

INTERVIEW I

DATE: August 21, 1969  
INTERVIEWEE: EARLE G. WHEELER  
INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENEY  
PLACE: General Wheeler's office as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

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M: General, I would like to just briefly note your commands before we begin, because I think this is a time period central to our area of discussion. I have down here that in 1960 to 1962 that you were director of the Joint Staff organization within the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This would be here at the Pentagon.

W: That's correct.

M: In 1962 you were deputy commander-in-chief of the U.S. European Command; then from 1962 to 1964, chief of staff of the U.S. Army. In 1964 you were nominated and confirmed as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

W: That's correct.

M: Before we go into your association with Lyndon Johnson, I would like to ask if you have participated in any other oral history project?

W: I participated in an oral history project that was conducted after the assassination of President Kennedy regarding my relationship with President Kennedy during the time that he was president and also the one or two contacts I had with him during his campaign for the

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presidency.

M: That would have been primarily as chief of staff of the U.S. Army, wouldn't it?

W: That is correct.

M: All right, scholars can refer to that transcript and for that reason, we will sort of skip over some of the military developments of that period.

I would like to ask you first when you met Mr. Johnson and did you have any contact with him during his Senate years?

W: I didn't meet President Johnson during the time he was in the Senate. I was out of the country in Europe most of the time. During the three years that I was here, late 1955 until late 1958, I was on the Army staff, but my area of interest was such that there was no reason for me to have any contact with then-Senator Johnson. I testified before a subcommittee of the Senate Preparedness Investigating Committee on a couple of occasions on airlift, but that subcommittee was chaired by Senator Symington and not by Senator Johnson.

The first time I met him really was socially after he assumed the office of vice president in 1961. The first official meeting that I had with him occurred, I think, in early 1961 when President Kennedy was out of the country. We had a flap over the weekend having to do with Haiti, as I recall. There was a meeting convened at State, and I went to it representing the Joint Staff. I was then the director of the Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Vice President Johnson attended this meeting. It was really the

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first time I had ever seen him in action, and I was very much struck by one characteristic which I saw him display thereafter on many occasions. Mainly, he insisted that if we decided to take any action, political or military, that there should first be consultation with the congressional leadership.

Thereafter, I had very little contact with him, except again on a couple of social occasions, until I became chief of staff of the Army on 1 October 1962. Even then when I attended from time to time National Security Council meetings along with the other Chiefs, I had very little personal contact with the then-Vice President Johnson. I would say that my contacts began with President Johnson when he appointed me as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 3 July 1964. And of course, increasingly, during the remainder of his tenure in office, I saw him more and more frequently as the tempo of the war in Southeast Asia increased and as the problems connected with it got to be more and more sizeable.

M: General, we've come to the point in time of your appointment [as chairman of the JCS]. Could you tell me a little bit about this? I have a notation here that this really represented the end of the rotation precedent among the services, although your two previous predecessors as chairman were from the Army.

W: You could consider it a break in precedent or not, depending upon how you break out the time periods. By law, the chairman can be appointed for two two-year terms in time of peace. Now General [Lyman] Lemnitzer, who was my predecessor, was one who succeeded General

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[Nathan] Nate Twining of the Air Force, who served almost four years. Now General Twining retired only a few months before he would have completed four years as the chairman. As I say, Lem only served two years [and] then went to Europe to replace General Lauris Norstad, whose deputy I was in Europe. And General Maxwell D. Taylor was called back from retirement. Actually, he had been called back before and was acting as the President's military advisor. He was appointed as chairman on the same day that I was appointed chief of staff of the Army, 1 October 1962. So you might consider that it was General Taylor who broke the precedent. Then, when General Taylor was asked to become our ambassador to South Vietnam, the President and Secretary McNamara had selected me to replace General Taylor. So maybe I broke the precedent. I'm just not sure.

M: Was there any consultation among the services to find out how they would feel about your appointment?

W: I doubt it. Normally, certainly not on a military level. The Joint Chiefs of Staff pass upon the appointments of all three and four star officers, as you may know. This is an understanding that President Eisenhower made with the Senate Armed Services Committee. However, the Joint Chiefs of Staff consider it inappropriate for them to comment on who should be appointed the chief of a service [Army, Navy, Air Force] or should be appointed the chairman. Now, whether Mr. McNamara or President Johnson talked to the service Secretaries, I don't know.

M: Has Mr. Johnson ever commented to you about how your name was proposed

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to him for this position?

W: I think it was probably proposed by two people, Secretary McNamara and General Taylor. This would be my guess. But he never really said.

M: I'd like to deal, in this first part of the interview, briefly with the types of communication and decision-making process between the Joint Chiefs and the President or the White House. First, I would like to ask you what the channels of communication are between you and the White House?

W: Well, in the first place, by law the Joint Chiefs of Staff are, as a body, the military advisors to the President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense. We convey our advice to the President in several ways. One, we prepare formal papers which go to the Secretary of Defense. From time to time, we will have as a last paragraph something which says the Joint Chiefs of Staff desire or the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend that this paper be forwarded to the President for his information. Secondly, from time to time, President Johnson would meet with all the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Now this was a practice that was followed also by preceding presidents and also by Mr. Nixon. But, for example, before we put the budget to bed, as always, there was a meeting of the President with the Secretary of Defense and all the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. President Johnson used to have these meetings down at the Ranch normally, sometime during early or mid-December depending upon the agenda of the calendars of the various principals involved. Then on other occasions, he would ask all of the Chiefs to attend a

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National Security Council meeting. On two or three occasions, President Johnson would have what I would call a more informal meeting with the Joint Chiefs. He would have us all over to lunch with the Secretary of Defense.

However, as time went on and the business, particularly the war in Southeast Asia, as I referred to earlier, got hotter, generally it was I who spoke to the other Chiefs. This was just a matter of convenience. In other words, trying to get five people around the table and so on is rather burdensome from a logistic point of view, if nothing else. So as time went on, as I say, his custom became to have me attend all of the meetings that had anything to do with military business. These would be Cabinet meetings, National Security Council meetings, and then, when Walt Rostow became the special assistant for national security affairs, President Johnson started the so-called Tuesday Luncheons, which I always attended. I was one of the regular invitees. Now, the people that attended these luncheons [were]: of course the President; the Secretary of State; the Secretary of Defense; Mr. Helms, Director of Central Intelligence; myself; and Walt Rostow. In addition, from time to time Mr. [Clark] Clifford would attend. He was then the chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. But he was also an advisor to the President on many other things. They have been friends for many years. From time to time, Mr. Justice Fortas would attend the luncheons. From time to time--this was after General Taylor returned from being retired as ambassador to South Vietnam--General Taylor would attend.

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The President wanted his advice on matters political and military, particularly political, having to do with South Vietnam.

Also, quite frequently George Christian, the press secretary, would be there, and also Tom Johnson or somebody like that to take notes. Occasionally Vice President Humphrey would attend, but these occasions were usually when matters of legislative or political nature were being discussed.

Now, these luncheons were very interesting affairs because the range of problems discussed was not confined to the military at all, but went right across the full spectrum of areas of presidential interest at the time. Generally though, there would be at least some military or military security matters involved. Now on those occasions I mentioned, Cabinet meetings, National Security Council meetings, special meetings of various kinds in the Cabinet Room with small groups of his advisors and these Tuesday Luncheons, I would put forward the military point of view when it was necessary or comment on anything else as far as that goes. Mr. Johnson didn't confine me to commenting on military affairs at all.

M: General, could you comment on these various types of meetings that you mentioned from Cabinet meetings to National Security Council to the Tuesday Luncheons, as to their regularity and as to their being a decision-making body.

W: President Johnson didn't really use the Cabinet meetings as a decision-making apparatus. It was there that he discussed problems with the members of his Cabinet, got their viewpoints on various programs,

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found out what progress was being made in various programs, and so on. I'm not trying to indicate that no decisions ever came up out of these. I'm sure they did, because a record was always kept, of course, and I'm sure Mr. Johnson, being the kind of man he is, why this stuff kept churning around in his head and eventually turned into a decision.

National Security Council meetings, yes. They were smaller, of course, because usually we would have the statutory members of the NSC present. Generally speaking, we were dealing with problems having to do with the national security interests. And before Mr. Johnson would make a decision, for example, on such a thing as putting troops into the Dominican Republic, he always had a meeting with the National Security Council and got the views of the membership.

Now the Tuesday Luncheons, I think, became more and more a decision-making forum as time went on. President Johnson, as you no doubt know, likes to get the views of any number of people before he makes a decision. There was nothing unusual at all for him to say, "Well, now, I called" so and so, and so and so, and so and so last night. These would be people all around the country. [He was] just taking their pulse, you see, to find out what their reaction was to this situation or that situation. He was a great telephone-user. So was President Kennedy, I might add. He liked to get a number of views. He was a good question-asker. His method of doing business was contrary to that of President Kennedy who liked to see things in writing. He [Kennedy] read very fast. He absorbed things quickly



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in writing. President Johnson preferred to use, I imagine, the system that he developed when he was majority leader on the Hill, [that] of getting people in a small smoke-filled room and boring into a subject until he had picked your brains and, I suppose, examined all of the facets of the problem, before he would make up his mind to do something.

Now, I mentioned other decision-making times. I mentioned earlier the fact that I'd been first struck by his insistence that before anything was done, there should be consultations with the congressional leadership. Invariably, throughout the time he was president, before any major decision was made, such as going into the Dominican Republic or such as the Tonkin Gulf affair or such as putting our troops into South Vietnam, he would always have a meeting with congressional leadership. He would have them briefed, told what the situation was, what the options were available to us, and then he would seek the counsel of the various senators and congressmen that were present. And they usually had a pretty good turn-out. So, in a sense, you might say this was a decision-making process in itself, although of course, it was President Johnson who made the decision. Everybody else's words were in the nature of counsel of one kind or another, either negative or affirmative. But in the end, he would make up his mind and go ahead and do so and so.

M: Reflectively, on these meetings, you're saying that they were consultative; it was not just a matter of proposing the question and the decision being announced?

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W: No. I know that on a number of occasions President Johnson was accused of not really consulting with the Congress--that they were in effect informed. I think that that's really an oversimplification and an injustice to President Johnson. His long service in the Congress taught him, I think, that before you took any major step that had sizable political implications, that it would be a good idea to touch base with the principal political leaders of the country, certainly the leadership of the Congress. And I'm speaking now of both bodies and of both parties, the Democratic and the Republican. For example, you'd always have Senator Mansfield, Senator Dirksen, Senator Dick Russell, Stennis, Margaret Chase Smith, and others, Carl Hayden, when he was still around, and Senator Fulbright. And on the House side, you'd always have, of course, the Speaker [John McCormack], Jerry Ford, Mendel Rivers, Doc [Thomas E.] Morgan, usually the chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee, George Mahon, among others. Carl Albert would usually be there and others of what you might call the leadership.

M: General, with the emergence of more dovish opinions among the congressional body, was there any lessening of consultation with them?

W: No.

M: Of course, I'm thinking of Senator Fulbright.

W: These major decisions were the decisions having to do with the Dominican Republic, which was supported very fully by the congressional leadership; the Tonkin Gulf retaliation, which again was supported

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[and] the legislation was introduced by Senator Fulbright; the placing of our own ground troops in Vietnam, not only speaking of when we put the Marines in to protect the Danang Air Base, but on July 20, 1965 when the President decided to introduce a sizable number of ground troops. He consulted on all of these occasions and many others.

Now, for example, generally, when I took one of my rather frequent trips to Southeast Asia, when I came back he would perhaps have me come to breakfast and he would have the congressional leaders in to breakfast. I would brief them on what I had seen on my trip, my estimate of the situation, and so on. In addition to that, he from time to time scheduled for the evenings what I would call rather formal briefings for large numbers of the Congress. As a matter of fact, he made the effort in a series of these evening briefings to brief the entire Congress on the situation. When I say brief the entire Congress, it would cover the whole spectrum. He would have Secretary Rusk speak. He would have Secretary McNamara speak; I would speak, and Mr. Helms. And [we'd] be open to questions afterwards. In other words, he was trying there, I think, not so much to indulge in a consultative process as an educational process so as to sway the opinion of the Congress, which of course was causing him a great deal of trouble.

M: Were these as frequent in 1968 as they were in 1965, 1966, 1967?

W: I would say that 1967-66 were the two years where these were held the most frequently.

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M: General, as principal military advisor to the president, which is I think your constitutional duty in this aspect, how would you assess the President's reception of military advice throughout this period?

W: Well, when President Johnson became president, I think he was somewhat suspicious of the military. In other words, he really had no military orientation in his past. He had served for a while, of course, in World War II, in the Navy, I believe. And, of course, when he was on the Hill, he was a member or the head of committees which dealt with the military. But basically speaking, he hadn't had any wide acquaintanceship or dealings with the military except in the budget process or something like that. I think that he was inclined to believe that we would be somewhat more parochial than we are and perhaps somewhat less objective than I think we are. This may be a function of the fact that President Johnson very much likes to deal with people he knows. At least, this is one of the characteristics that I found in him.

As he got to know me better, there was no question in my mind that he was far more receptive to my ideas and my proposals than he was at the outset. Also, I think, he went through a growth process once we really got enmeshed in this war. His instincts are not in any way militaristic. On the contrary, as you probably know, his focus had always been on domestic affairs, not on foreign affairs or on military security affairs, really, although he had some dealings [with them]. However, as time went on, as he studied more and more

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what happens in wars and how wars are fought, he came to have a pretty good appreciation of the use of force and power. Of course, he has always understood the use of power. I'm talking now of political power. But I think he came to understand more clearly how the political and the military fit together, foreign policy and military power fit together. So that, as time went on, I felt that my relationships with President Johnson became closer and warmer over the months.

M: It exceeded the official capacity, didn't it? You met many times just informally with Mr. Johnson, I believe.

W: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, we were invited to the Ranch, among other things, Mrs. Wheeler and myself. He started calling me by my nickname, only he called it "Buz" and not "Bus," but that's neither here nor there. Yes, it came to be a friendly relationship over time, about as friendly as a President can ever be with anybody else. There are limits.

M: In these really unofficial type of meetings, what were the range of topics of discussion, General?

W: Everything. But you have got to recognize that, being the type of man he is, with the problems that he had pressing down on him, that very generally even though it was not a formal occasion or a briefing or something, he was talking about the problems that we were faced with, including however, the problems that were posed in the country by dissidents, crime, that sort of thing. It was very wide ranging. And of course, you know his fascination with his grandchildren and so

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forth. That sometimes came up in discussion, too.

M: Could you see a change in the President's mood over the period, and this would be from a personal standpoint?

W: Oh, yes. His last two years in office, he aged very perceptibly and quite rapidly. He has a tremendous amount of energy, as you no doubt know, but he was a tired man. He was tired mentally, if not physically. And I think maybe he was a little tired spiritually, too, towards the end. He felt very keenly--and it had its effect on him--his loss of popularity in the country. This was something that bothered him a great deal. He is a very sensitive man; although some people don't think so, he is. So he felt this rather sharply. And I think it was reflected in his physical appearance and in his actions.

M: General, this is a little off in another direction but, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it's related to military advice. Was it generally the method to have you [represent the other Chiefs]? I think you've mentioned that you, towards the end, were representing the other Chiefs of Staff. Was this on the basis of having arrived at a consensus opinion before presenting it to the President? Or couldn't members act individually?

W: You have got to remember that by law any member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has the right to see the president. In other words, he just says, "I want to see the President," and he gets to see the president. The normal method is to tell the secretary of defense that "I want to see the President," and that's it.

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Over time, as I say, it is a cumbersome procedure to have all five Chiefs. Frequently, two or three of them are not even in town. They're off trying to run their services and do their other chores. More and more, it just became the practice that I represented the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Now despite what you may have heard to the contrary, my colleagues and I get along very well indeed. We see eye to eye much more than we disagree. In fact, we have been accused of being too cozy on occasion. Insofar as the war in Southeast Asia, there hasn't been a divergency of view among the Joint Chiefs of Staff since the fall of 1964.

So when I talked to the President or to the Secretary of Defense, I knew what the other Chiefs' views were. Not only that, if a particular problem was coming up, I always consulted with them if I had time. If I didn't have time, or if I did, for that matter, I always reported to them practically verbatim what went on at the meetings, what I had said. And if we were talking about a problem where there was a divergency of view among the Chiefs, I would always express the divergent view. I made this a practice. So that he [President Johnson] was not receiving merely my advice, but he was receiving the corporate advice of the other Chiefs of Staff.

M: General, the fact that you came to be the main contact among the Joint Chiefs, would it relate to the fact that your personal relationship [was] developing with the President?

W: I don't think so, really. I think this was a matter of convenience

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more than anything else. As I say, the cumbersomeness of trying to get five very busy men, four of whom have services to run, together at a given time as compared to having one spokesman, namely myself, whose principal job it is to do this. You see, I don't have to run a service; I don't have to devote my time to that.

M: General, on a sort of reflective basis over the last five years, is the military in the position of necessarily presenting the strongest military posture in an event? I'm not sure I'm making myself clear.

W: I don't think I followed you on that.

M: In a decision-making process, when the military chiefs are advising the President, do they necessarily always give the strongest military position? Do they advocate it?

W: No. As a matter of fact, what we try to do is to lay out for the President what the pros and the cons are of adopting any course of action. And having done that, we then come down and recommend what we think is right. And I might say that the rule that we try to follow is this: If I were president of the United States, would I follow the advice that is being presented to me? In other words, is it logical? Is it a dangerous course of action? Is it a necessary course of action? So that we don't, by any manner or means, advocate the strongest possible military response to a military situation that arises. For example: We never, through the whole



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course of the campaign against North Vietnam, advocated the use of nuclear weapons. We never advocated the bombing of the dikes in North Vietnam. We advocated a few other things that were too strong for people's stomachs, but not those two anyway, and there were others. In other words, we tried to be sensible men.

M: I think what I am reflecting is the feeling, in looking back, of the military developments in the sixties. You get the impression we are committing, and we are committing, and it was escalating, whether it was Southeast Asia or the South American hemisphere. Obviously, the military would have to present the military point of view in these aspects: "What would happen if we commit how much we need in order to either succeed politically or militarily?"

W: Right. For example, if you wanted to use the war in Southeast Asia as an example, and it's a good one, in the summer of 1965 it became amply clear that it wasn't a matter of whether the North Vietnamese were going to win the war; it was just a question of when they were going to win it. In early June of that year there were a series of rather sharp, small battles north and northeast of Saigon. Out of the ten general reserve battalions--I think it is ten or twelve, I have forgotten which--of the South Vietnamese army, the enemy destroyed nine of them. One, two, three, four, right up, like that. The Vietnamese military at that time were busily indulging in politics and not keeping their eye on their job, and the situation deteriorated very rapidly to the

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point where they were all holed up in their compounds and doing nothing against the enemy. The enemy practically had a free hand in South Vietnam.

The question arose at that time as to whether or not we should commit our own ground forces to rectify the situation. The pros and the cons of this, I assure you, were very thoroughly discussed, because it wasn't just a matter of committing ground forces. If you were going to move in there, it meant budget money; it meant diversion of resources of all kinds; it meant a commitment that was going to probably last for a considerable period of time. This couldn't be done overnight. And furthermore, if you are going to fight a war, you shouldn't fight it in South Vietnam. You'd better fight it in North Vietnam, because that's where the problems arose. In other words, it was the source. Now President Johnson, on July 25, 1965, after consulting with all the advisors, came to the conclusion that this was the proper course of action, that we had a commitment made by other presidents at other times. So he made the decision to go ahead and move our forces, which we did.

M: There was also a consideration about the call-up of the reserves, wasn't there?

W: That was discussed at the time. And we, the military, advocated it for two reasons. One, we have never recommended or even considered it desirable to attempt to create, particularly, ground forces of sufficient size to meet all of our commitments worldwide. You would have a standing army that would just be

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tremendous in size if you did. For that reason, all of the services have reserve units, in the case of the Army and the Air Force, both National Guard and Army Reserve, and Air Reserve. Now all of our contingency plans were based upon the assumption that if we made a sizable commitment of our forces any place in the world, we would immediately reconstitute the strategic reserves of the United States by the call-up of the reserve units.

Now, there is another aspect of this which is pertinent from the military point of view. Confining yourself to the active forces alone to supply the manpower and not being able to call upon the very sizable reserve in manpower and units in the reserve components meant that you had to stretch your talent in the regular forces very, very thin. It meant that you had to increase the call-up or the draft by a substantial percentage. And if started, it would, over time, spread your leadership thin. I'm speaking both of officers and noncommissioned officers. So it was for a composite of all of these reasons that we recommended that we initiate a reserve call-up. Plus one factor which was psychological, and that is that we felt that it would be desirable to have a reserve call-up in order to make sure that the people of the United States knew that we were in a war and not engaged at some two-penny military adventure. Because we didn't think it was going to prove to be a two-penny military adventure by any manner or means. It was for the same reason that we advocated and continued to advocate such things as closing the port of Haiphong and really undertaking an air and

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naval campaign against North Vietnam that would teach them what war was all about, [so] they wouldn't be so damned eager to indulge in one. Now, as I think you intimated or at least one of your questions, we, in my judgment, misused our naval and air power with the result that the North Vietnamese were able to accommodate over time to what little destruction, to the destruction that was caused, with the help of the Russians and the East European satellites, to a lesser degree the Chinese, were able to maintain themselves and continue the war.

M: Reflectively, would the impact of not calling up the reserve be measured now as one of the greater mistakes?

W: No, I wouldn't say so. It made it very difficult at the outset. For about two years the Army and the Air Force particularly were really scratching in order to maintain the forces in Southeast Asia at the strength that they should be and at the same time keep a one-year rotation policy, which has proved to be a very great morale factor among the troops. In other words, they know they are going to go there for one year, and then they come home. As I say, we are over that hump now. But for about a year and a half or two years, it was really touch-and-go. One of the things that happened was that you had to draw down so substantially on what was left in the United States. We had to draw down on our NATO forces in order to get the replacements to go to Vietnam. We were using really the United States regular units, NATO units in Europe, as a replacement pool. This is not a very desirable way

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to do business.

M: What was the President's main resistance to calling up the reserves?

W: I think that what it came down to was two things: one would be the disruption in the economy; the other, the disruption of the lives of so many families by suddenly calling a large group of men to active duty. I think these are the two things that weighed mostly on his mind. I think I've probably got them in reverse order, as a matter of fact, as to the importance as he looked at them.

M: You've already mentioned the Gulf of Tonkin in talking about the decision-making process. Let me just ask you if there was any provocation on our part for what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin.

W: No, we had a couple of destroyers that were in international waters. They had been doing this for some time, going up the coast of North Vietnam but out in the [waters]. In fact, we even avoided going in closer than about thirteen miles. They claimed twelve miles as their territorial water. We only claim three, as you probably know. But we stayed outside of what their claim of territorial waters was. Now, I'm not trying to mislead you. These ships were equipped with electronic equipment so that we could keep an eye on the naval order of battle, the air order of battle, and so on in North Vietnam, and also to pick up other interesting tidbits of information. I don't regard this as a provocation, unless you want to take it as a provocation that we have a Soviet intelligence

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collector that sits right off the port of Charleston all the time. We have another that sits right off the runway in Guam. In fact, I've seen it myself. They stay outside of our territorial waters, which is three miles. Now, is that a provocation, or isn't it?

M: Could you tell me a little bit about Mr. Johnson's reaction to and the developments surrounding the Gulf of Tonkin incident?

W: He was understandably upset and I think angry that our vessel had been attacked in the high seas. This was by international law an act of war, and he wanted us to examine very carefully what our response should be. We agreed that we should undertake a retaliatory action, which we did. There was no hesitation, I might add, on his part, no thought that this was the wrong thing to do. On the contrary, he thought it was absolutely mandatory or otherwise we were in danger of having one of our vessels up there sunk because these fellows had these guided-missile destroyers. They launched torpedoes. If you have a torpedo hitting the destroyer, you are liable to have it sink with all hands aboard.

M: Was the President satisfied with the adequacy of the information presented him?

W: Yes, absolutely. Or else he wouldn't have undertaken it.

M: There was no doubt in his mind?

W: None. Absolutely none.

M: Was the military advocating at that point continuous bombing of North Vietnam?

W: Oh, no. Absolutely not. All we were interested in was maintaining an

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intelligence surveillance. You see, that happened in early August of 1964, if I remember correctly, the fourth or fifth. No, we hadn't advocated it [continuous bombing of North Vietnam] at that time.

M: Of course, the military has contingency plans for these things?

W: They have contingency plans for everything, including Thailand.

We had contingency plans for that, too, of course. But having a plan and having the intent to carry it out are two entirely different things, as I'm sure you know.

M: In October 1964 and February of 1965, of course, was the bombing of Bien Hoa and Pleiku. [North Vietnamese actions against the South] Did the military initially advocate bombing on the first occasion?

W: Yes, we did. And that was turned down at the time. There was a lot of discussion as to the desirability of doing it, that is, responding at that time. Finally the decision was made not to. Then followed the Pleiku incident [in] which, by the way, we lost a considerable [number]; I have forgotten how many of our people got killed, but there were a number of them who were killed and wounded. And so the decision was made to make a retaliatory attack.

M: What was the President's resistance in Bien Hoa?

W: If I remember correctly, we hadn't lost very much in the Bien Hoa attack, and, also, too much time had elapsed to tie the two together. You couldn't make a clear connection between the two. In the Pleiku incident, this was not only a repetition of what

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had happened before, which made it a little more odious from our point of view, but we could respond within a reasonable length of time and tie the two together. And the attack was very definitely made against American installations.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about how that decision was arrived at in initiating the bombing?

W: As it happened, McGeorge Bundy and the late John McNaughton were in Vietnam at the time. General Taylor was then our ambassador. As I recall it, they came in from Saigon with a concerted recommendation from McGeorge Bundy, McNaughton, Ambassador Taylor, and General Westmoreland that we should undertake a retaliatory action at once. Now this was already being considered here, but I'm sure that the recommendation from the field had a considerable weight in causing the President to make the decision.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about [this]: As the bombing in North Vietnam continued, and of course, we did initiate some bombing pauses too in there, but there is so much written about the restriction on the sites and Mr. Johnson's continued management of the targets.

W: Well, you have got to recognize that there were at least three points of view that were expressed. One was the point of view of the Joint Chiefs of Staff which was: If you are sensible, you don't give the enemy an even break. War is not a game. So we advocated,



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militarily, that we should undertake the most sizable effort that we could against remunerative targets, excluding populations for targets. None of us believed in that at all. [We advocated that we] close the port of Haiphong as the first major target, as a matter of fact, by mines and by destroying the docks of the other facilities there by bombing [and that we] utilize our naval forces out there to help out with targets that were closest to the shore.

Then you had another viewpoint which was advocated, which wanted to give signals to the enemy. So this meant that we used a sort of eyedropper approach to applying our part. This had no effect at all, none. As a matter of fact, all it did was permit the North Vietnamese to improve their defenses, get more assistance from the Soviets and from the Eastern European satellites. I think it probably strengthened the will of Hanoi, rather than the contrary. Now, this was a one of these political-military theories people come up with who are not professionals.

The third point of view was, I would say, more the political point of view. In other words, [this recognizes] the undesirability of embroiling the Soviet Union and/or the Chicom [Chinese Communists] in this mess.

So here you have the President presented with three viewpoints, and he chose the slow approach. It was just a question of which line of advice he was going to take. For his own reasons, he chose the slow approach rather than the one that we advocated.

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M: Did the President ever discuss his 1964 campaign position on the war in relationship to what developed in 1965?

W: Never in any great detail with me. I think, from remarks that he made from time to time, that he felt there was nothing inconsistent with what he had said in 1964 and what happened later on. The reason being that the situation had changed, and he felt, I think, very comfortable in his own mind that he had done the right thing in the light of the situation he was facing.

M: There is a lot of talk or material written about the fact that part of the President's credibility gap, to use a current phrase, developed in 1966 in relation to the military and the Secretary of Defense making such optimistic prognosis of the conclusion of the war. Would you tell me a little bit about how that came about?

W: Well, I can say one thing: that I don't recall any member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ever making an optimistic prognosis. As a matter of fact, the other day in the Washington Post on the editorial page, I think it was the Washington Post, they had a list of quotations as long as your arm going back over the years, the so-called optimistic, over-optimistic statements and so on. There was none from any member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. There were some from political leaders. Mr. McNamara, for example, got himself upbraided on more than one occasion for coming back in 1964-1965 and saying that we can start withdrawing our troops by Christmas or words to that effect. I might add that the Chiefs were somewhat appalled that he had made any such statement, because it didn't look that way to us.

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But this light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel business and that kind of thing, I think it did cause trouble.

Another problem was, I believe, that there was really a failure to tell the people in words of one syllable that they could understand that this was a war involving the security interest or the interest of the United States. I think that, in true American fashion, we tried to put this on a very high plane of "one man, one vote," and I don't think the citizens of Cook County would understand that. I'm not trying to be invidious when I mention Cook County, but we have had our problems with that in the United States. Self-determination? I don't think this means much to the average man. Now in simpler terms, and perhaps in more mundane terms, the American people understand things real well.

I don't know how this came about. I have noticed that President Johnson, while he is extremely persuasive, extremely logical, and projects himself, his personality and characteristics, extremely well in a small group or in talking to someone alone, simply didn't come over well on TV and radio. At least this was my thought, and I'm no expert on this; but people far more experienced than I felt the same thing.

M: Did you ever discuss this with the President?

W: No, I never did. His other advisors could take that one up with him. He has said so himself on occasions, a couple of times. But he rather humorously or semi-humorously, one day said he thought that he could go on TV and read the Lord's Prayer, and he would be criticized for it.

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M: General, was there any confusion as to the nature of our commitment in this period from the introduction of ground troops in 1965 through 1968 in a review of the policy?

W: The Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which was passed by the Congress, told the President to--this we'll have to refer to, to get the exact words. But the sense of it was to use that force that was necessary to protect the freedom of South Vietnam or maybe they even made it broader than that: Southeast Asia. So, as far as I was concerned, there was no doubt as to what the commitment was, what we should do on the military side to carry out what seemed to me an authorization, probably constitutionally unnecessary, but what [was] actually passed by the Congress which put the executive branch and the congressional branch in the same bed. So, as I say, there was no confusion in my mind. There seemed to be a confusion in a lot of other people's minds but not mine. Maybe I'm too simple.

M: Were the growing pressure on ending the war and the emergence of bodies of dissident opinion a factor in changing the outlook or the nature from a more military view to a more politically oriented conclusion?

W: That was a part of it, compounded by the fact that the Tet Offensive of 1968 was a tremendous victory for the North Vietnamese in the United States. Actually, it was a very substantial military defeat for them. They really got themselves creamed, but the way it was played in the press here created in the minds of the American people the same effect that the outcome of the first battle of Bull Run did.

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There was more gloom and doom around Washington than somewhat. There is a very fine book written, by the way, called Reveille in Washington which deals with Washington at the time of the Civil War, written by a lady by the way whose name I forget. I've got it somewhere. It is an old book. But she describes the atmosphere here in Washington after the first battle of Bull Run. And as I say, I was reminded of that during the Tet Offensive, the February-March period of 1968. Incidentally, I went out to Vietnam in the latter days of February, towards the end of the Tet Offensive. People were far calmer in Saigon than they were in Washington. However, it had a tremendous effect on the public; it had an effect on the leadership in the Congress; it had an effect, there is no question about it, upon President Johnson; and it had a major effect on the incoming Secretary of Defense, Mr. [Clark] Clifford. And it is my view that it was then--in fact, he says as much in his article in Foreign Affairs--that he began to reassess his position and moved to higher ground. So I think that the sense of your question would have to be the answer in the affirmative.

M: But that we were aiming for a military type of conclusion prior to that time? The use of military force to arrive at--

W: Oh, no. Actually, from the very outset, let's go back on this one. In the first place, all wars end politically. War is a political act to start off with. A war doesn't make sense unless there is a political reason for it. I don't know of any war yet that has been fought without some political peg to hang it on. So that in any

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war, you seek a political end, political objective, and it ends in some sort of political agreement or decision or compromise.

Now we never used, during the entire course of our military operations in Vietnam or in Southeast Asia, even a fraction of the military power that is available to us. Now it happens to be my view that had we done so the war would have been over two years ago. So, in response to your question, from the very outset the objective was to achieve what I would call a political settlement of the war.

M: But by military stalemate?

W: No, not by a stalemate, [but] by proving, yes, proving, to the North Vietnamese that they could not possibly take over South Vietnam by force. And I might add that we certainly have proved that. They can't. But you don't win wars like that. No war has ever been won on the defense, at least not in my reading of military history. So what it amounts to is that the North Vietnamese fought from the very outset, and are still fighting a war all out, and we have fought a war with a fraction of the power that we could bring to bear.

W: I better stop here.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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*M<sup>rs</sup> Earle G. Wheeler*  
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