

WILLIAMS: The men taking the stage, the dais, are familiar to all of you. I've been asked to state the obvious and that is, their bios are in your packet should you need more on them as they get settled. Again, our thanks to President Carter. I must say a candidly more revealing interview than I expected going in, his thoughts on the Vietnam War and the effects on him and his presidency.

I think this is going to be difficult to balance. No shortage of issues today although we do have a finite period of time for the panels gathered. And I think it is probably best to begin with an overarching question that I'll pose in different ways to our participants. And I guess it should be worded, "What went wrong?" And I suppose if there is a home field advantage in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to be had in this repository of artifacts from the Kennedy administration, it should go to Ted Sorensen.

So, Ted, I will put the first question this way. Pay any price. Bear any burden to assure the survival and success of liberty. Did the United States become captive of either our own rhetoric or our own swagger at the time in Vietnam?

TED SORENSEN: No. But let me say a few words opening words, Brian, if I may, without taking too much time from our distinguished panelists. The fact that you begin quoting President Kennedy's words and that we are in this wonderful repository of his words, it puts me in an awkward position

VIETNAM AND THE PRESIDENCY
INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE

3.11.06

PAGE 2

because the audience will expect me to be as eloquent as he was, forgetting that he had a much better speechwriter than I do. [laughter]

In any event, much as I'm fond of the slogan, so to speak, of the National Archives, which you mentioned earlier, "what's past is prologue"-- Roughly translated that means, you ain't seen nothing yet. I think what should be emblazoned upon the wall behind this panel and kept in mind by everyone up here, but everyone on any panel today, including even the historians, something that President Truman was reported to have said, which is (And I keep this in mind often), "The average high school sophomore in Independence, Missouri equipped with hindsight is smarter than the president of the United States."

So I'm sure with hindsight it is easier to point out errors of commission and omission with respect to Vietnam by a string of presidents. But in one sense the premise of this conference when it says in the brochure that the war in Vietnam was central to the presidencies of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and so on down the line. The truth of the matter the war in Vietnam was not central to the foreign policy of the President Kennedy.

Berlin was central. Cuba was central. The Soviet Union-- One might even say the United Nations, nuclear testing, a number of other issues. I even have a memorandum I wrote to President Kennedy at the end of, nearing the end of his first year in office in 1961, in which I am asking him whether the time is coming when he wants to go on national television and talk about

Southeast Asia. Because I said, “The other major issues facing this presidency, such as the ones I just mentioned, have all been the subject of a presidential address. But you’ve said nothing so far about Southeast Asia.”

The fact is Vietnam was a low level insurrection at that time. There was no pitch to war with North Vietnam yet. The Viet Cong were a disorganized guerilla group. They were conducting assassinations. I don’t want to minimize its seriousness. But it never raised to the level of the other major crises confronting the Kennedy administration and there were plenty of them.

WILLIAMS: Jack Valenti, here we are at that Kennedy Library and yet the photo on the front of the brochure, advertising this event, “Vietnam and the Presidency,” is of your boss watching an armada of helicopters approach. It brings to mind the great story as President Johnson was being escorted out to his chopper and a military aide said, “Mr. President, I will take you to your helicopter.” He said, “Son, they are all my helicopters.” [Laughter]

And, Jack, you and I have spent some time at the other library as they call it out in Austin. I’ve listened to all of the released phone conversation tapes that are extent from the library, the LBJ library, thus far. And there are conversations embedded in those tapes to be heard where President Johnson is heard saying, in effect, “This is the way Kennedy would have proceeded.” The cynics say, “That is because of the two people on the phone, one of them knew it was being recorded for posterity.”

Your view on how and why Lyndon Johnson proceeded down the road he did from the day he took the presidency forward.

JACK VALENTI: Well, first I would like to say to Caroline, that I'm a devoted admirer of her mother. She bought, when she was at Doubleday, the only work of fiction I ever did and she became my editor. And I must say, I came to know her very well and I came to love her very much. And I just wanted you to know that.

I am one of those who was on the airplane with President Johnson when he took the oath of office on that awful, nightmarish day in Dallas. When in a senseless act of mindless malice, which is a phrase coined by Mr. Sorensen, the 35th president was murdered in the streets of Dallas. And the new president summoned me to Air Force One, hired me that day and I flew back with him as his newly hired, special assistant.

That night, the very night of his first night of his presidency, he lay in bed in his bedroom in Spring Valley. Bill Moyers and Cliff Carter were there until about 11 o'clock to three o'clock in the morning. And we were all watching television. The commentators all over the world expected this new leader of the free world. And he talked about what he wanted to do to pass Kennedy's civil rights bill, which had been hung up, as he put it, "too God-damned long" in the Senate. He was going to get it out.

VIETNAM AND THE PRESIDENCY
INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE

3.11.06

PAGE 5

He talked about having a voting rights bill, passing President Truman's medical insurance. But Vietnam was not mentioned on that first night. I have to say that what President Johnson wanted to do, and he made it clear to me and others, he wanted to make sure that the legacy of John Kennedy, all the things that he sought to achieve, were kept in place.

Five days after he was president, Ted Sorensen wrote a brilliant speech for him, in which he rose before a joint session of the Congress and said, "President Kennedy said, 'Let us begin.' I say, let us continue." Now on the day that he had his hand upraised on that airplane, we had over 16 thousand fighting men in Vietnam. They were disguised as advisors but they were heavily armed and they were in the field.

One of the unanswerable questions is, if there were no troops in Vietnam at that time, would Johnson have sent them? I don't know the answer. All I know is that he determined to keep in place every single advisor to President Kennedy and every member of Kennedy's cabinet, and he did. I happen to believe, politically that was a mistake.

But my opinions at that time weren't relevant. And I think it is fair to say, Ted can offer his judgment, every aide to President Kennedy, when they left, they left under their own steam. He wanted to make sure that the country knew that he would not disrupt any policy that Kennedy had in place. Now, later on in this panel, I can take some of the things that we learned in

Vietnam, that I think Iraq, that comes out of Iraq, this sour odor of this same aroma that we found in Vietnam.

And there is a lot to be learned from that. But I have to say that President Johnson determined, as I said, to hold on to Kennedy's legacy, whatever he thought that would be. And the idea of getting out of Vietnam at that time was alien to him because that would like a repudiation. And then, we got deeper and deeper. And the Pentagon would come forward with, "We can do this on the cheap, Mr. President. We can do this and that interdictive Ho Chi Minh trail. Do a little bombing and the North Vietnamese will come to the table."

But, if I may-- We learned something in Vietnam. I happened to have fought two wars, one as a 21-year old combat pilot, whose greatest achievement in World War II after 51 missions was I survived. Believe me, that is no inconsiderable achievement. The second one is fighting a war in Vietnam I learned one thing, four things. One, that no president can win a war when public support for that war begins to decline and evaporate.

It is like setting a heavy body loose down a hill. And once it goes, you lose control of it. There is a line that I read somewhere that says, "The people grow tired of a confusion whose end is not in sight. That is the primary thing that I learned is you cannot fight the war without public support. The second thing is, you cannot, no matter what mighty army you are, conquering a foreign war, you cannot win against an insurgency that springs

from the population with their traditions and their religion and their culture. It never has been done in history, in Afghanistan, in Dien Bien Phu, American colonies and you name it. There has never been an insurgency that didn't prevail against a mighty power.

And the third thing I learned was that if you are going to fight an enemy, you've got to know who they are. You've got to know their ancestral rhythms and their traditions, their mores, their customs. I remember one time going into the President's office and saying, "Mr. President, I would like to have you invite Bernard Fall and other historians of Indochina to tell you who are these people. What do we know about them?"

And he said, "I think that's a good idea. Go see Bundy." And I went to see McGeorge Bundy who said, "Listen, Jack," he said, "we have our own historians at the Agency, the CIA, and State. And our historians know as much as anybody needs to know about that country." Well, as I left, I said to Mac, "That may be so, Mac, but I haven't seen any of our historians briefing the President on who these people are."

And the fourth thing I learned was, that the Pentagon, about 60 to 70% of all their forecasts-- And by the way, this is done through retrospective wisdom, as makes us all very smart. Sixty to 70% of all the estimates, the forecasts, the recommendations they made turned out to be wrong. Now, I'm not saying-- Believe me there are two things, I never caustically criticize any president of any party because I know what he has to go through.

And I don't believe that the Pentagon, McNamara on down, were developing delusive juices to pass on to the President about body counts and what they were-- I don't believe that at all. They just were wrong. I learned in Hollywood that nobody knows anything. [Laughter] And I learned that in the government nobody knows anything. And Wall Street, nobody knows anything.

The vagaries of error infect us all. And when you rely totally on the military, no matter how gifted they are (General Haig, you excepted of course), they can be wrong. And there General Clausewitz who was a Prussian strategist who once said that in battle things happen you call friction. That the minute the battle begins, you define friction as something that wasn't anticipated in the battle plan. And therefore friction multiplies. And he said, "Friction is what distinguishes war from war games."

And finally, we were operating under a delusion called the domino theory. Eisenhower believed it. Kennedy believed it. Johnson believed it. I don't know about Nixon and Ford. But it turned out to be a piece of defunct mythology, the idea that if Vietnam fell, all of Indochina would fall.

Now, those are the four things I learned. And after that, I am absolutely vacant of any other great ideas. [Laughter]

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Always good to have the vacant Jack Valenti with us.

[Laughter] We have, in addition to past is prologue, then, a few questions to work with here, including, “Nobody knows anything,” and “defunct mythology.” And Dr. Kissinger, that is where I’ll start with you. In the rear view mirror of history, was the domino theory, indeed, defunct mythology?

HENRY KISSINGER: One can’t answer that question because there is a division of opinion on the subject. There are people who argue, who live in the area, that if Vietnam had collapsed at the beginning when President Kennedy and President Johnson made the initial commitment, that then all of Southeast Asia would have also collapsed. And Indonesia, which was a closely run case in which we have a Communist insurrection, which was narrowly defeated, would have disintegrated, and this would have had the consequences that were predicted.

After Vietnam collapsed ten years later, 12 years later, the situation in Indonesia had changed. The Communist insurrection had been substantially defeated. So that those particular consequences did not occur. I personally believe that when the United States commits itself with the number of forces that we did, there are consequences. And one cannot pretend that there are not consequences to the defeat of a country on which the security of so much of the free world depended at the time.

But I would like to make a comment about the earlier point. I believe that the presidents who first committed themselves in Vietnam and also continued, did so for a noble motive. I believe that their judgment of the dangers that existed was essentially correct. There were a number of difficulties that arose. One was that they, in all administrations, from Truman through Nixon and Johnson, they all applied the containment theory that worked in Europe to Asia.

And they did not sufficiently appreciate that Vietnam was not a nation as the European nations had been. Secondly, there was not an adequate understanding of the nature of guerilla war and there was not a willingness to face the consequences of the deployment of American forces. The traditional American strategy of attrition could not work against an enemy who did not have to fight because he had no territory to defend.

And we wound up in the grotesque situation that there were North Vietnamese divisions in Cambodia. The whole supply system of North Vietnam went through Laos. Every year 60 thousand troops came through Laos and tens of thousands of supplies and we, in our public debate, argued that those were neutral countries where we could not resist. Those were ground rules that could not work.

Third, and I was part of it, too-- We had a misunderstanding of the nature of negotiations. How many times did President Johnson plaintively say, "Why don't the Vietnamese turn the key because they can unlock the door to

peace?” We did not understand that for the North Vietnamese that a compromise was the equivalent of a defeat. They had not fought for 20 years in order to make a compromise. And that one could not come to a negotiated solution unless there was a military outcome.

And we kept presenting to ourselves the war as a choice between diplomacy and warfare. And I must say in my personal experience, it took me a while to fully grasp it. And, finally, we have to face as a country the fact that we defeated ourselves. We weren't defeated by the Vietnamese. We defeated ourselves by the divisions.

When I first started in these discussions at Harvard and most of my friends, all of my friends were really part of the Kennedy administration, were sympathetic to them. When I started there was a debate what was do-able, what was not do-able. By the time I was in office, the debate had become about the moral quality of American leadership. And there was a almost civil war type division between the contending forces in America.

So the typical, painful choices that had to be made were made in the context that did not permit a real debate. And everybody had some contribution to make to that. And, finally, we have to say to ourselves, when we keep talking about defeat in Vietnam, when you cut military assistance from \$2.4 billion to \$700 million, when you prohibit military action in the face of the most blatant violations, you are bound to lose.

So what we need to learn from Vietnam and one reason I'm here is to see what we can learn in terms of having a more unified public discussion and an ability to look at these issues from the point of view that serious people on all sides have a difficult problem. And, at the end, they didn't manage to come together.

WILLIAMS: Secretary Haig, wearing your hat as General Haig and noting that Valenti has fired the first volley at the military Intelligence here today-- Looking back, how was the information various presidents were receiving from the military now thoroughly documented? How was it so wrong, noting that they always say the invisible member of Congress, the cabinet and presidential advisors, is our old, dear Washington friend Rosy Scenario?

ALEXANDER HAIG: Usually you are wrong. But I think what the misnomer here is that this was the military's decision. Most of our Intelligence apparatus is civilian, the CIA and all the other top agencies. And this started in the Korean War, which hasn't come up in this event. It all confirms, as did yesterday's discussion, that no party, no party in the United States has a monopoly on incompetent crisis management or conflict management. None of them. I've served them all.

I'm the one fellow here that was here on the take-off and the landing. I worked for Bob McNamara as Deputy Special Assistant when we got into the war. I worked for Jimmy Carter during the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, the consequences of which we are still paying for. I worked for

Richard Nixon, of course, and Gerry Ford. And they weren't without their mistakes.

But I think that is the first thing that would line up behind Henry and he has kindly defractionalized this thing and got a little bit more realistic. Now yesterday we had the debate-- How many were in the room yesterday with all our presentations? Quite a few. But I left there a little bit concerned. First, because there was a constant discussion about this being a nationalist conflict, which we never understood in Vietnam. We translated it as a Marxist-Leninist ideological struggle.

Well, the simple facts are that none of the presidents for whom I worked ever was able to detach the Cold War, the US-Soviet relationship, from the struggle in Vietnam. So whatever the historians may say about nationalism versus ideological Marxism, it's irrelevant. It's true but it's irrelevant. Because the war was dominated by East-West relations and the superpower confrontation, believe me. That is part one. So let's dispense with that.

Secondly, we had a perversion of strategic thinking. And there, unfortunately, I'm in the hospitality of the Kennedy Library. But I have to say it began in the Kennedy administration. And that was the spectrum of conflict, you recall. We had nuclear warfare. We had conventional warfare. And then we had guerilla warfare and insurgencies. And we somehow had to learn to deal with all three.

And it created a new school of McNamara-ism where whiz kids were brought in from our faculties here at Harvard, Yale, other places. And I sat there and watched them come in. And I watched their thinking start to impose itself on the entire Pentagon, resulting in what I call incrementalism in the conduct of conflict. And the theory was, and I think we just had Dr. Schelling of Harvard to get some kind of award for his wisdom.

But he is the fellow that brought to the conflict spectrum, the belief that the best way to control the escalation of conflict was to match it, step by step. In other words, it started in the Berlin contingency plan, which we used to call the Poodle Blanket. And I worked on it. And it was repelled by the thinking.

It went something like this. If the Russians block Berlin by platoon of forces, you will be best served by responding by a platoon of forces, so you keep it at a low level of intensity. And that that will bring you conflict management, the outcome of which will be non-conflict. My judgment is precisely the opposite in reality if one reads history.

A conflict, if you enter into it, God forbid, must be entered into it with a full knowledge that your nation is being committed to the sacrifice of its young men and women. And for that reason, every asset of the nation must be applied to the struggle to bring about a quick and prompt, successful end or don't do it. [Applause] That is the second perversion, incrementalism, that has reared its ugly head again in Iraq. How can we believe that this kind of--

We send two and a third divisions into Iraq, when George Bush, Sr. had 26 division equivalents. And he didn't get rid of Saddam Hussein. And that was a conscious decision of grave consequences and that was a big mistake. So we are down trying to police that effort today, aren't we? Now that is another thing.

Now, my friend Jack, who I admire so immensely, because we are Hollywood guys. I've been on MGM's board and I love it. And it was just a great thing. And we made a lot of money selling it to our Japanese friends.

VALENTI: Speak for yourself. [Laughter]

HAIG: Having said that, somebody said there is no domino theory. What in heaven's name? Where have you been? There was a domino theory. And you know who saved us from it? And that is another dimension of the conflict that was totally ignored yesterday, and that's the role of the People's Republic of China and the consequences of splitting China from the Soviet Union for global achievement.

Now, how do I know there was a domino theory? I knew it because when I was in NATO, I got a call from the Chinese ambassador. He said, "I want to talk to you." He came over. He said, "We are going to have to punish Hanoi because they are in the process of overrunning Thailand, Cambodia.

They will surely turn to Burma. And this is going to be done at the sufferance of the Soviet Union.”

Now they had to go in. It cost them 50 thousand dead Chinese because they learned some bitter combat lessons. They hadn't been in war for many years. And, as a result, they lost a lot of people but they did punish Hanoi. And that domino theory collapsed. So we owe the People's Republic of China a great deal of credit for preventing the domino theory, I tell you that. And don't think there wasn't one. There was one, of course.

Now, having said that, let me suggest that we underline what Henry just raised, too, and that was Vietnam. We didn't lose Vietnam. We quit Vietnam. We strangled our effort when the final hours of the bombing at Christmas time took place, and Henry and I know about that. We were very much in favor of it. And it brought Hanoi to its knees.

It also occurred at a time when the Soviet Union's unraveling was very evident. It was beginning a process of advanced decay. When I hear my Republican friends, my Reagan-ites say that Ronald Reagan single-handedly won the Cold War, I say, “Hogwash!” The Cold War was won by every American president in both parties throughout the spectrum of that conflict joined by our European friends and many other allies around the world. We did it incompetently and competently. But it was the deciding factor.

Now, what brought the Soviet Union to its knees, a flawed political system which inevitably was doomed from the day it was installed. And that's what leaders should be telling the American people. Not that some smart politician was able to defeat it when nobody else was. I used to give speeches in NATO Europe in the seventies. Gosh, I can remember first to the North Atlantic Council. I said, "The Soviet Union is in an advanced state of decay. And if we just stay together and stay united and stay strong we are going to witness its demise in our lifetime."

Now, I think Ronald Reagan played a big role as a catalyst in the inevitable, historic process. But, there is my little contribution. And I hope we will get down to the realities of what we are discussing here today because we are in the midst of another struggle where, it appears to me, we haven't learned very much.

WILLIAMS: Secretary Haig, thank you.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Well, then, we are officially underway. [Laughter] And back to you, Ted Sorensen, present as you were at the creation. We've now just heard the expression, whiz kids, thrown around as a pejorative, that combination of intellectual candlepower and post-World War II military fire power, the campaign Eisenhower v. Kennedy was about the missile gap. I used the word swagger in my first question to you.

How much do you think that there was a sense of drunkenness combined with a misunderstanding, naïveté having to do with what Jack Valenti talked about as the ancestral rhythms and what we later learned with the unending military strength of the Vietnamese forces, that led the United States into the fix it got in?

SORENSEN: Are you asking me to comment on Jack's ancestral rhythms?

[Laughter]

WILLIAMS: Oh, good Lord. We will be here all day.

SORENSEN: I wouldn't say-- You've got the wrong administration when you talk about a sense of drunkenness. I think that sense of headiness-- I have always thought, since the Bay of Pigs, that the first 100 days in any administration is the most dangerous time because there is a sense of headiness. The new president has just taken office. He has won the election against all the predictions to the contrary.

He's taken over the most powerful position in the free world. There is a big iron fence around the White House that keeps out anybody that wants to object or protest or tell you otherwise. You are surrounded by people who say, "Yes, Mr. President. You are absolutely right, Mr. President." It is a dangerous time. A new president thinks he has a magic touch and can do no wrong.

Kennedy discovered at the Bay of Pigs that that was absolutely untrue. But Vietnam did not rise during that period. Laos was more of a concern. In Eisenhower's last briefing to Kennedy-- He warned him that he would probably have to send combat troops to Laos. And Kennedy never did. He tried to neutralize Laos, which I'm sure some of the people at this table think was a mistake because the North Vietnamese were using the trails through Laos to send men and material to South Vietnam.

But Vietnam itself, as I mentioned, was not a major issue for Kennedy. Eisenhower had begun the policy of the sending in military advisors and instructors. Jack, or someone here said, that was merely a disguise. They were actually combat troops. That may well be. I don't know that as a fact. But Kennedy reinforced the policy of sending in advisors and instructors.

Three different missions were sent to Vietnam. One was headed by Vice President Lyndon Johnson. Another one by chief of military Joint Chiefs of Staff, Max Taylor, a wonderful general. Another by-- First he was Deputy National Security Advisor, later Assistant Secretary of State for Asia, Walt Rostow. All three of those missions came back and said essentially the same thing, "Mr. President, you have to send combat troop divisions to South Vietnam. That is the only way to save South Vietnam. And you have to bomb North Vietnam. That is the other essential."

And Kennedy listened to all three reports but never once did he send combat troop divisions to South Vietnam or bomb North Vietnam. The best speech Kennedy ever made on Vietnam, interestingly enough, he made in 1954, when he warned Eisenhower and the American people from the Senate floor that we could not replace the French colonialists in Vietnam. As Al Haig said, it was a nationalist war and they were sick of having foreign troops on their soil.

And no western power, the United States or the French, was going to win such a battle. And the young Senator John Kennedy said it would be futile, hopeless for us to send combat troop divisions there and he never did.

WILLIAMS: Jack, after Secretary Haig mentioned his quote about every asset of a nation has to be put into the effort quickly, promptly for resolution of the war or don't do it. Back to those tapes again, two notable things from Lyndon Johnson's late night phone conversations. He says to Dick Russell, "I don't know whether to get all the way in and I can't get all the way out." The Situation Room calling at two, three, four in the morning, Mr. President, we had four aircraft out tonight. Three of them returned.

He was notorious for spending sleepless nights in the Sit Room, really guiding individual sorties and missions. The micro management of the war. Why? His kind of jumping in with one foot, limited fighting of the war that John McCain has complained about. The target fighting of the war that John

McCain has complained about. The target list he was given as a pilot, that the targets to avoid outnumbered the targets to hit.

VALENTI: One thing we have to understand is that hindsight is such a spectacular asset because we see everything in all its full, glorious reality. The fact is that every president has to deal in real time. What order do I give at nine o'clock tomorrow morning? I remember when Walter Lippman and Scotty Reston would come in fulminating about the war. President Johnson would give them a yellow pad and a lead pencil.

He would say, "Okay, write down for me, Walter, what is the order I give at nine o'clock tomorrow morning?" And, of course, all of a sudden it is misty, kind of philosophical answers but nobody could write it down. The fact is that you have to deal in real time. Johnson's greatest fear, which I heard him utter to me privately dozens of times, he felt that he might start World War III. He used to say that some AV is going to drop a bomb down some smokestack of a Russian freighter in Haiphong Harbor and the pilot will be from Johnson City, Texas and we've got World War III going on.

He had a terrible horror of that. Now, you can talk about military adventures, but when you are president, the specter of another war like that is quite terrifying. So, whenever I hear people talk about-- And I say this-- I happen to have a great devotion and admiration for Henry. Because I think Henry is one of the great political philosophers of our time. And I certainly admire Al Haig immensely.

VIETNAM AND THE PRESIDENCY
INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE

3.11.06

PAGE 22

But I differ with him on the idea that you go all out because going all out has consequences. You will incite people like China. But remember MacArthur, crossing the Yalu and suddenly China comes in and we had the God-damnedest mess you ever saw, a bloody mess in Korea. Clausewitz was right. Friction comes in. Things you never anticipate happen. Johnson did personally say, "I don't want to get too close to Hanoi."

And he used to examine the SAM sites to make sure that we didn't go too close to Hanoi. It was a limited incursion, no question about that. But the obverse side of that is going all out. What new gargoyles do you incite? And second, trying to impress upon nations that have no democratic history, a democratic government is damn hard to do. I remember then President Diem was assassinated in October of '63. And after that Vietnam had a succession, a kind of a revolving door of new governments, one coup after another.

I remember, Ted. I went in to see him one morning. I said, "I just heard from State Department, Mr. President. There is another coup in Vietnam." And Johnson just became agitated and he said, "God damn it. I'm sick and tired of this coup shit that keeps coming back all the time." You couldn't install a government. Now we are engaged in Iraq now. We are trying to impress upon a people without democratic traditions a democratic institution.

VIETNAM AND THE PRESIDENCY
INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE

3.11.06

PAGE 23

Democracy gets very messy. And suddenly you've got people in power, democratically elected like Hamas in Palestine that we don't like, that we don't want. But that is the democratic process. Sometimes in this country we elect people that half the country doesn't like. But that is the process of democracy. [Applause] So, I'm saying to you, I think America ought to stay out of alien adventures in foreign places unless our security is directly affected.

Because you set in motion a train of events that once you let that body down the hill, as I said earlier, you lose control over it. So all I'm saying to you is that I saw President Johnson agonize on this. Bill Moyers and I were in his bedroom every morning at seven o'clock, 12 hours difference. He is on the phone with McNamara about Vietnam, 12 hours difference. Finding out the casualties.

And I remembered one morning. I said, "Mr. President. That's pretty tough, isn't it?" He said, "Let me tell you something, Jack. Sending young men out to die is like drinking carbolic acid every morning. It is not pleasant." So, having lived through that, as I said, I understand what President Bush is going through. I may not agree with everything but I know what he is dealing with now.

And it's a terrible agony for a president. Therefore, the answer is, don't commit your troops and your young men-- And, by the way, it is always young men who go to war and die. The older bastards don't do that. They

stay back and say, “Well, I know you are doing a good job out there,” and so forth. Don’t commit unless our national security is directly affected.

WILLIAMS: It is interesting. The man who gave Hollywood its rating system has given C-SPAN an R-rated-- [laughter] [Applause] Those of you kids watching at home, ask your folks to explain some of the vocabulary you will hear today. Dr. Kissinger, the part of-- As I made clear at the start, part of our forum here today. It will come as a surprise to no one that the cards are already coming in. This next question is asked of all four of you. But it is your turn. Is there anything you would like to apologize for?

KISSINGER: This is not the occasion for this sort of a question. So if I can comment on what was said before-- We have to start from the assumption that serious people were making serious decisions with the national interest and the world interest at heart. And so, this is a sort of question that is highly inappropriate.

Now, I’d like to make a comment on what Jack said. There was a Cold War-- It’s in defense of the original decisions. There was a Cold War going on. There had been a Berlin ultimatum in 1957. There was a Berlin ultimatum in 1961. There was a 50-megaton bomb exploded in September 1961. There had been a nuclear missile sent to Cuba. So therefore to think that events in the world were connected was not an irrational decision. It was a very rational decision.

Now, the friends I had in the Kennedy administration were explaining to me and I think they had a good point. The guerilla war was a new form of warfare. It was being added to nuclear war and conventional war that the previous administrations had managed to stop nuclear war and conventional war. And it was the task of the Kennedy administration to stop guerilla war. It was an absolutely rational decision.

And the sending of advisors, considering that President Eisenhower had recommended to President Kennedy to send combat troops to Laos as the first step in the administration. It was also a very understandable and rational decision. The next question then is about going all out. You have the choice about sending 500 thousand troops or not sending 500 thousand troops. But you don't have the choice between winning and losing once you have sent 500 thousand troops.

And then, when you have sent 500 thousand troops, how to extricate yourself becomes a problem that you cannot deal with by the gradualist assessment of what you do everyday, which runs with it, having the other side match it every day. And you then go up and do an endless war.

The Nixon administration didn't send the 500 thousand troops. It found the 500 thousand troops. And how you extricate when you are the country on which the security of the world depends? First, how you extricate 500 thousand troops technically? The amount of time it takes when you are surrounded by a million North Vietnamese and a million South Vietnamese

who could turn on you if you suddenly pull the plug. This is a very complicated-- this is a question that could not be dealt with by slogans and by advocating peace.

And all the decisions that we have made had to be seen in that context. Were mistakes sometimes made? That is open to a lot of debate. But that sort of question, it sort of implies that there is some horrible guilt that people ought to be allowing when they face the situation of 500 thousand Americans. In fact it is true those 500 thousand Americans-- And without the catastrophe that could have happened.

That is not an appropriate question. It has nothing to do with my own personal feelings. It has to do with how, as a country, we look at ourselves. That serious people make serious decisions ought to be taken for granted. And then we can have a meaningful debate and we can come to answers that guide us. That way is a way of dividing us, torturing ourselves and making it easy for ourselves.

Because there is no reason to suppose that the people who ask that sort of question have a more elevated moral standing than people who everyday face the sort of decisions that Jack Valenti faced. And when you know that if it comes out wrong, your country and the free people depends on it.

WILLIAMS: Respectfully, Jack--

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Just one moment. Respectfully, Dr. Kissinger. I'm seeing this as a theme running through a lot of these questions coming up here. And as the advocate for the questioners in the audiences-- Quote: "You policymakers ripped the heart and soul from 58 thousand 245 American families. What do you say to those families and the sacrifices they made because of your lack of knowledge, lack of understanding, lack of caring?" It has been 30 years. There is a whole lot of anger about the conflict, Dr. Kissinger. That is what the question is meant to--

KISSINGER: But anger is not enough. You owe it to yourself to analyze what the implications are and what the real choices were.

HAIG: Let me add something here. You know, everybody likes to personalize this. And this whole debate has gotten between presidential advocates. And that is not the issue at all. The issue is what we learned from the bloody lessons of history. You know, as Winston Churchill was asked once, "How do you become a statesman?" And he replied, "Read history, young man. Read history."

The history of the Cold War, there are some conclusions to be drawn from it because we may be entering another global conflict with radical Islam. And that is why these meetings are so significant, so important. And it is so important that we strip out what I call the partisanship and get down to the

historic realities. One of those historic realities, Jack, is that the over estimation of the Soviet Union throughout the span of the Cold War.

As I look back on-- I started out working for Douglas MacArthur. And I received the first call from Muccio in Seoul announcing the North was coming south. And we automatically over-estimated, right then and there, the Soviet Union. It dominated everything. The Cold War is a prime example of that. And that is why I say--

I wrote a memo to Joe Califano in 1965 when I was working for Bob McNamara. And I said, "The way we are starting to get involved in Vietnam is a sure path to defeat." And I was talking about incrementally. And Joe brought that down to me recently when he was writing his, I guess you would call it a memoir. And he said, "Al, how did you know?" And I said, "Because we went into the war in a tentative way, thinking we could have guns and butter at the same time." Do you remember that debate Jack, during the Johnson years and the Kennedy years?

And my point is this-- And that's why I was so strongly behind the statement made by our guest speaker last night, Halberstam, who said, "We never should have dumped the draft." I think the dismissal of the draft as a system where our young people grow up feeling some obligation to serve their country one way or the other, in uniform or out, was not only an important social aspect of our society, it was the core of our patriotism.

Who in the Congress of the United States would have put up with ten years of insanity in Vietnam if their young people had been on the firing line and bleeding and dying like the youngsters from our inner cities and our farms whose parents had no influence. And that is why I said to President Nixon when he called me in and said, "I hear you are trying to sabotage my study on doing away with the draft."

And I said, "That is right because you are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Get a draft that is fair and honest and ecumenical in every sense of the word. Every youngster serves, not just the non-influential young kids in America."

WILLIAMS: Ted Sorensen--

VALENTI: May I just say something?

WILLIAMS: Go ahead, Jack.

VALENTI: I wish you had sent that memo to Bob McNamara. President Johnson used to say, "A president's judgment is no better than his information." I promise you, Al, as I sat in every single meeting, from November 22nd for three years that the President sat in on Vietnam, I took copious notes, which are at the LBJ Library of what everybody said at the time so they can't deny what they were saying.

The fact is, the Pentagon is the one who was saying, “We can win the war on the cheap, Mr. President. A little bombing here. We can interdict these guys carrying a band of ammunition, a rifle and a bag of rice coming down Ho Chi Minh trail. We can do this and they then will come to the table.” They didn’t realize what Henry said. They weren’t about to come to the table.

But the President was relying on the forecast, the estimate, the recommendations of that came from the Pentagon, who was supposed to be the custodians of all truth that happened in Vietnam. So that memorandum, which was quite accurate, should have been directed to McNamara and John Norton and McNaughton and all these people. So when he came to the President, he could say, “Mr. President, let me tell you what Al Haig said, and I agree with him.

HAIG: I will tell you what Bob McNamara said. He said, “Haig is the only army officer I know who tells me what he thinks.” And I was then a lieutenant colonel.

Well, what I mean what happens then is you get men who don’t advance in the military structure unless they are what I call “responsive” to the political leadership. And when you get that kind of a guy, we are teaching the wrong values to our military officers. And that is why I like to see our young military officers go to Harvard and Yale and Princeton and get the kind of

education that drives them into some broader considerations as they go up the line where they are going to have heavier responsibility.

VALENTI: State's teachers college, too.

HAIG: Not bad. Not bad.

KISSINGER: One of the problems with the analysis was that they made a cost-benefit analysis. And they thought they could make the North Vietnamese pay more at every step than they could gain. And that is sort of a statistical way of looking at this. But these people were revolutionaries. They fought all their lives. And very early-- I was not at the beginning. I was mostly focused on Europe. Very early there was an interview that Pham van Dong had with Herad in Salzburg.

Pham van Dong was the prime minister of North Vietnam. And he said, "We are going to win because there are more North Vietnamese willing to die for South Vietnam than there are Americans." And, therefore, once you are were engaged in that war, if you did not bring it to a military conclusion, if you fought it as a war of attrition in which you were trying to calculate precisely to do not a thing more than was being done to you, you were bound to lose.

WILLIAMS: Ted Sorensen, you wanted in on this, I believe.

SORENSEN: Well, if we are going to get into a contest of our old memos here-- [laughter] I could get out mine in which I said to President Kennedy very, very early, if there was ever a country that had to save itself, Vietnam is that country. There is also one, Jack, to President Johnson during the three months that I stayed on and served President Johnson in which I said to him that before any commitment is made the Vietnamese Government must agree to implement all of the reforms we had insisted upon for them to get the support of the Vietnamese population in the countryside: tax reforms, land reforms, administrative reforms, political reforms and so forth. So, anyway, you were about to ask me a question.

WILLIAMS: I was about to ask you about President Kennedy's feelings following the assassination of Diem.

SORENSEN: President Kennedy was shocked by the assassination of Diem. He was not a big fan of Diem because at that time Diem only had, ten years earlier, had some hope for as a Democrat who could obtain true independence and self-determination for South Vietnam. By that time Diem had come under the control of his corrupt brother, brother's wife, some of the landlords in that country and Diem was refusing to accept any one of those reforms I had listed a minute ago, which I had repeated in my memo to President Johnson because he was new on the job.

But he didn't want Diem killed, and there had been a long debate inside the government over the text of a letter going out to our ambassador in Saigon,

who every month would say, “Oh there is a new coup attempt”-- which Jack represented a little more frankly-- “new coup attempt being reported” and the question is would the United States shine a green light or red light on the coup attempts and Kennedy, it’s true, was getting fed up with that government, but he did not want a coup attempt that was going to assassinate President Diem.

WILLIAMS: So because there is that memorandum to file that exists on tape and all that analysis of it and because we’re here, this would be a good time to lay it on the record like a good prosecuting attorney. President Kennedy had nothing to do with the assassination of President Diem?

SORENSEN: Definitely not. Definitely not.

WILLIAMS: Secretary Kissinger, several questions-- this is going to shock you-- on the Christmas bombing. What was the justification for bombing Cambodia that eventually led to the rise of Khmer Rouge and the atrocities committed? And-- let me link that with this-- can you explain the reasoning in widening the air war into Cambodia and Laos without telling the Congress or the American public?

KISSINGER: First of all, the premise of that question is totally wrong, but I’ll be glad to tell you what happened. The premise of the question that the bombing of a five-mile strip along the Cambodian border led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge-- and that the Khmer Rouge then murdered two million

people all because of American action-- it's an example of a kind of masochism that is really in many ways inexcusable.

Let me describe exactly what happened. There had been a bombing halt negotiated at the end of the Johnson administration. The negotiations were supposed to start and were just starting. President Nixon came in at the end of January 1969. Within four weeks after he came in, on February 22 a North Vietnamese attack started in which 500 Americans a week were being killed.

After we had agreed to a bombing halt and had observed the bombing halt, President Nixon waited for four weeks until we had had two thousand dead. That is more than we have had in all the years in Iraq. And then he did not want to end the bombing halt. And he decided to concentrate on the four North Vietnamese villages that were located in sanctuaries within eight or ten kilometers, however you translate that into miles, five plus miles, along the border.

Came into South Vietnam, killed Americans, then went back into the sanctuaries. In January 1968 Sihanouk, the ruler of Cambodia had told Chester Bowles that he did not know what was going on in the region, that the North Vietnamese had expelled all the Cambodians, that the United States was, in effect, free to do that it wanted in those regions.

So it was in this context that President Nixon ordered attack on the sanctuaries. The original plan was that we would make the attack. We would wait for somebody to protest. We would then ask for a UN investigation of the claim. They would find sanctuaries. We would then go on from there. To our amazement, nobody protested. Nobody said anything. Not Sihanouk, not the North Vietnamese.

So then, gradually, at first slowly and then very regularly the bombing continued. The argument that Cambodians were driven out of the sanctuaries into Cambodia is an absolute untruth. There were practically no Cambodians living there. Nobody had ever seen any casualties. Later on, when the war spread deeper into Cambodia, when the North Vietnamese tried to take the rest of the country, that was no longer the case.

Then there were Cambodians casualties. But one of the myths that has to be cleaned up is that why should the United States respect sanctuaries from which Americans are being killed along the Vietnamese border where the head of the government had said, that he did not-- And, in fact, that he would welcome some American action. And said it again, which is never reported. He said it at a press conference.

He said, if a Cambodian-- I hear about these attacks. If a buffalo is killed, you will hear from me. But since there are no Cambodians living there and since I have no report of casualties, I don't recognize that there are attacks going on there. These are the facts of the bombing.

HAIG: Incidentally, the Congress was fully informed. Because I know. We did it. And we had the leaders of the House and the Senate there.

KISSINGER: Twenty-five leaders of the House and Congress were fully informed of this. And this is one of the myths to which an end should be put.

WILLIAMS: Secretary Haig. Does the US bear any moral or other responsibility for the unintended consequences of our use of defoliants like agent orange in Vietnam?

HAIG: Of course. Anything that is done, it wasn't done intentionally. Nobody did that intentionally. They were trying to save lives and to defoliate areas where infiltrators were moving without opposition to kill innocent civilian women and children in South Vietnam. And they did it wholesale. But the consequences were very, very bad.

WILLIAMS: Jack Valenti. A question came up to this degree and it is not meant to sound as flip as it may come off. The air war in Gulf War I really took place as the quote, "Softened the ground prior to General Schwarzkopf ground invasion without any press coverage at all. The Pentagon, in effect said, "No. Look away." How would such a policy, if you could have brought down the window shade on news media coverage, military operations on the ground in Vietnam, the subject of a later panel today--

How would such a policy have changed the outcome, in your view of a war that eventually took down your boss?

VALENTI: Well, the fact is there was no censorship in Vietnam. I suppose it is the only war that we fought without censorship. I talked to David Halberstam about this. He said, “Sometimes it was hard to get on helicopters, but literally correspondents could go wherever they chose to go. As he pointed out, you couldn’t get a helicopter. You got a taxicab to go.”

The point is this was the only war fought without censorship. I’m a great believer in having the press cover every war. I think it is important for the people to understand what is going on. Now, the fact is, that every night in living color during that Vietnam War, the body bags came back in avalanching numbers. And I have no doubt that it had an enormous effect on the American public of, “What the heck are we doing there with all of these casualties.”

But without the press you were ignorant. And I’m a great believer-- First, I’m a fierce advocate of the first amendment. And I think that those 45 words is the one clause in the Constitution which guarantees all the others. We wouldn’t have a democratic republic without the first amendment. I’m a great advocate of correspondents covering a war. It does have-- let’s face it-- it does have an effect that those in power find unsuitable because it does change public opinion. But that’s a fact of life. But I see no reason why the press shouldn’t be covering every war.

WILLIAMS: Dr. Kissinger, your name coming up in these questions. When you uttered the iconic statement, “We believe peace is at hand,” did you have a political motivation?

KISSINGER: First of all, I urge all of you to read that press conference. What had happened-- And since there are about 40 thousand phone conversations of mine and endless conversations with President Nixon on many subjects, you will find that politics was not a subject that I ever discussed. We had gone through a year of great agony any of many decisions.

We had faced an all out North Vietnamese offensive, very similar to what the Johnson administration faced in '68. And we had brought the negotiations almost to the point of success. And then it proved too difficult to complete them. The first thing-- And then the North Vietnamese published the text of the negotiations as they then stood.

If you read the press conference, the way this question is put-- And the way it is often presented is, I came out from behind the curtain, I said “Peace is at hand,” ducked behind the curtain, and had a great headline and allegedly of great benefit to President Nixon. If you read the discussions between President Nixon and me during that whole period, he didn't particularly want an agreement. He said he had all the voters except the ones that were fanatically devoted to McGovern. And he couldn't get any of those.

So he really would have preferred if the negotiations had been more protracted. Now, I pushed him and he agreed because we thought we had found the North Vietnamese in having made the first error of analysis. They thought our position would be stronger after the election. We knew that the Congress would probably vote us out of the war after the election. And we knew also that the Pentagon, because of its budgetary constraints had already planned to reduce our forces in B-52's and other aircraft after the election by a third.

So we wanted to use the fact that the North Vietnam thought-- But if you read my press conference-- It was an hour's press conference that went point by point through everything that had been negotiated and it laid out exactly where we stood. My major concern was to keep the parties whose distrust of each other was legendary, to keep the process going so that we could pick up right after the election where we had stood, rather than to have had the whole thing blown up.

All the people that were negotiating with me-- We had spent four years of negotiating. We had committed ourselves to this. And to us, the outcome of the election, that was already pre-ordained at that point, played absolutely no role in the discussion. And I would urge you all, don't just read the sentence. Read the four typewritten, single-spaced copies of the whole text and see whether there was anything in there that was even remotely misleading.

WILLIAMS: Ted Sorensen, we understand a tape was played during a section yesterday. And we hoped to try to merge audio and video and perhaps play it during today's session. Chilling in its use of words like "insurgency." This was the oval office conversation, the President, Maxwell Taylor, McNamara. It was about a drawdown of all things.

It was about the American withdrawal of Vietnam of a date certain. And of all things, a notion to train the local Vietnamese to take over their own conflict. The comparisons are clear. I think it is clear to everyone in the audience where comparisons between Vietnam and Iraq fall flat on their face. Which ones do you see as applicable?

SORENSEN: First, what is that date? Is that October 1st?

WILLIAMS: What was the date on the conversation?

DAVID KAISER: October 2nd.

WILLIAMS: October 2nd. Which comparisons do you find applicable? So much conversation today about the war in Iraq.

SORENSEN: I think there are some comparisons. Although as Al Haig's, Lieutenant Colonel Haig's memo to Joe Califano pointed out, we are getting into the war in Vietnam. His memo, I think he said, was dated 1965, and

President Kennedy was killed in 1963. So my first hand knowledge is limited. But I think that in Vietnam we were facing then and in Iraq we are facing now a people determined to throw out foreign troops. And it is almost impossible to defeat those insurgents.

I think that we are facing in Iraq now a bitterly divided cultural, whatever you want to call it, sectarian, ethnic or otherwise situation as we were in Vietnam then. I'm told there are some back channel negotiations going on now between some of our military in Iraq and some of the insurgent leaders.

I have said earlier that during President Kennedy's time, had been leaders of the Viet Cong who could have negotiated on behalf of anyone, whether it was the North Vietnamese or even the Viet Cong rank and file-- I think that Kennedy and Bundy would have found a way to open negotiations with them. But in those days there were no negotiations possible. As I said in an Op Ed piece not so long ago, Kennedy said, "If they ever ask us to leave, we will be on the boat the next day." And it is not that difficult to arrange for the Iraqi government that we put in power to ask us to leave. I hope they will do that soon.

WILLIAMS: And General Haig, a question for you which may have been asked and answered, but maybe you want to take a second whack at this in this context. Do you believe that the Vietnam War could have been won by the United States?

HAIG: Of course. There is no doubt about it. And I saw it first hand in the Christmas bombing. And I discussed it with poor President Nixon before he died. And he described the greatest mistake of his presidency was his failure to end the war decisively by bringing the facts of the war to the Soviet Union in nothing but straight, threatening ways. And to apply the power that we had at our disposal, which in the matter of several weeks brought Hanoi to its knees, the Christmas bombing.

And our prisoners were released and they were back in Paris making concessions that they had heretofore never expressed a willingness, although they went from a base developed before those bombings, which were the framework. So, what really happened was the President was threatened with impeachment if he continued the bombing. Everyone in his cabinet abandoned him and told him he had to cease the bombing.

If he had gone on with it another three to four months, it is my view a victory would have been to have, the North would draw back to the Geneva Accord's agreement, the 38th parallel. And I think they would have. They simply could not do it because of the political situation.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Dr. Kissinger. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt the applause. Dr. Kissinger, from your old friend in the audience, your old friend, Ambassador Bill van den Heuvel there is this. In a memorandum to

Gerald Ford, where the President asked you what lessons there were to be learned from Vietnam you wrote, quote, "There are really not many, that many lessons."

In the light of the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq, do you see any lessons of the war in Vietnam that might be relevant for us?

KISSINGER: I don't have the memorandum clearly in mind. And it may be applied to the situation of '75. Are there lessons to be learned from Vietnam? Yes, there are a number of lessons to be learned. A few of them I already mentioned. There has been a lot of talk here about reform. And it is absolutely true that it would be highly desirable to be involved in situations where the government and the people are in harmony with each other.

Those, however, are the least likely situations to arise. Then, too, the problem which we faced in Vietnam, which we are facing today in Iraq, how much reform can you do simultaneously with fighting a war? And that is a question which we have found extremely difficult to solve. In Vietnam we had one advantage compared to Iraq, that we had a very homogeneous population. And towards the end of the Vietnam War, there was a government that was substantially in control of its region.

In Iraq we are facing a society that is split into sectarian and ethnic groups and in which, therefore, there is no national-- There is not an adequate sense of nationhood. And where even a government when it is formed will more

likely see its ministers represent sectarian divisions and sectarian interests than national interests. And the question that we need to address is not whether we should be committed to democracy. Of course, we should be committed to democracy.

But the pace at which it can be achieved and the relationship especially in situations like Iraq and Vietnam, to the immediate security situation-- I know the problem better than the answer. But it is one of the challenges we absolutely face.

WILLIAMS: Jack, in the war as we mentioned, the war of guns versus butter, where the Johnson administration is concerned, guns won. And this question asks you to comment on your boss' ability to admit or acknowledge errors.

VALENTI: Well, I don't know of any president who goes on television and says, "You know folks, I screwed up." I just don't think they do that.

SORENSEN: Kennedy did after the Bay of Pigs.

VALENTI: Well, that's true. I stand corrected. And his ratings hit sky high after that.

Johnson was honeycombed with contradictions. I have said publicly, as I have said privately, that almost anything you can say about Lyndon Johnson,

VIETNAM AND THE PRESIDENCY
INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE

3.11.06

PAGE 45

good or bad, had a tinge of truth in it. What he was committed to, with a passion that was undiluted and persistent, was trying to reach out to those pressed against the wall because of circumstances over which they had no control.

To reach out to the under-educated young and the poor and the old and the sick and the black-- And I remember that Ralph Ellison, two days before Johnson left office, in a big dinner in New York came up to him. And I was standing there. And he said, "Mr. President, because of Vietnam, you are just going to have to suffer from being the greatest American president we have ever had for the poor and the old and the sick and the black. But," he said, "That's not a bad epitaph."

I think in retrospect, in his retirement in his ranch-- And, by the way, what you saw as a man in retirement who, literally, I think, was welcoming death. Johnson died four years after he left office. His age? Sixty-four. So the war had a terrifying influence on him. I never heard him actually say in private, "You know, I made a big mistake there." But there was implied that perhaps he should have done things differently.

He was caught in this, I guess you might, contradictory area. Fight the war without raising taxes. I think one of his mistakes was, we should have raised taxes. You can't fight a war unless you have the funds to do it. But at the same time he wanted to build his Great Society. And you were at the beginning of that, Ted. And all of us were there. And that was very

expensive and the War on Poverty and Head Start and Medicare and Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Voting Rights Act of '65 and the Civil Rights Act of '64, all very expensive.

That, I think, was a big mistake. We should have raised taxes and tried to fight the war in Vietnam and build the Great Society at the same time. But in the end it was just not possible.

WILLIAMS: There is a story told that your boss lit up a cigarette on what was formerly Air Force One carrying him back to Texas. And when asked about it by Mrs. Johnson he said, "My last couple of years belonged to the country. These next couple belong to me."

VALENTI: Well, that's true. He started smoking cigarettes. His weight ballooned. When he was president, he used to drink Fresca, which completely dismayed people who came to see him. When he asked, "What do you want to drink?" they had to drink Fresca. To Everett Dirksen, that was an abysmal sin. [Laughter] But he took care--

Johnson used to say, and I think this was important, "For the president, it is not enough to do good. You've got to look good. Not only physically, but you've got to look good in the eyes of the people." If you ask me what was his greatest mistake, and I must say I tried desperately to get him to do this, I wanted the President, during that Vietnam War to go on television-- And make a series of no more than ten minute talks, making it clear to everybody

on television that their favorite sitcom would just be delayed ten minutes but it would continue on to get the whole sitcom.

There is nothing more terrifying to the public than hearing a president and losing *All in the Family* or whatever they were watching. And I said, “Why are we in Vietnam?” would be the theme. What are we doing to reconstruct Vietnam? How are we doing militarily? I tried to say to the President that FDR and Churchill were very transparent with the American people. They told it, as he would say, with the bark off even when there was bad news to give.

For reasons which I cannot fathom, he never said no to me but he never said yes. And he never did it. I happen to believe that was a grand omission that I think he would have had a lot better rapport with the American people if he had talked to them over and again.

Now, he wasn't the great orator, the debonair, witty fellow that came over as the first television president, John Kennedy. But he did have a kind of energy and force about him that I think would have been useful.

WILLIAMS: Ted Sorensen, why didn't the Kennedy-Johnson administrations learn more from the lessons of the French?

SORENSEN: I can't speak for the Johnson administration. Kennedy actually had studied the lessons of the French and had, as I mentioned,

spoken about it first as a member of the House, twice as a member of the Senate, that we did not want to repeat it. That doesn't mean he didn't make errors of omission. Perhaps when I say Vietnam never rose to a high level of study, such as ExCom in the Kennedy administration, perhaps it should have.

Perhaps it was getting worse and he was putting off the decisions as to whether to go in all the way. But there were no errors of commission because he did not go in all the way.

WILLIAMS: Secretary Haig, did Vietnam create the crises of the late 1960's or did the crises of the 1960 create Vietnam?

HAIG: Now that's a very thoughtful question.

WILLIAMS: That's why I asked it. [laughter]

HAIG: I meant to compliment you.

WILLIAMS: It's somebody else's.

HAIG: I think there is no question that Vietnam had a tremendous impact on the American society and all that's followed since. You know, some blame it on the press. I've always said it wasn't bad press that lost Vietnam, it was bad policy. The only contention I would have about the press was

that they didn't know why it was bad policy. And they very seldom got around to describing why it was bad policy. But they were right in their criticisms.

Now, having said that, there hasn't been a thing happen in our capitol since-- And it merged, of course, with Watergate. And the two events, Vietnam and Watergate, are what have made the major impact on post-Vietnam America. There is a fractionalization among the parties today that exceed anything I ever saw in the vitriolic lack of cooperation between the two parties. And we simply have to correct this.

And we also have to, again, re-instill our young people with the desirability of public service. We don't have the same caliber of legislators we had when I entered government, men who thought first of the country and second of the party and its interests. Today it has been reversed and it is one man, one vote. There is no discipline with any committee on the Hill. There is no way a president could bring in a few leaders and make a consensus decision that they will support. Because the more outrageous you are on the Hill, the more attention you get from the press.

WILLIAMS: Secretary Kissinger, a signed question from Professor Jeffrey Kimball, Miami University of Ohio. During October 1969 President Nixon asked the Pentagon to prepare a secret program of strategic military readiness measures, which included nuclear-armed B-52s, readiness measures that Soviet authorities would notice but not notice to the point of

alarming them. To what extent do you believe such military measures would encourage Moscow to be more helpful in acting as an intermediary with Hanoi? Professor, you owe me one.

KISSINGER: First of all, I do not believe that President Nixon ever ordered any specific set of measures such as you have mentioned. What the context-- What some historians are now doing is they pick a document or a sentence and then they ask you a question about it, without explaining the context. The context had been that there had been negotiations in Paris for six months without the slightest progress.

That I had had a secret meeting in Paris where we told the North Vietnamese that we were eager to make progress but that if there were not progress, other steps might be taken. President Nixon had also said this publicly and he had said this to the Soviets. He ordered not any specific set of measures but he ordered a study of what measures were available. We worked on these and finally President Nixon decided that he would not implement any of those measures. And that he would continue more or less with the strategy that was being pursued at the time, which was Vietnamization and simultaneous negotiations.

So you are talking here of a study paper that was never implemented, never submitted to the National Security Council, and which President Nixon decided not to carry out. Is this an accurate description from memory?

HAIG: I think it's pretty good. I wouldn't have been that buttoned down on answering that question. But I don't recall it ever happening-- We did have alerts in the Nixon presidency. And that was during the Yom Kippur War, when we were confronting a unilateral Soviet intervention in the Sinai.

KISSINGER: But you are talking about a Vietnam plan.

HAIG: I don't recall any ever implemented. We had some additional measures of readiness.

KISSINGER: His question referred to an NSC paper--

WILLIAMS: Right.

KISSINGER: --That never went anywhere.

WILLIAMS: Well, you can take that up with the Professor. A question for Messers. Sorensen and Haig. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon all continued and deepened our involvement in Vietnam, at least in part to honor our, quote, "commitment." What harm if any to our role in the world as a country or our leadership from our defeat there in 1975? Mr. Sorensen, you first.

SORENSEN: Not much, frankly. I think it affected morale inside the United States. It made successive administrations fearful of getting

involved, which on balance was probably a good thing. But it may have, at times, contributed to isolationism and, therefore, unilateralism, which is rampant in Washington today. And that, I think, is a bad thing.

WILLIAMS: Secretary Haig, same question.

HAIG: Well, I don't know that I would answer that question any differently than has just been answered, quite frankly.

WILLIAMS: Jack Valenti, a question of tying, again, Iraq and Vietnam. How can we get out of Iraq if you believe no war can succeed without public support and we cannot win when there is an insurgency?

VALENTI: Well, I'm not smart enough to figure out how we get out of Iraq any more than I was smart enough to figure out how to get out of Vietnam, so-- The answer is, I don't know. And I'm not one of those who came out of the Johnson administration saying I was a dove and I was against the war. I was not because I was against the war but I didn't have a suitable alternative to what the President was doing.

His strategy was to try to bring the North Vietnamese to the table so that they could negotiate. Johnson was fond of quoting from Isaiah, "Come, let us reason together." He told me many times privately. He said, "If I could just get in a room with Ho Chi Minh, we could work out something. And let

us get out of this war with some honor and then stop this fighting.” So, I don’t have an answer. And I don't know that anybody has one.

WILLIAMS: Secretary Kissinger, this may require reflection on your part. What did your role, your involvement in the Vietnam War, looking back, do to alter your life? You have been the subject of so many works and books and treatises and screeds on that subject. How is your life different today that you were involved in a policymaking role in that conflict?

VALENTI: Well, he is famous. That is one thing.

KISSINGER: I got involved in Vietnam issues really sort of accidentally. I worked as a consultant in the Kennedy administration but not on any of these issues for a while. And I slipped into a negotiation, almost by accident. In the Johnson administration, I was at a scientific conference, at a conference of scientists where there were two scientists. In the house of one of them Ho Chi Minh had stayed during the negotiations. And he said he would be willing to go to Vietnam and offer assurances of peace and talk to Ho Chi Minh.

And I notified Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara of this. And they asked me to act as a liaison. So I slipped into the Vietnam issues. Then Secretary Lodge invited me to come to Vietnam. And then President Nixon, whom I had opposed in three presidential campaigns, made me his security advisor. So it was not my destiny to be involved in Vietnam.

It now has fundamentally, it has affected my life in the sense that the Nixon debate doesn't seem ever to end. And for many I've become the surviving symbol of the Nixon administration and of the Vietnam period. So there is a great ingenuity being shown to go through masses of documents to find one sentence and separate it from context and that can go on forever given the massive materials.

To me, Vietnam-- I came here as a refugee. I had lived in a dictatorship. For me, America was a very important experience. I did not like to-- I thought it was very important that America maintained its position in the world. So I attempted to bring about the best settlement of which we were capable. I thought we could not afford to collapse and to withdraw unilaterally.

During the Cambodian incursions I had some staff members who wanted to resign in protest. And I told them, "If you stay with me, we will bring about peace in our way." And we thought we did. But this is not necessarily the perception of others. I normally do not participate in these debates. I agreed to come here because the Kennedy family and the Kennedy entourage were important to me at a stage in my life, and to remain friends throughout this whole period with all the divisions.

I had great sympathies for all they went through. I didn't agree on some points later on. And I worked with President Nixon who I think served the

country in foreign policy with enormous distinction and contributed greatly to ending the Vietnam War and creating the structure of the world, which it now exists. And I have no regrets and I had an opportunity to serve the country, which is all anyone can ask for.

[Applause]

SORENSEN: I would like to add one personal word to that because I know Henry has been vilified by many people with whom I have associated over the years. I became an opponent of the Vietnam War when it escalated. And in 1970 there was the Lawyers' Committee against the war in New York, decreed there would be a march on Washington to protest and lobby and so on.

And I said, to the surprise of some, that I would go see Henry Kissinger himself, the National Security Advisor in the White House at the time. And Henry, graciously, gave me an appointment despite the fact that I was on the Nixon enemies' list and was outspoken against the war. The fact that he was willing to reach out and hear me at that time, I think is a testament to the good will he has borne towards those associated with the Kennedys' over the years.

VALENTI: I would like to second what Ted said. I'm a great admirer of Henry Kissinger. I think he always did what he thought was right, even though a lot of people didn't agree with him. But that's the plight of every

VIETNAM AND THE PRESIDENCY
INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE

3.11.06

PAGE 56

public servant and I think he is a great man. My valedictory though is about war itself. Because I don't know how many in the audience share my experiences. I know on this panel, General Haig and I fought in war.

World War II was supposed to be the good war, but it wasn't. All wars are inhumane, brutal, callous and full of depravity. And you learn as young warriors to kill or be killed. It is not a suitable way to live a life. And I remember that when I finished 51 missions I was now sent home when the war was over in Europe. And then I was going to be dispatched for the invasion of Japan, flying a B-25 at 100 feet above the water.

And I must tell you that whenever I hear people, a lot of historians who prattle on about how what an awful thing it was for President Truman to drop those bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I'm always reminded that they were not in uniform at the time or didn't have anybody in uniform. I counted that to be one of the great decisions of all time because we would have suffered casualties in Japan, three, four, 500 thousand. The Japanese weren't going to surrender, just as they didn't do at Iwo Jima and Saipan and all those other places.

So I'm just an opponent of the war because I know what it does to people. And it took me a long time to shake off the anxieties of being in combat. It is something I pray my son never has to do. One final thing. I took him to Omaha Beach when he was 14 years old. And I took him to the American

cemetery, and I made him look at these markers on which were inscribed the bland finalities of a young man's life.

More than 60% of the people buried in that cemetery, 9,387, were between the ages of 18 and 23. And I said to my son, "John, you must read this, name, rank, outfit and the day died. Because these young men gave you the greatest gift one human being can proffer to another. They gave you the gift of freedom. Because you will never have to test your own courage to see how you would react when the dagger is at the nation's belly and death stares you right in the face. And you owe it to these young men and don't you ever forget it."

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: I think it would be a dereliction of my duty not to end on those words, especially since the time has come. With the great thanks of the Presidential libraries to our four panelists here, we must now break for a little over an hour for lunch. We will come back, talk about the media and public opinion with Steve Bell, Frances Fitzgerald, and Dan Rather. Please join me in thanking these gentlemen.

[Applause]