell apart at that point.

Q: Well, what did that leave you to do?

NES: Very little. Very little. I was still doing the political reporting, a lot of it, and visiting the provinces and so forth, but certainly not performing the usual DCM job, as I have in other missions.

Q: I see. At whose instance did you leave Vietnam? Was it Ambassador Lodge or the State Department?

NES: I don't know. I think it was a happy combination of them both. I think also that General Taylor obviously when he went out there wanted his own deputy. He didn't want to continue with me. And I think that in line with the feeling in the White House that the more rank you put out there the more Viet Cong you handle, that he wanted as his deputy the top career officer in the service. I was out-trumped by a number of ranks. I think three things together: I think that Lodge was displeased with my attempt to, in effect, carry out the orders I went out there with. I think that certain elements in Washington were displeased with my what seemed to be pessimistic outlook. And I think General Taylor wanted to choose his own deputy. I think all these three things coalesced together.

Q: Were you glad to leave?

NES: Yes, I was. Very, very.

Q: Some people in the State Department had said at the time that Vietnam was poison.

NES:
It was. It was.

Q: Did it poison your career?

NES: It didn't because - I was very lucky really. In the first place, I was long overdue for home leave, so as soon as I got back I took off for New England for two months. At the end of that time, the department found various things for me to do, to look into the counterinsurgency school, I served on the promotion boards and so forth. Because to assign a class-one officer just like that is very difficult. It takes a long time. You just can't find a position of his rank and his background and capabilities like that. So it took almost a year until they could find Cairo as a post. In the meantime I was offered several ambassadorships in very unlikely places, which I thought would be dull as dishwater and I held out for a stimulating post, which it certainly turned out to be.

Q: Well, that's not a minor post either. It's a critical post.

NES: Yes.

Q: Concerning Senator Fulbright, what was your relationship with him when you came back?

NES: Golf. I played a lot of golf with him at the Chevy Chase Club.

Q: Is he a good golfer?

NES: He was a very good golfer in those days. He, of course, was very interested in my views on Vietnam, as a result of which he asked me to do a little informal paper for him, which I did, a copy of which is among those that I gave you.

Q: Could that conceivably have gotten you in hot water?

NES: I think it was too late by then. I think people were thinking about other people and other things than Vietnam. That was in December. I had gone and had home leave. I don't think so.

I thought in light of the record that Senator Fulbright later made, that anybody who was supplying him with papers might have found themselves in the bad graces of the administration.

It was true on the Middle East, too, you know. I don't know what your view of Senator Fulbright is, but he was a very well-educated, intelligent and charming gentleman. He was a lot of fun to be with and a lot of fun to play golf with. I think he was quite accurate in his overall views of Vietnam, his pessimism as to the thing. You can consider that he was wrong and part of the element in here that undermined our effort, but to have succeeded in Vietnam we would have had to have had public support for the occupation

of the North and I doubt if that could have been cranked up at the time.

Q: What should we have done in Vietnam that we didn't do?

NES: It's so easy in looking back on things. I don't think we demonstrated the sort of imagination and political risk in this country that was necessary to grapple with the situation. Let's just think for a moment whether we might have begun our opening to China at that time if the China lobby had not been so strong here, that we could have proceeded along the lines that the Nixon Administration eventually proceeded, talked to the Chinese about Vietnam. After all, they'd been in a state of confrontation with Vietnam for a thousand years, and as demonstrated more recently, they've invaded Vietnam. Whether we couldn't have neutralized Chinese support for the North, and having done so and given them adequate assurances that we had no intention of approaching another Yalu, whether we could have gone in and occupied the North and finished the thing off once and for all.

Now, that is looking at it in hindsight. I think any idea of talking to the Chinese at that time in the political atmosphere that existed was absolutely anathema. I think anyone would have been considered out of their mind. As you know, we were tentatively talking to Hanoi through the Canadians at that time, but in a very desultory way, and I don't think we ever offered the Ho Chi Minh regime anything that was sufficiently attractive for them to forebear for a while this-

Q: Mr. [Belford L.] Seabrook, I think, was carrying that message.

NES: Yes, that's right. But basically as I think is shown in the papers I gave you, I didn't believe that counterinsurgency would succeed and so I felt that we really had two alternatives. We could begin trying to negotiate our way out, as we eventually did, or we could try to clean the thing up with an occupation of the North, such as we did in Korea and Germany and Japan.

Q: But the escalation as it did take place, not involving an occupation of the North, what did you think of that? Of course, I realize you were not there.

NES: I was out. I was preoccupied with the Middle East. Really, there's no use going back and trying to visualize what I thought, because I frankly don't remember. All I do remember is that in talking later with General Westmoreland - and I don't know whether he'd admit to this now - he told me, "Well, we could have occupied the North and cleaned this thing up with far fewer forces and far fewer casualties than we eventually suffered through feeding things in step by step by step." Whether this was true or not, I don't know. But I imagine we could have. I mean, a half a million men over there, God, we could have certainly occupied North Vietnam with that.

Q: William Colby has said that if they had just left the CIA alone, they could have handled the situation.

NES: I doubt that. I like Bill Colby, but I don't think they could have. I don't think they could.

Q: Well, sir, is there anything that we need to talk about? Any point that you would like to get on this record? We've covered the questions.

NES: I don't think so. No, I think we've covered it all.

Q: All right, Sir.

[End of Interview I]

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Mr. Nes, did your prior service in North Africa stand you in good stead when you went to Cairo in any way?

NES: Well, I think for any foreign service officer who's spent most of his career in Western Europe, service in one or two Arab countries teaches him a great deal about the Arab world as a whole and certainly serves him in good stead when he reaches another Arab country. In the first place, it makes you very aware of the Palestine issue as having overriding consequences for U.S. interests in the area. It tells you a great deal about the extent and pervasiveness of Jewish power on the American political scene and that no administration can really operate in that area without more or less the support and sanction of the Jewish leadership and community. I think just becoming aware of the history, the religion, the architecture, the customs and so forth of the Arab world will help you wherever you serve in that world.

Q: Is there that much continuity across the Arab world in your experience?

NES: There is in a cultural sense. After all, they are all Moslems. The architecture is similar in Morocco to that that you find in Saudi Arabia, in Mecca or Medina. The language, of course, is more or less universal with various degrees of dialectic difference throughout the so-called Arab world.

Q: Had you known Ambassador [Lucius] Battle before your service in Egypt?

NES: Yes, I did, not very extensively. At the time when I came back to the department with Ambassador [David] Bruce from Paris and he took over the job as under secretary of state and I became his assistant in that position, Luke Battle was one of the several staff assistants to the Secretary, who was Dean Acheson at that time. We had adjacent offices and of course we got to know each other both in a substantive way but also socially.

Q: What special briefing, if any, did you receive before you were posted to Cairo?

NES: I had quite a long gap between leaving Saigon and going out to Cairo. During that

period I took advantage of the Foreign Service School course on the Near East area, which was excellent. I spent a great deal of time in the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs working with the desk officer on our relationship with Egypt. So I would say that at no time in my career was I more fully briefed on a post than I was with regard to Cairo.

Q: Were there still significant surprises awaiting you?

NES: I don't think so. I think from the time I got out there everything was going just as badly as I suspected.

Q: What was the atmosphere of our relations with the UAR when you arrived, as long as we've raised it?

NES: Cool, very cool. You will recall that fairly recently mobs without any interference from the Cairo police had set fire and burned the USIS library, that we were in a period where we were quibbling about the extension of PL 480 food assistance, and a period when the Egyptians under President Nasser were acting throughout the area in a way which we heartily disliked. So I would say that it was very obvious when I got there in June of 1965 that the relationship was not good and was deteriorating.

Q: Let's talk for a second about this interplay between U.S. policy toward Egypt and Egypt's policy toward its neighbors. What was the cause and effect relationship, if any, between those two?

NES: Very briefly, I think it's well to review Nasser's book on his objectives, both worldwide and in the area, and to realize that he had two principal ideas. One was to modernize Egypt and bring it into the twentieth century. The second was to establish Egypt as the paramount power, not only in the Arab world but in the Third World, and to exercise leadership toward Arab unity on the one hand and toward the nonaligned aspirations of most of the Third World as the other. Now, these objectives ran afoul of U.S., or what we consider to be U.S. interests in a large part of the Arab world because of the Arab-Israeli dispute, and in the Third World where we had been trying, not very successfully, to bring certain Third World countries into our ideas of an alliance against Russia.

Q: Would it be oversimplification to say that we officially wished that Nasser would give up all this Pan-Arab aspiration and concentrate on internal development?

NES: Well, we did, and the thrust of the American attitude toward Egypt during all of 1966 and the first half of 1967 was to try to utilize the prospect of continuing U.S. assistance to pressure him into giving up many of these objectives.

Q: What levers were we primarily using?

NES: The big one was the PL 480 food assistance, which was very extensive, and we

more or less terminated that in the summer of 1966 and told the Egyptian government that we would consider its continuation, but we kept saying this for a period of six to eight months.

Q: What was behind that? Were we stalling?

NES: We were stalling, stalling. I think it's interesting to note in connection with U.S. policy toward Egypt that an NSC paper on Egypt - and as you know, NSC papers were prepared with the approval of all the key agencies of the government on every key country in the world - was never developed and approved until the summer of 1966. That is some 13, 14 years after the advent of President Nasser and his revolution. This NSC paper, as far as its recommendations on American policy were concerned, set forth the phrase "limited liability, limited expectations." It then went on to make a series of recommendations as to the steps we should take to cement our relationship with Egypt on the one hand, and which would not cost the U.S. government either too much in financial assistance or too much politically in the Congress on the other. And it listed ten or fifteen recommended courses of action, which I won't go into here now, but we can.

In November of 1966, Ambassador Battle in Cairo asked me to come back to Washington on consultation and try to ascertain to what extent the U.S. government was prepared to go forward with these NSC recommendations. I did so and returned to Cairo and informed the Ambassador that as far as I could ascertain there was no willingness on the part of either the Congress or the various agencies involved to go forward with any of them whatsoever. When the Ambassador and I looked at the situation I think we realized right then that we were heading Nasser into a corner and that our relationship could only deteriorate further from the point it was at that time.

Q: Is the difficulty with the Congress - and I think it's fairly obvious, when crowds sack the USIS library that doesn't get you very good press with the Foreign Relations Committee.

NES: Absolutely.

Q: Was it possible to explain this to the Egyptians in any way that would make any difference?

NES: I think that was the key problem, there was no way to explain it. Because so many of these projects were self-financing. Just illustrative, there was, first of all, the continuation of PL 480 food assistance. The Egyptians had made a renewed request in February of 1966 for some one hundred and fifty million dollars in PL 480, and by the end of the summer we were still telling them "we have your request under consideration." Well, you can say this for a month or two, but you can't say it for six.

Then there were other economic projects, such as helping the Egyptians reschedule their debts. Only the United States, among the major western powers, refused to entertain this idea. There was a request that we roll over our CCC financing. We couldn't come up with

an answer on that one. There was a request that we release PL 480 Egyptian pounds in order to permit them to proceed with such projects as building grain silos in the Alexandria area, the so-called Salia [?] agricultural extension project, modernization of the Suez Canal, the acceptance of a Westinghouse bid on a nuclear desalting plant, more sympathetic treatment within the IMF, the IRB, and the New York banks.

Then there were certain political items that the Egyptians were very interested in. One, they asked that we help mediate their difficulties with Saudi Arabia over the Yemen. And they extended an invitation for Secretary [Dean] Rusk to come out for an official visit. Now, all of these things cost very little, practically nothing, but they would have been evidence of our sympathy for Egypt and our desire to maintain reasonably cordial relations, relations, for example, as good as we had with Yugoslavia, which was a communist country. We never were able to move forward and give them an affirmative answer on any one of these. All of them had been approved by the National Security Council in its policy paper.

Q: What was the difficulty?

NES: I wasn't in Washington, I can't tell you. But I imagine-

Q: There were rumors flying thick and fast among the Foreign Service officers.

NES: Yes. But I have an idea that - it's very easy to block any action in Washington. After all, there are a number of agencies involved in these little things aside from the State Department, the Defense establishment, the Treasury, Labor, Agriculture, and so forth. All you need are one or two people in any agency of the government to put a project such as one of these into the bottom of his in box and sit on it and they can be delayed indefinitely.

Of course, if the executive takes a sufficient interest, that sort of thing won't happen. You can break the roadblock certainly, but the executive wasn't taking any interest in Egypt at that time.

Q: Well, of course, he did have a lot on his plate, but ....

NES: Yes. Vietnam primarily.

Q: What can you tell me about Nasser as a person? Now you said that of course you didn't have direct conversations with him, but you observed him in action, I'm sure, in conversations with ambassadors.

NES: He was certainly very charismatic. He had the Egyptian people in the palm of his hand. He could do absolutely no wrong. But in this attitude I think you have to remember that he was really the first Egyptian leader of Egypt since the Pharaohs. Egypt had succumbed to the Greeks, to the Romans, to the Turks, more recently in history to the French in the Napoleonic era, to the British at the time of the Suez Canal and on up until

the 1930s. There had never been, strictly speaking, an Egyptian leader of Egypt. He was the first one, and this gave him, of course, tremendous standing. Plus the fact that on the international stage he seemed to stand out as one of the key leaders of the Third World at that time, with President Tito of Yugoslavia, with Sukarno of Indonesia, with Nehru of India and so forth. So he not only had a great deal of worldwide prestige, but he had unlimited prestige and support at home.

Q: What about Anwar Sadat? Did you have any occasion to meet with him or talk to him?
NES: At that time Sadat was speaker of, in effect, their House of Representatives. We were so impressed with him as a person and with his potential that he was one of the few Egyptians to benefit from a so-called leader grant to visit the United States. It's an interesting sidelight to know that my wife was chosen to brush up Mrs. Sadat's English in preparation for that trip. She was half British and half Turkish, so she had a fundamental knowledge of the English language, but she'd never used it. So my wife used to visit with her almost daily so that when she got to the United States she could handle such things as our currency and so forth.

Their trip was very successful. He came back tremendously impressed by what he'd seen, and I think even at that stage, which was long before President Nasser's death, I think most of us felt that he would probably succeed to the leadership there. He was very personable, very personable, and his English was good. Of course, he was trained by the British Army, so...

Q: Was there consideration given to alternative leadership the times when Nasser was being obstreperous or difficult or whatever?

NES: Oh, I think names were always bandied about in Washington, but I don't think there was any serious consideration given to an alternative, certainly not an alternative that we could have put in his place.

Q: What did Allen Dulles mean by that famous remark that he's supposed to have made one time? This is earlier. "If that colonel of yours gives us too much trouble we will break him in half," or something to that effect.

NES: I'm not aware of that. I wasn't aware of that.

Q: I've seen it cited two different places. They may be citing each other, I'm not sure. Would you comment on the thesis - and I think it's Miles Copeland's thesis - that we kept Nasser confused because our diplomatic signals were not consistent? I think he says that Nasser concluded that we paid proportionate attention to him to the noise that he made internationally.

NES: I would go along with the first suggestion that we confused him. I think we did more than that. I think we convinced him that we were out to get him. As far as the second suggestion of Miles Copeland, I would not go along with that. I don't think he

ever felt that he would benefit by our largesse if he made enough fuss and enough trouble for us. I think he began to suspect our motivation, our intentions, probably as early as 1962 or 1963. These, as I've tried to point out, were greatly augmented by our failure to come across with any sort of cooperation or assistance in either the political or the economic arena.

Q: Well, how plausible were his suspicions?

NES: I think they were quite plausible. I think that given the fact that during the last year before the June 1967 war we had sat on our hands on every single item of possible sympathy and assistance would lead any leader to suspect that there was something wrong.

Q: Well, it certainly suggests a pattern.

NES: Yes.

Q: Was there a pattern? I mean, was somebody at the top - these aren't just oversights or slackness?

NES: Well, I think you put your finger on it. I don't think that anyone at the top in Washington, whether it was the President or the Secretary of State, really could pay very much attention to the Middle East in general or to Egypt specifically. So I think the country fell from a policy standpoint into the hands of second and third level people in the State Department and in the other interested agencies.

Q: Were there people in the State Department who would have been motivated to take an anti-Egyptian line?

NES: I'd rather not get into specifics. I went over that with you at lunch, but not in this.

Q: Very well, sir. What about the Soviets during this period? I know that there were concerns in the State Department that the Soviets were increasing their influence through military aid and one thing and another. Were you keeping an eye on this or reporting on this in any way?

NES: Oh, very much so. The Soviet position in Egypt itself was based primarily on their very large, great assistance in the building of the Aswan Dam. And of course they had up there their technicians and engineers and so forth in the thousands. In Cairo itself they had a very large embassy, an ambassador who was formerly a KGB man, such as Andropov is today. They wheeled and dealed in the cultural arena very extensively, bringing all sorts of theatrical projects in from Russia. They, of course, were providing a considerable amount of military equipment, primarily in the air force, and were training Egyptian pilots. Their position was not nearly as great, however, as it became after the 1967 war, and certainly not as great as it became after the so-called war of attrition along the Suez Canal when they took over the air defense system in Egypt to try to neutralize

the Israeli bombing raids, which were occurring during that so-called war of attrition. But it was extensive. We were monitoring, for example, the Soviet shipping through the Suez Canal, endeavoring to ascertain what exactly they were sending not only to Egypt but to Algeria and other areas of the Mediterranean. So I'd say we were very concerned.
Q: The Russian stuff was coming up the Red Sea through the Suez?

NES: Yes.

Q: What was the status of the Soviet Union aside from the material end of it? I mean, were the Russians welcome visitors? Did Egyptians like Russians and vice versa and so on?

NES: I'd say absolutely not. You talk about the ugly American, it was certainly a case of the ugly Russian in Egypt. Many said, well, the reason they don't like the Russians, they don't tip as well as the Americans, but it was much more than that. The Russians lived solely by themselves. They never mingled socially with the Egyptians at all. They had some sort of a compound on the island of Gezira where all their people lived. They had their own movie theater, they played their own basketball games. They remained totally aloof except at the top level from both the Egyptian bureaucracy and the people as a whole.

Q: That's interesting. How did the technicians on the dam manage that? Was it strictly nine-to-five and then I go back to the [compound]?

NES: Absolutely. Absolutely. There was practically no intercourse between the Russians up at the high dam and the Egyptian workers there.

Q: I've heard stories about President Nasser's assessment of LBJ as a person. Did any of this ever filter down to you?

NES: Not to me. I've read [Mohammed] Heikal's assessment of Nasser's dislike for LBJ personally, but I saw none of that at all.

Q: As long as Mr. Heikal's name has come up, have you read <u>The Cairo Papers,</u> the book that he put out?

NES: I have it in the library, yes.

Q: What is your assessment of that, or do you have one handy?

NES: Well, I don't really. Heikal was a very interesting person. I feel that he tended toward tremendous exaggeration, largely to promote his own status, and that he wasn't particularly honest in his assessments of either people or the situation. A fascinating person, lots of fun to spend an evening with and talk with, but I never relied on his word one iota when I dealt with him.

Q: To what extent did he echo official government views? To what extent was he an independent player?

NES: You couldn't tell. I think he was pretty much an independent player. I know that once Sadat took over that he pretty well fell from grace as far as the presidency went; his influence greatly diminished.

Q: Well, as long as we're on canards, I'm going to change the order of a couple of these and ask you about the persistent rumor of Nazis and ex-SS men working and advising in Egypt.

NES: We had reports from time to time that they were working in sort of a modified missile program trying to help the Egyptians manufacture and fire ground-to-ground missiles. But from what we could gather from our aerial surveillance, only one or two of these missiles ever got off the ground and they were so inaccurate as to be totally innocuous. We never really felt that it was very important. Of course there are reports of former Nazis working throughout Africa in developing all sorts of advanced armaments. You now have them reportedly working in such diverse places as Libya and Algeria, but I really don't put too much credence in this.

Q: South America didn't get them all.

NES: Yes. Didn't get them all.

Q: What was that - freebooters - Otto Skorzeny was supposed to have gone to give some kind of military advice at one time. I don't know when, I can't remember the period.

NES: I really wasn't aware of him at all. I think there is a German presence in Libya today, which is not an ex-Nazi presence but in effect a German governmental presence that is working on various defense projects with Qadhafi, which is sort of interesting, West Germany.

Q: That's interesting. It may get more interesting.

NES: Yes.

Q: I know the complexity of what I'm about to ask. What was Nasser's relationship with the various Palestinian factions?

NES: From my vantage point in Cairo it was minimal. The Palestinian nationalism, which led to the development of the PLO, really did not play an important role prior to the 1967 war. I think it was probably the demonstration of Arab government impotence - Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian - in that war which led the Palestinians to realize that they would never get back Palestine if they relied on Arab governments, that they could only get it back through their own efforts. This led to the creation of the PLO and the Palestine movement as we know it in more modern history.

Q: Are you saying then that Nasser was giving lip service to another era?

NES: Yes, I would say so. The liberation of Palestine from Israeli control was of course one of his many objectives within the context of Arab nationalism itself.

Q: What about the Syrians? How do they fit into this picture?

NES: Well, you know, we had this silly situation of a union between Syria and Egypt into what was then known as the United Arab Republic.

Q: It's always reminded me a little of the Pakistani situation-

NES: Exactly.

Q: - with the big hostile country in between.

NES: Exactly. But I don't think it ever amounted to anything, and of course it eventually just fell of its own momentum.

Q: It seems to me that the Syrians have always been more radical at least in their rhetoric about Israel and what they're going to do to Israel and so forth. Is this significant? Do you think that they are more radical?

NES: Well, I think this, they certainly give the impression that they are more radical. And yet when it comes right down to the nitty-gritty, they have been very, very cautious in their attitude toward Israel in the last several years and made sure that they did not undertake any actions during the Lebanese crisis which would bring about a direct Israeli invasion of Syria itself.

Q: This is out of respect for Israeli military prowess?

NES: Exactly. Yes. Exactly.

Q: When you arrived, of course, the arms race was well established in the Middle East.

NES: It had begun really with the Czech arms deal and prior to the nationalization of the Suez Canal. But the 1967 war greatly stimulated the introduction of arms into the Middle East. Our provision of military equipment, training, whatnot to Israel increased many fold after the 1967 war, as did Russian assistance to Egypt and Syria.

Q: Who is the villain in this piece? Is this a chicken and egg kind of question, who started the arms race?

NES: I think it is, yes. I don't think you can tell who started the arms race.

Q: Okay. Averell Harriman visited in Cairo during the Vietnam bombing pause in December-January of 1965 and 1966. What was that visit about? Was that related to the bombing pause?

NES: As I recall it, it was related to our entire Vietnam policy. Ambassador Harriman endeavored to explain what we were trying to do in Vietnam, ask for Nasser's understanding and, in effect, ask him to do what he could with the North Vietnamese in persuading them of our intention to in effect bomb them back to the Stone Age if they weren't more forthcoming insofar as negotiations were concerned.

Q: I see. Well, in view of what you said about the coolness of our relations with the Egyptians at the time, how far did Mr. Harriman get?

NES: I'd say zero, absolute zero. It was a very naive ploy to send him out there at that time.

Q: Was Governor Harriman an effective envoy?

NES: I think he always was. I think he always was. I didn't accompany him on his visit to President Nasser. I think Luke Battle was still there as ambassador and would normally have done that, so you might ask him about it.

Q: I will. Can we talk about the Yemen a little bit? That's always been interpreted, that I have seen, as Nasser's attempt to recoup lost prestige in the Arab movement. Is that an explanation, do you think?

NES: I think it is partially. Saudi Arabia, as far as Nasser was concerned, was a conservative, reactionary monarchy which was not in the mainstream either of Arab nationalism or of Arab socialism. I think he felt that anything he could do to undermine the Saudi regime was in his interest as far as his own ambitions in the Arab world is concerned. So it seemed rather logical at the time for him to confront the Saudis in the Yemen, which he did. And I think at one time there were sixty or seventy thousand Egyptian troops down there. You had in the Yemen in effect a civil war with one side being supported by the Saudis and the other side by the Egyptians. The United States was supportive of the Saudis in this contest, and I think we undertook a number of clandestine activities in the country to undermine the Egyptians and support the Saudis. Eventually we were caught red-handed when the Egyptians ran across a number of classified American telegrams in the AID mission in the Yemen.

Q: Was that the cover? Was it a CIA operation?

NES: No, it was just absolute stupidity and lack of judgment on the part of the AID director that he had information such as that in his own virtually unlocked filing cabinets. So we had quite a crisis, because several AID people were slapped into the jug and they had our papers. Our embassy in Cairo sent our political counselor, Dick Parker, who was an Arabist, down there to try to straighten it out and get the people released and get our

papers back, which he did, after which they of course had been photographed by that time. But it was a very embarrassing situation because I think they caught us red-handed and in operations which were designed to thwart their position.

Q: Were the repercussions in Cairo - did the Egyptian officials wag their finger in your face or anything comparable?

NES: The Egyptians played it very cool, but Washington was incensed that the Egyptians should have in effect carried out this operation that had put two Americans in jail and had seized documents which Washington thought were subject to diplomatic privilege and so forth. So it didn't help to further our relationship as far as Washington was concerned, but the Egyptians played it very cool. I don't think there was ever any mention of it in the press.

Q: That's astonishing in a way. I suppose perhaps they weren't ready to push things. And of course I guess it blew all the operations that were discussed.

NES: Oh, of course, of course.

Q: Did we correctly interpret Nasser's motivation in Yemen at the time?

NES: I'm not so sure that we did. I don't think we really understood what he was trying to do, which boiled down to a quest for - if you try to put it another way, it was really an attempt to undercut Saudi prestige and at the same time to enhance Egyptian prestige in the Arab world.

Q: He was paying an awfully heavy price for this.

NES: Oh, it was very expensive. It was a guerrilla operation part of the time. And of course when the Israelis hit him in June of 1967 he had most of his best army troops down in the Yemen.

Q: We're approaching the 1967 crisis now. I note that there was a change of government in Israel that spring I believe it was, when [David] Ben-Gurion handed over to [Levi] Eshkol. Was this interpreted in some particular way in Cairo as - after all, Ben-Gurion was a pretty savage guy at times. Was Eshkol perceived as softer or... ?

NES: Curiously enough, I don't think that the top leadership in Egypt paid very much attention to what was going on politically in Israel. I think at the very end, on the eve of the Six Day War, when I believe Moshe Dayan was brought back in as defense minister, I think that rang a bell. I think they probably said to themselves, this is it. But up until that time I don't think they paid very much attention to activities within Israel of a political nature, and I don't think the Egyptians knew very much about Israel.

Q: What role was the Soviet Union playing in the weeks preceding the crisis?

NES: I don't know to what extent this can be documented, but we were led to believe in the embassy that the Soviets had provided intelligence indicating to the Egyptians that the Israelis were about to march into Syria. We had no indication of this either through our people in Israel or from our satellite surveillance. Whether the Russians really believed this or whether it was totally prefabricated is very difficult to say. But looking at the background, I think the Egyptians had every reason to suspect that this might be the case when you remember that less than six months before, the Israelis had launched a massive raid into Jordan, into this little town of Eli Samu I think it was called, and that subsequently they had engaged in a rather ferocious air battle on the outskirts of Damascus in the course of which six or seven Syrian MIGs had been downed. Add to this the statements of several of the Israeli leadership in early May of 1967 to the effect that if the Syrians didn't behave, they would march in and replace the Syrian government in Damascus. Putting all these things together, I think that Nasser was very receptive to the type of intelligence the Russians were feeding him.

Q: One has to ask, didn't Nasser have his own sources of intelligence?

NES: Not as far as the Syrian-Israeli border was concerned. And of course all of this activity allegedly was taking place within Israel.

Q: True. You went yourself, I believe you said earlier, to try to convince the Egyptian officials to repulse these reports.

NES: Yes, this was under instructions. But I don't think it had any effect at all because I don't think at that point they believed anything that any American was going to tell them. What else did we do in Cairo to try to avert hostilities as the thing was getting hotter and hotter? Well, I think we did quite a lot actually Remember, we sent over Bob Anderson and then we sent Charlie Yost and then we sent a letter from President Johnson to Nasser. In each case we pled with him not to be the first to strike. In each case we received assurances, as did the U.N. Secretary General when he visited Cairo, that the Egyptians would not be the first to attack. In the course of these various demarches we really received a number of fairly far-reaching commitments from Nasser. He finally, reluctantly I think, agreed to submit the issue of the Gulf of Aqaba to the World Court for determination. He agreed to reactivate the military armistice commission on the border between Egypt and Israel. And of course he agreed to send his Vice President, [Zakaria] Mohieddine, to Washington. He was taking all of these steps as he was back-pedaling furiously away from the various things he did and said in the previous weeks, which Israel had eventually considered a casus belli, which they used to justify their preemptive strike.

But by the time all these assurances were given, it was too late. The decision had been made in Jerusalem and that was that.

Writers on this particular episode tend to take a rather dim view of Nasser's oratory during the time, his moving the troops into the Sinai, but especially the blockade, the Gulf of Aqaba business, which I think Israel had made very plain they would regard as a

casus belli. That's absolutely correct, absolutely correct. Now of course we realized - there are two aspects to this and I don't know how relevant they are. First of all, the amount of Israeli shipping that actually went through the Gulf of Aqaba was minimal, two or three ships a year.

Secondly, after his speech to the air force stating that he would close the Gulf of Aqaba, no steps were actually taken physically to do so. However, this does not exonerate him from very poor judgment in making a statement of intention which he knew and all the rest of us knew was in effect a casus belli. And the Israelis had made this very plain for a number of years.

So on the morning after this speech, the so-called Gulf of Aqaba speech, which was made on the twenty-second [of May], on the twenty-third with the concurrence, rather reluctant, of the State Department, I arranged for the departure of all dependents from Egypt and secretaries and so forth.

Q: How did the Egyptians react to that?

NES: They were so preoccupied with the course of events, I didn't observe any reaction at all. But we were able to do it while the airport was still open. We chartered TWA aircraft from Greece to come over and take them all out.

It seems to me that would have been worthy of note, but I suppose, as you say, they were preoccupied and too busy looking at Israel to pay much attention to what - Although you know Heikal was writing a series of articles at that time in which he pointed out that the Israelis, as a result of this, had no alternative but to attack. I don't know whether you've run across those anywhere. Yes. It's one of those things that involves Nasser I think.

Q: Yes. A lot of discussion has taken place about U Thant's removing the expeditionary force from its stations in the Sinai.

NES: Yes.

Q: The speculation of why did he take the whole thing out. One piece of speculation I've only recently come on, and that was why didn't somebody simply ask the Israelis to let the UNEF [United Nations Expeditionary Force] move across the line?

NES: Because originally when UNEF was established, the idea was that it should sit on both sides of the line and the Israelis flatly refused at that time.

Q: Do you have any insight as to why or how the Egyptians reacted when UNEF was pulled out? Were they surprised that the whole thing pulled up stakes?

NES: Well, later in retrospect, Egyptians have told me - and I can't mention their names because they're still active in the Egyptian government in diplomatic service - that they were very surprised when UNEF left the Sharm el Sheikh area. That the request had been

targeted only at the UNEF on the Israeli-Egyptian frontier and no mention had been made in the request of the UNEF forces in the Sharm el Sheikh area. And that when U Thant pulled the whole kit and kaboodle out, they were very, very surprised. Then they go on one step further, which may be self-serving, to say that with UNEF out of Sharm el Sheikh, Nasser really had no alternative but to in effect substitute his presence for theirs.

Q: In the military sense he had no alternative or in the political sense?

NES: Political sense. Political sense.

Q: Okay. All right. So the fence has been removed between the two disputants now with the removal of UNEF. In the days right before the outbreak of hostilities, Abba Eban went through Paris and London on his way to Washington. Did Cairo pay any attention to this?

NES: I paid a great deal of attention to it, but I don't know whether the Egyptians did or not. As I've mentioned to you before, I'd be very interested to see a memo of the conversation between Abba Eban and President Johnson, which I think took place on May 26.

Q: I haven't seen that in our declassified records, but of course Eban has a version of it in his memoir, and Lyndon Johnson does, too, of course. That's about as far as I can go with that.

NES: Right. I have an idea that President Johnson tried to be very cautious and tried to follow the same line as he did in his letter to Eshkol and his letter to President Nasser, to plead with both of them not to take any precipitous action. But he may have said this in such a way that Eban interpreted as a green light. Of course, the Israelis have a history of interpreting anything you say in the way they wish. So I don't think you can blame President Johnson on this. I think it was a matter of interpretation. But it would be very interesting to see both memos of conversation, both the Israeli and the American, to see and compare them.

Q: Yes. Let's see. Robert Anderson's visit to Cairo. Were you a party to his briefing?

NES: No, I did not accompany him to visit President Nasser, and as indicated by the file there, his report was sent subsequently from Lisbon and not from Cairo.

Q: Were you privy to that?

NES: Not at the time. Not at the time.

Q: What was your understanding - what did Robert Anderson say different than we had already been saying?

NES: I don't think anything, judging by the telegram. I don't think anything. I think it was

a "cool it" type of demarche.

Q: Why Robert Anderson? What special-?

NES: Well, he had a very close and continuing relationship with President Nasser and with many Egyptians. He had come over to Cairo a number of times when I was there, primarily to talk in economic terms, insofar as the private banks, American exports and so forth were concerned.

Q: Of course, he was a Texan, that may have been how the decision evolved, too.

NES: That helped. That helped.

Q: What role did the Egyptians think the U.S. was playing in the days immediately before hostilities broke out? You hinted that they were not ready to believe anything we said at this time. Did they think we were actively assisting the other side?

NES: Well, after this devastating Israeli air offensive on the morning of June 5, which continued until the sixth and which virtually eliminated the Egyptian air force, I think it was very difficult for President Nasser or the Egyptian military to understand how the Israelis by themselves could fly so many sorties. They had no conception of how a modern, efficient air force such as the Israelis or our own can turn planes around, refuel them, rearm them, so forth. They just couldn't understand how, let's say, three hundred or four hundred missions could be flown in a matter of a few hours by a hundred aircraft. So they jumped to the conclusion that they were facing the same situation as they faced in 1956 and that some of these planes were coming off of American and British carriers in the Med. The fact that the planes came in over the Mediterranean helped to sustain that belief. They came in to avoid Egyptian radar and came in and circled and hit in effect the targets from the rear.

But they really believed this and as a result, Nasser made a statement along those lines and it brought crowds into the streets with a very strong anti-American type of emotionalism. As a result, we felt very naked in the embassy there and immediately limited any movement around Cairo by American personnel either on foot or in cars or anything else. But I must say the Egyptian government, fearing a very major bloody incident, provided I think it was one of their crack airborne battalions to form a perimeter around the embassy so that no crowds ever got through.

Q: Did they try?

NES: Not that I know of. Not that I know of.

Q: They say that from a personal standpoint that was a very dicey situation.
NES: Well, it was. We were in contact with the Egyptian authorities, the minister of Interior, and he kept assuring us that he would provide total protection, physical protection, insofar as he could. Now there were a lot of Americans left, after the

evacuation, up country that we were very much worried about.

But you know, an interesting sidelight on this, if this is the time to digress. I was called over to the foreign office I believe on the sixth - it could have been the seventh - and handed a formal note by the chief of protocol breaking diplomatic relations. In the conversation - and perhaps there was also an attached memorandum, I can't remember - it was set forth that we could only retain a very minimal presence there under some other flag. So we naturally wanted to maintain the largest presence we could, particularly on the administrative side, because there were five or six hundred Americans there with cars parked over Cairo, with houses and apartments filled with their furniture and so forth. We tried to set as a precedent the British presence, which had been permitted to remain under another embassy at the time of Suez. But they took it down much further than that and we ended up with a handful.

But this handful was interesting in that they specified that one of these individuals should be the CIA station chief, who was declared to the Egyptian government as our station chiefs are in a number of countries. The reason for this is that they'd all read The Invisible Government and were absolutely convinced that the CIA not only had the ear of the President as no other organization did, but that it was very influential in determining American policy. They felt that if they kept the CIA station chief there they would have a line of communications thereafter directly to the White House to sort of protect their rear in this situation. So he remained, to the chagrin of the state Department, and of course the poor fellow was saddled with the administrative chore thereafter of trying to round up all these automobiles and these effects and ship them out of the country.

The Spanish were eventually chosen to represent our interests. In the course of that week, the Spanish Ambassador came along and we pulled down the Stars and Stripes and raised the Spanish flag over the embassy and had a drink of champagne. He was a wonderful person and had a great deal of influence with the Egyptians, which was why he was chosen. He, of course, had to take our CIA chief and the other five or six people into his embassy and they operated out of there subsequently and did an excellent job administratively. But this poor fellow, I don't think he ever imagined that this would be the end of his service in Cairo.

Q: Not what he thought he had been trained for.

NES: No, but he did a wonderful job. Illustrative of that is the fact that in due course six months later, two big lift vans arrived for me in Washington with all of our household effects. There wasn't a single glass broken, and they had even gone so far as to ship all the groceries and liquor that was in the basement.

Q: Well, we all know that Egyptians don't drink, so of course they wouldn't have any use for that.

NES: But I just thought that was sort of a sidelight on Egyptian thinking, the way they operate.

Q*: That is amusing. What about the Liberty incident? Were you still in Cairo?*

NES: Oh, I was more than aware of that incident.

Q: Well, I can imagine you were. Describe if you will how you learned of it, how the news came in, what the reaction was.

NES: Well, in the course of that day, I can't remember the date, whether it was the seventh or the eighth, I think it might have been the eighth. In the morning we got one of these immediate messages. Let me say that despite the break in diplomatic relations, our communications continued, although we shifted from cable to emergency radio and we went out through the Sixth Fleet. But we had communications. And we got an immediate message saying the Liberty was being attacked, presumably by the Egyptians.

Q: Had you known the Liberty was offshore?

NES: No. Had no idea it was offshore. Presumably by the Egyptians and that planes were being launched in a retaliatory raid from the Saratoga. So we expected American planes over Cairo at any minute. And within about an hour the second message came in saying that the attackers had been identified as the Israelis. Interestingly enough, some months later when I was back in Washington, I gave a talk at the National War College, and at the luncheon afterwards I sat next to one of the commanders of the destroyers escorting the Saratoga, and he confirmed the launching of aircraft, the original mission being targets in Egypt. So it was a pretty close thing.

Q: You say you did not know the Liberty was there. Once you got the news that the Liberty had been attacked, was it obvious what kind of ship it was?

NES: Not to me. Not to me. And things were moving so quickly then, we all left Egypt a day or two later on the ship that we chartered out of Alexandria. That is the few official personnel that were still there after our major evacuation, and the correspondents and so forth.

Oh, one other interesting sidelight on this break in diplomatic relations and the order that all Americans leave. The big exception was the oil people. The Egyptians wanted the people working on their rigs in both offshore and within Egypt to stay right there and they guaranteed they'd be protected and so forth. So in other words, the two elements that the Egyptians considered most important to maintain were the CIA and the oil.

Q: A lot of Americans might have agreed with them.

NES: Yes.

Q: That certainly reflects a different experience than the one in Iran some years later. Very much so. Did you ever hear the story that the attack on the Liberty was quite

deliberate?

NES: Well, there's been a lot written. You know, there have been several books and I think the initial article on it appeared in a very peculiar magazine, an article by Anthony Pearson and it was in Penthouse I think in April of 1976. It was quite an interesting, accurate article. But there have been several books written more recently, I think one by the skipper on the Liberty or one of his key deck officers. Given the circumstances, I don't think that there's any doubt but that it was deliberate. And the motivation is purely speculative. The consensus among the navy people I've talked to is that they realized that the Liberty was sending in intercepts in two areas: one, revealing that the Israeli forces were going far beyond the commitments they'd made to us, as far as their activities are concerned. And secondly, that they were using so-called, I think they're known as black tactics to deceive the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Syrians as to what each other were doing. But that's pure speculative and I just pass it on to you as a type of sort of suggestion that's being put out by our own navy people.

Q: When Abba Eban wrote about that in his memoirs, he found a way to say that the Israelis knew there were American Jewish sailors aboard the Liberty as interpreters. Well, obviously they're not just monitoring the Egyptians.

NES: Yes. Yes.

Q: They make Hebrew speakers.

NES: Yes. But I think it's illustrative of one of the great cover-ups in our military history.

Q: Do you have any insight into Nasser's feeling about a cease-fire? Why the hesitation?
NES: I don't understand it. I understand perfectly why the Israelis didn't want a cease-fire, but why Nasser didn't, unless he really wasn't conversant with the true military situation on all the fronts, in Jordan, in Syria, on his own. Because it seems to me there was nothing that he could gain by prolonging the agony and a great deal he could lose. Now as far as Israel was concerned, it was entirely different.

Q: It was entirely a matter of tactics.

NES: Yes. Many predicted at the time that the Arab armies were smashed beyond repair, at least for a generation or a decade, or at least another five years, but apparently they came back very quickly, much more quickly than anyone thought they would.

Q: Is this due entirely to a huge infusion of Russian aid?

NES: Well, you know this - I'll get into that in a minute, but this brings up the assessment in Washington in the immediate wake of the war to the effect that, one, Nasser had been totally humiliated and would probably fall. Well, we saw what happened when he resigned and the mobs went into the streets in Cairo demanding he remain. Two, that Egyptian armies had been broken once and for all and would never again be a threat.

Three, that the Russians, because of their support of Egypt and their equipment of the Egyptian and Syrian forces, were in effect knocked out of the Middle East, as far as any status is concerned, more or less indefinitely.

When I got back to Washington, with the few people that would listen to me, I contested each one of these. I said, in the first place, Nasser has come out of this probably stronger than he ever was before. I said, secondly, the Egyptian army will be rebuilt very, very quickly with Russian help. And I said, thirdly, you're going to see the Russians not only return to their former position in the Middle East, but through arms equipment they're going to have a greatly enhanced position. That instead of this war being a great success for the United States and the West, it's been a total disaster. And it has furthermore made the achievement of any negotiated settlement on the Arab-Israeli issue virtually impossible, because the Israelis are now in possession of the West Bank, Gaza and Syria, and they're never going to leave. But this is the way the professionals, and I was just one of many, viewed the war in a totally different context than the White House and the upper echelons in the State Department, totally different.

Q: In military terms what the Egyptians lost was a battle.

NES: That's all. That's all. The casualties were very small. And it enabled them to weed out a lot of incompetents, too. In their high command, yes.

Q: Now, let's see, you stayed with the State Department until when?

NES: Until January of 1968.

Q: Then your vantage point for viewing subsequent events in the Middle East was the vantage point of the informed private citizen?

NES: Very much so. Although of course I had access to everything between June of 1967 and January of 1968, particularly the machinations up at the U.N. which led to Resolution 242 and all the rest of them.

Q: I take it you don't approve of the way that was handled or the resolution itself?

NES: Well, I think it had two great faults. French texts should have been identical. I think the English and the French text said "les territoires," and the English text just said "territories," which enabled the Israelis to get totally off the hook as far as evacuation went. And I think there was no mention in it of future for the Palestinians. So I think it was very faulted.

Q: What future is there for the Palestinians? How is this thing going to be resolved?

NES: Right now I don't see any future for them at all except as a dispersed people. This you know has happened to many people through the ages, the Armenians, the Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, various natural groupings that have been submerged by a great

power and in time lost their identity.

The only thing that argues against this type of future for the Palestinians is the fact that they seem to be an exceptionally energetic, well-educated people. They have more college graduates now among them than the Israelis do. Their population is scattered but in toto it is the equivalent of Israel's now, three to four million people. They have positions of considerable stature and influence in every Middle Eastern country. They practically run Kuwait. Many refer to them as truly the Jews of the Middle East because they have so much more on the ball than any of the other Arab peoples. And whether you can keep them divided and submerged indefinitely is a question. I think you can't compare them to the various natural groupings within the Soviet Union that have been successfully submerged, or to the Armenians by the Turks and the Russians. They are different and they are unique in that respect. And they are so similar to the dispersal of the Jewish people, who eventually were able to take advantage of the situation, the Holocaust in Europe, to unify their objectives and to gain the sympathy of the rest of the world and to in effect establish themselves in Palestine. The Palestinians might do this someday, but it's going to be a long time ahead.

Q: Well, they don't have to cross the Mediterranean to get back.

NES: They don't have to cross the Mediterranean. All they need is the support of great powers and they haven't got the support of anybody. They haven't even got the support of the Arab governments now. I mean, they're totally alone. Whether they can ever do this, I wouldn't predict, but it does at the moment look totally hopeless for them.

Q: Two other developments which I think the average American has trouble understanding. One of them is the sudden expulsion of the Soviets from Egypt. The other is Sadat's war of 1973 and the apparent shifts of policy that he has espoused. What do you think explains those two things?

NES: I don't think it's that difficult. In the first place, the Egyptians and Russians didn't mix, which I pointed out previously. On a personal relationship basis they didn't get along at all. The Russians were very overbearing. Secondly, even more important, the Russians were very careful never to provide Egypt with an offensive capability. And I think that Sadat realized full well that in order to launch the type of undertaking that he finally did in 1973, he'd be much better without any Russian constraints at all, that they in effect would try to restrain him, limit his freedom of action. So he was very careful to get most of them out of his country before he finally developed the final plans for the crossing of the Suez. And I think he saw this entire military operation totally in political terms, that if he could cross the Suez Canal - and you know he made it very clear the day of the crossing that he had no intention to go into Israel itself, that his sole objective was to take back as much as he could of the occupied Sinai. So his military objectives were limited in the first place. His political objectives I think very clearly were first of all to demonstrate that the Israelis were not invincible, to create a new situation in the world which would be advantageous to him and to the eventual agreement by the Israelis to leave the Sinai totally. And of course without the 1973 war you never would have had his

visit to Jerusalem, you never would have had Camp David, you never would have had the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. So I think he was-

Q: He had to make war before he could make peace?

NES: Exactly. Exactly. I think it succeeded brilliantly.

Q: What about the new man [Hosni Mubarak]? Did you know him?

NES: No. No, I don't know him at all.

Q: Where did we make our biggest mistakes? You have outlined policies, contradictions in policies. Were there any crucial turning points? Any places where the thing hung on the balance and could have fallen either way?

NES: Well, this is probably a parochial view, but I think the year 1966 and the first half of 1967 were very critical in creating an estrangement from Egypt wherein we had no influence over what they were doing or going to do at all. There always were those, and I tend to agree with them, who maintained that a happy Nasser is far less dangerous than an unhappy, thwarted, frustrated Nasser.

Q: You have been critical of the way you held the PL 480 thing as a lever. How should you use aid to persuade a surly, snarly ally or a friend or neutral to do what you want it to do?

NES: I don't think you ever can. And the best illustration is Israel. Here we have a country that is totally dependent on us. They couldn't survive in the international arena six months without our massive infusion of economic assistance, and yet we are wise enough, they say, never to use that aid as leverage if what we're asking is considered to be against their own best interests. Now just think what our policy would have been toward Egypt if we had pursued the same strategy as we are with Israel.

Q: Good point. But how do you persuade the Senate of all of this?

NES: (Laughter) Thank goodness I don't have to try anymore. You can persuade one or two senators, you can persuade Senator [Charles M.] Mathias of my own state, [Mark] Hatfield or a few, but not very many. Was [J. William] Fulbright willing to listen to this sort of thing? Oh, of course. Of course. He had a great deal of wisdom with regard to the Middle East.

Q: What was his thinking all this time? You came home then. Did you talk to him when you came home?

NES: Oh, sure. I talked to him. Well, I used to play golf with him all the time. You know, I talked with him when I came home from Vietnam and I talked to him about the Middle East. We thought alike on both issues.

Q: Well, what haven't we talked about that we ought to?

NES: I think we've pretty well exhausted the subject here. If there's anything else...

End of Interview