

**SHARON FAWCETT:** Thank you and welcome back to the second session on the Vietnam and the Presidency. My name is Sharon Fawcett and I'm the Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries. And I have a hard act to follow, my boss, Dr. Weinstein.

I want to start by talking a little bit about how presidential libraries are really uniquely positioned to be able to sponsor conferences such as these that bring together scholars, journalists, decision-makers, policy implementers. And, at least for now, the ordinary and extraordinary citizens who lived through and participated in the events that we chronicle in our libraries.

This conference is sponsored by all presidential libraries from Hoover through Clinton, including the Nixon Library, which will join the system this summer, along with many of their foundation partners and the National Archives Foundation. Through this conference we are heralding a new direction for presidential libraries. A multi-library conference format enables us to discuss issues across the timelines of the presidency.

Very few events happen in a stovepipe or happen only in the course of one four or eight year period of time. In the future, we will have more of these conferences. Perhaps, even more conferences on Vietnam, looking at it from even more perspectives. And with the benefit of the continuing opening of new materials through the declassification process.

We are especially grateful that the mission of C-SPAN encompasses bringing this conference and others held in the libraries to a national audience. Presidential libraries are about the legacy of each of the former presidents but also, more importantly, about the presidency, decision-making, the role of government, our changing culture, the problems we faced as a nation and solved or didn't solve.

Those of us that work in the presidential libraries and our governing institution the National Archives and its original archives, see it as our responsibility of custodians of the records to see that citizens and students can easily study the past for whatever reason they choose. But among other things, it certainly does inform our future.

At the National Archives, we are looking to find ways to provide access to this important documentary heritage. Of course, to the traditional process of reviewing and opening records and advocating their broadest possible release. And this conference wouldn't be taking place, this panel at least would not be taking place on presidential tapes without the advocacy of presidential library directors who went to families of former presidents and urged the earliest opening of the presidential tapes.

Johnson had a 50-year moratorium after his death on the tapes. And through the advocacy of the director of the library, with the family, the decision was made to begin early processing of those tapes, long before the 50-year period ended. And we would still be in that 50-year period if they hadn't chosen

that path. But, additionally, the libraries are looking for other ways, along with the National Archives of bringing our holdings, our records, your records, the records of this country to all of its citizens, to its students, through exhibits, conferences, teacher and student education programs and the digitization of our resources on the Web.

All of the libraries are working together to create a timeline of the presidency, a Web-based repository for the records of the presidency. We are working to complete the declassification of the hundreds of millions of classified documents throughout the National Archives. History and our interpretation of this war will continue to evolve as these new materials are opened.

Today, the distinguished historians on this panel will talk about their research, using the tapes and documents of three presidents who made critical decisions about the Vietnam War. What do the recordings of the conversations of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon tell us about the development of policy and the conduct of the war, the quality of the information the president received? Did he get what he asked for? Did he receive a broad array of options?

How reliable are the conversations on these tapes for drawing conclusions? These historians will give you a small opportunity today to listen and judge for yourselves the answers to some of these questions. And last, I asked the

panelists to address what it means to have these tapes and how, in having them, they may have changed the documented record of later presidency.

Our distinguished panelist today are David Kaiser with the Naval War College; Tim Naftali, Director of the Presidential Recordings Project at the Miller Center and, I think lately of a Kremlin Project also; and Jeffrey Kimball of Miami University. Each today will do a brief presentation accompanied by excerpts from the tapes. I think nothing gives you a better feeling for what these are and the job of historians and listening to and understanding these tapes and bringing you their interpretations than to hear them for yourselves.

We will start off with David Kaiser who will be talking about the Kennedy tapes.

**DAVID KAISER:** Thank you very much, Sharon. And thank you to Deborah Leff and the whole Kennedy Library for making this possible. Before I begin, several of my colleagues on the first panel referred to the threats to the kind of research that your panelists today do posed by new classification restrictions imposed by the current administration and previous administrations. I share those concerns.

I do want to take this opportunity, however, in front of this large audience to mention another threat to this kind of work and to the kind of work that you are hearing about today, which I regret to say I think is more serious and

more long term than comes from the other source, namely within American universities and, specifically, I'm very sorry to say, within my own profession of history.

For the last 30 years the historical profession has increasingly lost interest in what governments do, generally, and more specifically in great questions of war and peace. Ironically, and as one who has lived through this whole process, I think that is largely a result of the subject of our discussion today the Vietnam War, which had profound intellectual effects.

There are many fine colleges and universities in the country today, of which there is not a single history professor teaching this kind of subject any more. And you may have noticed that all you panelists today, or almost all your panelists today, have something in common. If they have any hair it is getting pretty gray. This is not a problem we can solve today. But it is something I do want you all to think about. And to the extent that any of you have any connection with any university, and all of you do have some connection, I hope that you will give some thought as to whether something should be done about it.

Now, our topic today is presidential tape recordings, which are inherently fascinating. And the three presidents that we are discussing today are the only ones who made truly extensive collections of recordings. And for reasons, which we all know, they are likely to remain so. So, we are dealing

today with what we can learn from these collections, both generally about presidents and specifically with respect to these presidents and Vietnam.

And so I'm going to attack it very briefly, generally, and then move on to Kennedy and Vietnam. Now I do think that that greatest specific value of such tapes is the evidence they provide of presidents' personalities and their styles. The Kennedy tapes show President Kennedy to be a calm, very good listener, who conducts meetings in a generally very low key manner and with patience, and who is curious. And who, above all, only decides on any given day what he has to decide that day.

Presidents Johnson and Nixon are outside the scope of what I have to say. I would say, however, having listened and read a good deal of both of them, that their tapes reveal them to be the extraordinary human beings that they were. Now, having spent my entire life studying people in power I have learned that whether we like it or not, the people who reach these high positions are often driven by demons of one kind or another. So while I'm fascinated by much of what is revealed in their tapes, I'm not particularly surprised.

Now, turning to President Kennedy, the most important tapes he made by far are the tapes during the missile crisis in 1962. They are an extraordinary, unique record of the government of great power in the most serious possible crisis. And they show President Kennedy at his absolute best. As the editor

of those tapes, one of the editors, my old advisor Ernest R. May remarked when he brought them out, “These were the best and the brightest.”

But what stands out about these conversations is how frequently President Kennedy is one or two jumps ahead of everybody else in the room in analyzing the events. The tapes also show that he was more than willing to overrule the consensus of his advisors when he thought the situation demanded it. And that is the point I will be referring to also.

We must keep in mind, though, that in general tapes are only one source on the behavior of presidents and administrations. We are talking today about a great question of foreign policy, the origins of the course of the Vietnam War. No one person, even the president, and I might even say especially the president, provides a key to US policy in a war. If you want to find out both where a policy came from and how it was executed, you have to go much further down and deeper into the government than that.

Tapes are useful as part of thorough research into available documentation and they help show the president’s role, which is frequently, surprisingly limited in a very complex process. And that is how I tried to use Kennedy and Johnson tapes in writing my own book *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson and the Origins of the Vietnam War*.

It always pains me a little bit when there is a revelation of a particular tape as there often is, and it is picked up by the press as a kind of smoking gun, as

this has happened frequently now with the Johnson and Nixon tapes. And the revelations always are interesting but they suffer from not being analyzed in combat.

Now the tapes, I want to suggest, of the Kennedy administration are limited value about Vietnam for one specific reason. There were, I believe, no tapes made during 1961. They begin in 1962. Tapes, as we will see, do provide some important insights into policy towards Vietnam in the Kennedy administration at one critical stage, in September and October of 1963 when they were arguing about the future of the Diem government.

But I found in writing my book that the biggest arguments and the most important decisions that they Kennedy administration made about war in Southeast Asia occurred in 1961 when the tapes were not yet being made. And because I think it is part of our function, maybe the most important part, before this audience to present important conclusions about these administrations and Vietnam, I'm going to talk a little bit about those 1961 decisions right now.

Now, following on what George Herring said, the Eisenhower administration not only got us deeply involved in South Vietnam, but I discovered that in late 1950's it laid down the policy that, if there was Communist aggression against either Laos or South Vietnam, the United States was going to act militarily to stop it, even if we had to do it by ourselves.

And in late 1960, there was a civil war going on in Laos. And the Eisenhower administration was preparing to implement that recommendation. And that was the situation that Kennedy found when he came into office. In addition, it was clear that the guerilla war in South Vietnam was becoming a serious problem. And what I found was that during 1961, the bureaucracy put forth a series of proposals for putting American forces into fight in Laos or in South Vietnam or both.

And those proposals were supported by Dean Rusk, by Robert McNamara, by McGeorge Bundy and above all by Walt Rostow, who was in the White House at that time. But the President on several occasions overruled all those advisors and refused to go to war then. He did so in a series of meetings in the first four months of 1961 about Laos, when he rejected military intervention and then changed the whole basis of American policy and opted for neutralization in Laos.

In July, Kennedy received proposals to put troops in the Laos-Vietnam border region. But he rejected them, too, citing, and I quote, “the reluctance of the American people and of many distinguished military leaders to see any direct involvement of US troops in the part of the world,” end quote. And then in October, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department proposed to put a division of American troops in South Vietnam immediately, backed by plans to escalate later to major war.

The President responded by dispatching the Taylor-Rostow mission to South Vietnam and virtually ordering Maxwell Taylor, who had been the special military representation, not to come back with a recommendation for American combat troops. Now Taylor nonetheless did come back with such a recommendation for a token American force.

That recommendation, actually, before it could be acted on by the President, was superceded by much larger plans for several divisions of American forces. And those were supported once again by Secretary McNarmara, Secretary Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy. And this came to a climax in an NSC meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November in which Rusk opened with a recommendation to accept these plans and implement them.

And I'm now doing to read for the written record. And you are going to see it on the screen, what President Kennedy said in response to that recommendation. And here is the case where we don't have the tape.

[Beginning of quoted/read material not clear.]

“The President expressed the fear of becoming involved simultaneously on two fronts on opposite sides of the world. He was referring to Berlin as the other front. He questioned the wisdom of involvement in Vietnam, since the basis thereof is not completely clear. By comparison he noted that Korea was a case of clear aggression, which was opposed by the United States and other members of the UN.

The conflict in Vietnam is more obscure and less flagrant. The President then expressed his strong feeling that in such a situation the United States needs more than ever the sort of allies in such an endeavor as Vietnam in order to avoid sharp domestic partisan criticism as well as strong objections from other nations in the world.

The President said that even he could make a rather strong case against intervening in an area ten thousand miles away, against 16 thousand guerillas, with a native army of 200 thousand men, where millions have been spent for years with no success. The President repeated his apprehension concerning support adding that none could be expected from the French.

And Mr. Rusk interrupted to say that the British were tending more and more to take the French point of view. The President compared the obscurity of the issues in Vietnam to the clarity of the positions in Berlin, the contrast of which could only make leading Democrats wary of proposed activities in the Far East.”

Now, I agree with Professor Schulzinger that no one knows what President Kennedy would have done if he had [not] died. This presentation is not about what he would have done. It is about what he did and what he did not do. And in this case he overruled all his senior advisors. And had he not done so, we would have had a Vietnam War but starting in 1961 not in 1965.

Now there was a lot of collective amnesia about this whole controversy in the Kennedy administration after the President died. But with one major exception, Dean Rusk, who remembered all this very well. And he brought this up in June and July of 1965 and again even at the time of the Tet offensive. Both times he spoke with regret that President Kennedy had turned down those recommendations at that time and expressed the rather futile hope, I think, that that action at that time would have headed off a larger war. I see no reason to think that it would have.

But there is not doubt that this was a fork in the road and that at this time the fork was taken for peace. And the issue of fighting a war in this part of the world did not come up seriously again during that administration, certainly not with respect to South Vietnam. Instead, yes, the decision was made to send initially about five thousand advisors and support troops and covert tactical air support. That did eventually grow to 16 thousand, five hundred.

But largely because of the other foreign policy priorities, which he always took much more seriously than Southeast Asia (And I will be glad to talk about that later.) President Kennedy did not want war in South Vietnam at that time.

We now turn to 1963 when we can learn something from the tapes. As many of you will remember, in early 1963 Secretary McNamara, the Pentagon, and the Embassy and MACV in Saigon were optimistic about the

progress of the war. Then in May, the Buddhists in South Vietnam triggered a serious political crisis, which only got worse over the next six months.

As a matter of fact, although this was ignored at the time, a military crisis began in the second half of 1963 as well. I discovered from our own military record that that was the period of heaviest Viet Cong activity, as opposed to North Vietnam of the entire war. And it steadily got worse in the second half of 1963. Amazingly, that was essentially concealed by the Pentagon all that time.

And Secretary McNamara managed to maintain the fiction all through, until December, actually of 1963, that we were still winning the war. And that was the background for the decisions that were made. But the political crisis was very serious and it led on August 24<sup>th</sup> to the famous State Department cable that was slipped through on a weekend, which authorized the embassy to tell South Vietnamese generals that they should go to President Diem and tell him to remove his brother Nhu.

And if he would not do that, it authorized the general to move against Diem as well. That led to bitter debate within the Kennedy administration, of which the recordings have not yet been released, in the last week in August and the first couple of weeks in September.

One of those, apparently, will enable us to hear Averill Harriman, one of most distinguished diplomats tell General Krulak of the Marine Corps that

General Kulak hadn't been right in two years and that Averill Harriman had decided that he was nothing but a damn fool. But apparently we will have to wait a few more years for that one.

Now, that led to two official missions. The second one was the McNamara-Taylor mission in late September to go to Saigon and decide what to do. And that led to the first series of interesting recordings, although I'm not going to play any of them because it would take too long and the quality is very poor. On the second of October, after the return of the McNamara-Taylor mission-- And those meetings approved the McNamara-Taylor report including a plan to withdraw a thousand Americans at once and to withdraw most but not all American troops by 1965.

Now there are several interesting things about that tape, those tapes. First of all, they make it very clear that McNamara and Taylor were still convinced that everything was going well with the war itself. As a matter of fact, McNamara referred to several Saigon critics of what we were doing, including our keynote speaker this afternoon, David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan. And made it clear that he thought they did not know what they were talking about.

In response to President Kennedy, who mentioned the name of John Paul Vann, a colonel who was not even in Vietnam anymore, McNamara assured him that you could forget about John Paul Vann as well. And there was no talk about the fact that the VC attacks were going up and up. Now, it is clear

from this tape, first of all that this withdrawal decision was tentative. The President expressed a good deal of skepticism about it himself.

And secondly, and this is really the critical point, that it was based on entirely false assumptions on how the war was going. The decision was announced on schedule. McNamara seemed to be confident that it would be carried out. But at some point, had President Kennedy not been assassinated, he would have had to face the fact that this situation was much worse than he had thought. At that point, he would not have-- He would have had to make a new decision.

I'm not going to speculate about what it would have been except to note that in Laos, faced with a very difficult military situation, he had in fact decided to go for neutralization not war. And I also think that the quote we have already seen does tell us something important although it doesn't prove anything. Another interesting thing happened in respect to the October 8<sup>th</sup> statement. That statement declared that the security of South Vietnam was a vital interest to the United States.

That was the second time that President Kennedy had been asked to declare South Vietnam a vital interest to the United States. The first time was in 1961. Both times he insisted on changing it. This time it was changed to a major interest of the United States as of other free nations. He did not want to be committed to the idea that the United States had to keep Saigon from falling to Communism.

Now there was another critical meeting that was taped on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, later in that month. And this was after generals in Saigon had come to the embassy again, to the CIA agent, Lou Conein and asked if the US would support that coup. And these meetings show the Pentagon, Secretary McNamara, General Taylor still very much opposed to a coup. The President makes some interesting comments in this meeting in which he makes it clear that he is very much on top of the situation.

He recognized that Lodge was very much pro-coup as he had been for some time. And he commented about Lodge, "I admire his nerve, not his prudence." But the critical part of the meeting came a little later, when Dean Rusk, who up until then had been anti-coup, McGeorge Bundy and, even to a lesser extent, John McCone, the director of Central Intelligence, told the President that Diem had not made the political changes that everybody thought he had to make.

That it seemed that he was not going to change the way he did business and that, therefore, they did not feel that there was too much chance of him winning the war. For the record, based on my research, I think that even without good military data on what had been happening over the last six months, that was a correct judgment. And thus, the decision was made not to try to stop the coup. I want to stress that that was the only decision that was made. This was not an American coup.

As a matter of fact, another thing, which is very clear from the tape is enormous skepticism that any coup would take place. There had been many false alarms before. Many of them thought that this would be one. In the end, the embassy even got almost no warning of the coup and the Americans were very surprised by how widespread its support was.

Actually, another tape shows that President Kennedy had signed on to a hands-off policy towards the coup even earlier, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October. In that meeting he commented, and I quote, “As I understand it, our position now is,” speaking to the General, “‘If you do it, it’s all right. If you don’t do it, it’s all right.’ We are not now going to go to them and ask them to do it.” Unquote.

When the coup did take place, it resulted, of course, in the assassination of the Diem and Nhu. And that by the way (And we have this in a written record.) was something the President Kennedy had specifically tried to rule out in late August. The issue of what would happen to Diem and Nhu had come up then. And he had said firmly that if there were a coup, they would have to go into exile and that nothing else must happen to them.

And I want to insist on that because of some very slanderous myths that have been propagated by people who should have known better. Now the coup was on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November. And a few days later, President Kennedy sat down in the Oval Office with a dicta-belt and dictated his own thoughts about it and how it had come about. The tape is very interesting because it

shows his own mixed feelings about the whole situation. It is a good account of how the policy had evolved, really.

And it also shows in one short, key moment that he still was really in the dark about what the military situation really was. And with the help of the transcript, which you will have, which has been handed out, let's now listen to the very interesting tape.

[AUDIO CLIP BEGINS]

**PRESIDENT KENNEDY:** 1...2...3...4...5...Monday, November 4, 1963. The ah...Over the weekend the ah...coup in Saigon took place--culminated ah three months of ah conversation about a coup, conversation which divided the government here and in Saigon. Opposed to a coup was ah General Taylor, the Attorney General, Secretary McNamara, to a somewhat lesser degree, John McCone, partly because of an old hostility to Lodge, which causes him to lack confidence in Lodge's judgment, partly to as a result of a new hostility because Lodge shifted his station chief; in favor of the coup was State led by Averell Harriman, George Ball, Roger Hilsman, supported by Mike Forrestal at the White House.

I ah feel that we must bear a good deal of responsibility for it beginning with our cable of early August in which we suggested the coup. In my judgment that wire was badly drafted, it should never have been sent on a Saturday, I ah should not have given my consent to it without a round table conference

in which McNamara and Taylor could have presented their views. While we did redress that balance in later wires, that first wire encouraged Lodge along a course to which he was in any case inclined. Harkins continued to oppose the coup on the grounds that the military effort was doing well. There was a sharp split between Saigon and the rest of the country. Politically the situation is deteriorating. Militarily they had not had its effect. There was a feeling whoever that it would for this reason Secretary McNamara and General Taylor supported applying additional pressures to Diem and Nhu in order to move them...

[John, Jr. enters the room]

**PRESIDENT KENNEDY:** Do you want to say something? Say hello.

**JOHN, JR.:** Hello

**KENNEDY:** Say it again.

**JOHN JR.:** Naughty, naughty Daddy...

**KENNEDY:** Why do the leaves fall?

**JOHN, JR.:** Because it's autumn.

**KENNEDY:** Why does the snow come on the ground?

**JOHN, JR.:** Because it's winter.

**KENNEDY:** Why do the leaves turn green?

**JOHN, JR.:** Because it's spring.

**KENNEDY:** Where do we go to the Cape?...Hyannisport?

**JOHN, JR.:** Because it's summer.

**KENNEDY:** It's summer.

**JOHN, JR.:** (Laughter) Your horses.

**KENNEDY:** I was ah shocked by the death of Diem and Nhu. I'd met Diem with Justice Douglas many years ago. He was ah extraordinary character and while he became increasingly difficult in the last months nevertheless over a 10 year period he held his country together to maintain it's independence under very adverse conditions. The way he was killed made it particularly abhorrent. The question now whether the generals can stay together and build a stable government or whether Saigon will begin to turn on public opinion in Saigon the intellectuals students etcetera will turn on this government as oppressive and undemocratic in the not too distance future.

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

**KAISER:** In my opinion, President Kennedy's greatest strength was his ability to keep things in perspective and to recognize what was truly critical and what was not. He was not, certainly perfect in this respect or any other. More recently I've been researching his policy on Cuba and I think that there were ways in which he got a little carried away with respect to all that. But that is a subject for another time.

He was, throughout his administration, preoccupied to a much greater extent with other foreign policy priorities in opposition to Southeast Asia, such as Cuba, such as Berlin, such as nuclear arms control and relations with the Soviet Union. A war in Southeast Asia, and he knew this very well, would work very much against all of his other basic foreign policy goals.

For that reason, I think, he resisted on several occasions the unanimous advice of his senior advisors to go to war in Southeast Asia. His successor, I'm sorry to say, in foreign affairs it was my conclusion, did not have that sense of perspective or that broader foreign policy agenda. And it was for that reason, I think, that within a very short time after coming into office, and largely because he had heard how the situation was, that President Johnson accepted the new, similar unanimous recommendations of those same advisors.

So that by March of 1964 he really had decided in principle that we would probably be going to war in Southeast Asia after the election. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

**FAWCETT:** I want to remind you all of the card on your chairs, to be thinking of your questions and passing them around, passing them to people who are walking around with tags that say “Staff.” They will get them up to me and we will have a chance to ask the panelists. Tim.

**TIMOTHY NAFTALI:** Good afternoon. I’m sure that Lyndon Johnson would have loved to respond to Professor Kaiser. And thanks to nearly 800 hours of tape, lovingly taken care of by the Lyndon Johnson Library, and carefully declassified first by Harry Middleton and then Betty Sue Flowers, in a sense, Lyndon Johnson can respond to David Kaiser.

And today I would like you walk you through some snippets that I think will give you a sense of how he thought about the war. And I would also like to mention that it is really thanks to my colleagues at the Miller Center that you will be able to see a transcripts scrolling with the audio, which I think will make it easier to follow.

“I knew from the start,” LBJ told Doris Kearns, later Kearns Goodwin, in 1970, “that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the

woman I really loved, the Great Society, in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as an appeaser. And we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything, anywhere on the entire globe.”

The Johnson tapes, which we have through mid-1966, do not contradict this image of a tormented leader. Rather they bring Johnson’s indecision and agony to life in way no written words could ever do. Forty years later, to a different generation, caught in a different war, Johnson in his own words, paints for us the bright lines of the box that he felt he was in.

In this first clip, it is July 1965. The Saigon government has collapsed in yet another military coup. And Johnson’s own military commanders have told him that to rescue South Vietnam, the United States needs to increase its deployments from about 75 thousand men to 175 thousand men. A year earlier, in August of 1964 Congress overwhelmingly passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to authorize the use of, quote, “All necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression,” unquote, in Vietnam.

Listen as Johnson and McNamara discuss the fact that Congress really didn’t authorize an Americanization of the war. But they would just have to go out on a limb and do it themselves. It is a remarkable admission from the

President about the limits of Congressional authorization of the use of force.  
Go ahead, Tom.

[AUDIO CLIP BEGINS]

**PRESIDENT JOHNSON:** I don't believe, that if you ask them to go in with you, I think you'd have a long debate. And if you don't ask them, I think you'll have a long debate about not having asked them . . .

**ROBERT S. MCNAMARA:** Yeah.

**JOHNSON:** . . . with this kind of a commitment. And even though there's some record behind us, we know ourselves, in our own conscience, that when we asked for this resolution we had no intention of committing this many ground troops--

**MCNAMARA:** Right. Right.

**JOHNSON:** --and we're doing so now. And we know its going to be bad, and the question [is]: do we just want to do it out on a limb by ourselves?

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

**NAFTALI:** Now, in the course of listening to tapes you will hear Johnson explain his rationale for being in Vietnam. And we selected a very, very

clear discussion of it that comes only five days after that conversation with McNamara. And this is a conversation with Martin Luther King, Jr. The civil rights leader had actually called the White House to talk about the Voting Rights Act. And the conversation goes into Vietnam because Martin Luther King started to criticize US policy in Vietnam. This is Johnson explaining why he feels he has to be there.

[AUDIO CLIP BEGINS]

**JOHNSON:** I've tried to do my best to . . . I've lost about 264 lives up to now, and I could lose 265,000 mighty easy. And I'm trying to keep those zeroes down and at the same time not trigger a conflagration that would be worse if we pulled out.

I can't stay there and do nothing. Unless I bomb, they run me out right quick. That's the only pressure we have, and if they'll quit bombing, if they'll quit coming in, if they'll quit tearing up our roads and our highways and quit taking over our camps and bombing our planes and destroying them, well, we'll quit the next day if they'll just leave the folks alone, but they won't do it.

So the only pressure we can put on is to try to hold them back as much as we can by taking their bridges out, delaying them, by taking out their ammunition dumps and destroying them, by taking out their radar stations that permit them to shoot down our planes.

Now that's what we've been doing. A good many people, including the military, think that's not near enough; I ought to do a lot more. But I've tried to keep it to that so I won't escalate it and get into trouble with China and with Russia, and I don't want to be a warmonger.

At the same time, if I didn't do that, I'd stay it as long as I could the other way. I held up until February after I came in in November. I went from November to November, and from November to February. But they kept coming. They just kept coming, and I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to get out or do it. Now I'm doing it with a restrained and with the best judgment that I know how.

**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.:** [Unclear.]

**JOHNSON:** If I pulled out, I think that our commitments would be no good anywhere. I think that we'd immediately trigger a situation in Thailand that would be just as bad as it is in Vietnam. I think we'd be right back to the Philippines with problems. I think the Germans would be scared to death that our commitment to them was no good, and God knows what we'd have other places in the world. I think it's the situation we had in Lebanon, I think it's the situation we had in Formosa. I think it's the situation we had in Greece and Turkey and Iran, and Truman and Eisenhower and none of these people allowed them to go in and take these peoples' freedom away from them. And I'm trying . . .

I didn't get us into this. We got into it in '54. Eisenhower and Kennedy were in it deep. There were 33,000 men out there when I came into the presidency.

Now, I don't want to pull down the flag and come home running with my tail between my legs, particularly if it's going to create more problems than I got out there, and it would according to all of our best judges.

On the other hand, I don't want to get us in war with China and Russia. So I've got a pretty tough problem, and I'm not all wise.

I pray every night to get direction and judgment and leadership that permit me to do what's right.

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

**NAFTALI:** Well, three weeks later, on July 28, 1965, Johnson would announce very quietly, actually, that an additional 50 thousand troops would be sent to Vietnam immediately. And he had immediately worried about opposition. Now he, in the next clip, you will hear him turning to former President Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower, in a garbled public response-- I don't mean any disrespect to President Eisenhower but garbled public response was something seen over and over again in the Eisenhower administration-- Eisenhower didn't want to give the impression that he

would do differently. But a member of the press asked him whether the situation in '65 was the same as it had been in '55. And the response was not something that Lyndon Johnson appreciated. So here is a conversation between the two presidents, members of that wonderful club of presidents, talking about Vietnam. Listen how the two presidents do what is so natural for them. They blame a third president for the problem. [Laughter] This is August 18, 1965.

[AUDIO CLIP BEGINS]

**DWIGHT EISENHOWER:** But, they wanted to say that I started a military plan. I said, "Now, let's make no mistake here. The conditions of today are vastly different from those from '55."

**JOHNSON:** Yes.

**EISENHOWER:** But if you look up my record, I constantly said, "We are going to support Vietnam."

**JOHNSON:** Uh, huh.

**EISENHOWER:** Now in those days, whence we had just recently signed-- we didn't sign the treaty but all the rest of the nations did, except South Vietnam and ourselves-- that treaty had certain measures that precluded real military positioning of troops there except the term's advisors, and we did

that. Now when I left, when I was in my last year there, we had about 365 advisors and I think we'd run it up to about 600 because of the size of the country. But I did say constantly, "We are going to support Vietnam." But at that time it had not come to a military problem.

**JOHNSON:** That's exactly right. General Wheeler--

**EISENHOWER:** I said, you know, by reasons that were beyond your control and mine, the damn thing did become military.

**JOHNSON:** That's right.

**EISENHOWER:** Particularly during the two or three years before you came in.

**JOHNSON:** That's exactly--

**EISENHOWER:** Now, I've constantly said, "In the condition that it is today, I support the President--

**JOHNSON:** Sure. You know that.

**EISENHOWER:** --consistently and fully."

**JOHNSON:** I know that.

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

**NAFTALI:** It was John F. Kennedy's mistake.

All right. Two and a half months after this conversation, it's already clear to the Department of Defense that this escalation is not working. This clip does two things. First of all it has a remarkable admission by Robert McNamara that this strategy is failing in Vietnam. This is November 2, 1965. And what is deeply interesting is the President is much less interested in that than in the fact that this little-known Harvard professor named Henry Kissinger has just gone out to South Vietnam, has returned and is criticizing the administration.

So this is sort of Henry Kissinger's entry into the tapes. Of course, as we will discuss it in a few minutes, will become a major player in the tapes. And this is also a sign of McNamara's pessimism about the war.

[AUDIO CLIP BEGINS]

**JOHNSON:** How's your battle going out in Vietnam?

**MCNAMARA:** Well, pretty well, Mr. President. We will have a paper for you, as I think [National Security Adviser McGeorge] Mac [Bundy] may have told you--

**JOHNSON:** Good.

**MCNAMARA:** --end [of the] week next week after [Secretary of State] Dean [Rusk] and Mac and I work further on it in relation to Vietnam.

The current battle is going along very well. The problem is that it's not producing the conditions that will almost surely win for us. It may, but it probably won't, and therefore we're going to have to pose the problem to you and suggest some alternative solutions to it. And I [unclear]--

**JOHNSON:** Who sent Kissinger out there, Bob?

**MCNAMARA:** Christ, I don't know, but he certainly blew off in the paper this morning. I read in the cable that [Ambassador Henry Cabot] Lodge had asked for him; I don't know whether this is true or not.

[Twenty-three seconds excised in accordance with the deed of gift.]

**JOHNSON:** What'd he say?

**MCNAMARA:** Well, the Washington Post has a story under the byline of a Los Angeles Times reporter which says . . . well, the headline on the front page is, "A Rule of Selfishness: Saigon Political View Dismays LBJ Envoys..."

“There are authoritative reports that Kissinger will tell the White House that there’s not yet a cohesive national government here, primarily because nowhere among the national leaders is there a true sense of dedication to the nations... or to the nation,” [and] so on.

**JOHNSON:** Who in the hell lets these folks get in?

**MCNAMARA:** I don’t know, I don’t know.

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

**NAFTALI:** The next and final conversation is between Johnson and Eugene McCarthy. This is February 1, 1966. The United States has resumed bombing North Vietnam. McCarthy is becoming more vocal in raising questions about this policy.

This conversation has two elements that I think are very important. One is, Johnson’s increasing defensiveness about the box that he is in. And also, Johnson’s anger at the mess the Kennedy administration left him and his blaming the administration for the Diem coup, which he felt was a bad idea at the time and continues to feel is a bad idea.

[AUDIO CLIP BEGINS]

**JOHNSON:** These other things are just offshoots. What they [supporters of the Walter Lippmann/J. William Fulbright arguments] really think is we oughtn't to be there and we ought to get out. Well, I know we oughtn't to be there, but I can't get out. I just can't be the architect of surrender. And don't [you] see . . . I'm trying every way in the world I can to find a way to . . . ah . . . thing.

But they [the North Vietnamese] don't have the pressure that will bring them to the table as of yet. We don't know whether they ever will.

I'm willing to do damn near anything. If I told you what I was willing to do, I wouldn't have any program. [Everett] Dirksen wouldn't give me a dollar to operate the war. I just can't operate in a glass bowl with all these things. But I'm willing to do nearly anything a human can do, if I can do it with any honor at all.

But they started with me on Diem, you remember.

**MCCARTHY:** Yeah.

**JOHNSON:** [That] he was corrupt and he ought to be killed. So we killed him. We all got together and got a goddam bunch of thugs and we went in and assassinated him. Now, we've really had no political stability since then.

**MCCARTHY:** Yeah.

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

**NAFTALI:** The McCarthy conversation is heartbreaking to listen to. This is seven years before the war would end. This is before future Senator John McCain was even taken prisoner. And approximately 95% of those whose names would ultimately be on the Vietnam War Memorial were still alive. The President, however, does not know how to get out.

In a democracy, it is hard to tell mothers who have already lost sons that the war they died for was actually a war of choice and not necessity, although we did have a discussion about that, too. Johnson's private agony was unknown to the public in 1965 and 1966, but it is very clear from the tape. Presidents, who in our system are commander-in-chief in addition to being head of state and head of government, cannot admit to a losing war in public.

It is one of the conundrums of our democracy. The president is potentially the most powerful persuader. And yet fearing public and international public opinion, a president often chooses not to use his powers of persuasion, thus tying the country to what he knows to be a failed policy. Thank you.

[Applause]

**FAWCETT:** Before Jeffrey gives his, let me ask a question of Tim and David. We are looking to and listening to the struggle that Johnson had with getting out of this war, what he could do, what is options were. You both looked at materials beyond that in presidential libraries. What do you find in looking at records in the lower echelons of government? What were they saying? What advice were they giving to their superiors that did or did not get to the president?

**KAISER:** Well, the most interesting thing I found along those lines, and my books ends in July '65, was in November and December of '64, when William Bundy, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East was the head of the planning group, which is trying to figure out what to do now. And he had been influenced somewhat by George Ball. And he and John McNaughton, McNamara's deputy, were very pessimistic about what was going to happen.

And William Bundy was raising serious questions, as had Ball, about whether this was really worth it. And, in particular, about whether our worldwide credibility really would collapse if South Vietnam fell. And he wrote a memo arguing, fairly forthrightly, that it would not. And that was developed into what was going to be one of three options for the president.

And the option was that we would do a little bombing in North Vietnam. We would take military action to see that, to show that our word was good. But he anticipated correctly that that would lead to immediate pressure to negotiate. And he suggested, then we will go to Geneva and we will get the best deal that we can. And in my opinion, one of the things that has never been looked at carefully enough, or not kept in mind is that the issue all the way along was the government in Saigon, and whether to have a coalition government in Saigon, which was the North Vietnamese short-term demand.

And in the final peace agreement in '73, instead of a coalition, they had a partition that put the Viet Cong and the Saigon government on equal footing. Now, before that got to the president, they had a meeting, what they called a principals' meeting today, with Rusk and McNamara. And they ruled it out. And Rusk, in particular, said to Bundy, "No, it won't wash. We won't get any points for trying and failing." That never did reach President Johnson.

On the other hand, memos from Senator Mansfield, a very great American on these issues, arguing for that course of action, did reach President Johnson and he was totally, massively, unimpressed by them. He said they were pure milk toast, no spine at all.

**FAWCETT:** Tim.

**NAFTALI:** Well, I think David and my colleague and friend Fred Logevall are much better on this. What I would point out is the unexamined

assumption that by standing tall to the Soviets in Berlin and in Cuba, that we saw that if pressed, the Communists will recede. And I think it is very important to keep in mind, not simply the long-standing, if you will, Cold War consensus but the experience of just the few Khrushchev years and how that shaped the policymaking elite and their assumptions about what you had to do to get the Soviet and their allies to stop. And I think that plays a very important role. And it is really an unexamined assumption.

**FAWCETT:** Well, it is a very interesting question where Vietnam fit into this chessboard of the Cold War. And maybe we can talk a little bit more about that after Jeffrey's presentation.

**JEFFREY KIMBALL:** Thank you. Now we come to that Nixon phase of the war, which is the last phase, with the Ford postscript. I hope you can hang in there and don't protest at the end of this war. Let me first say that I second all the remarks made by the first panel concerning the canceled Nixon conference, concerning concerns about classifications and re-classifications. And let me thank also, the John F. Kennedy Library for hosting this and the other libraries for supporting it.

What I would like to do is to summarize in ten minutes what we now know about Nixon-Kissinger policy and strategy. Obviously, I will have to simplify. But what I think had happened with the declassification of documents is that we not only have an evidentiary basis on which we can reassess their accounts of the war but I think what's happening in fact, as

well, is we have a new paradigm, so to speak, about what happened concerning policy and strategy during the Nixon administration. So that's what I want to talk about. And then I will spend about five minutes looking at a couple of documents, which illustrate one of the controversial points concerning their policy and strategy.

Well, their accounts, that is Nixon's and Kissinger's accounts and other's accounts of the Vietnam War, have misrepresented the goals they pursued and the strategies they followed in Vietnam. In addition, their legal and administrative steps delayed the release of relevant archival evidence. The trail of evidence we now have contradicts many of the claims they and others made during and after Nixon's presidency.

In many cases the new evidence uncovers stories that are either little known or misunderstood by both the public and the historians. Among the best examples are these. We now know that the madman theory of coercion was a key element of Nixon-Kissinger strategy. It was a theory that Nixon defined as, quote, "The principle of the threat of excessive force," unquote, a threat which is made credible by projecting oneself as mad or irrational or unpredictable.

We also now know that Nixon ordered a secret, global, nuclear alert in mid-October, 1969 lasting 17 days. Just one of the many examples, just one, of his application of the madman theory, for it was designed to jar both the Soviets and North Vietnamese. We now know that the so-called Nixon

doctrine was much less important in Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy than commonly assumed.

We now know that Nixon's Vietnam problem was probably the key causal element in his and Kissinger's policy of détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China, not their desire for a relaxation of tensions. And we now know that the so-called decent interval solution, which I will discuss more later, was the Nixon-Kissinger exit strategy from Vietnam, a strategy they vigorously denied following.

Furthermore, new archival material from here and abroad, throws more light on Communist policies and strategies in the conflict. The evidence from all sides does not support the key arguments of Nixon and Kissinger. Instead it reveals a different story of what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. In his public statements, for example, President Nixon had said that his purpose in Vietnam was to end the war, extricate American troops and gain the release of American prisoners of war.

But this oft-stated, publicly voiced purposes were held hostage to his primary policy goal of protecting credibility of his government's will and ability to intervene in and defeat third world revolutions. And they were also held hostage to his personal political goal of winning the 1972 election. To maintain credibility and win reelection Nixon, along with Kissinger, believed it was necessary to preserve South Vietnam as an independent state, just as previous administrations had believed this.

It was a necessity that hinged first on their ability to gain a significant military advantage in the Indochina theater of operations. And second, to lever cooperation from the Soviets and concessions from the North Vietnamese and the southern Viet Cong-- I'm using popular expressions to describe the DRV and the National Liberation Front.

Nixon and Kissinger would attempt to do these things through madman theory threats, triangular diplomacy and military escalation. Failing in 1969, however, to achieve their goals through aggressive military and diplomatic strategies, Nixon and Kissinger decided to follow a two-option course through much of 1970. And I want to thank Bill Burr for sharing a document with me on this policy at this time during their strategy-making.

One option was unilateral withdrawal, which they expected would be followed by continued civil war in the south. The second option was unilateral American withdrawal, coupled with a negotiated political compromise and a ceasefire. Nixon and Kissinger expected that the second option would also lead to civil war. For personal, political and diplomatic reasons, they chose by 1971 to pursue the second option, namely, a negotiated compromise that would achieve power sharing and territorial accommodation in South Vietnam.

They also planned to pace American withdrawals and the negotiations in order to postpone American withdrawal to around the time of the 1972 US

presidential election. Timing would have the effect of extending President Nguyen van Thieu's power in Saigon so that untoward developments in South Vietnam resulting from a negotiated American withdrawal would not harm Nixon's chances for reelection. They hoped the Vietnamization would strengthen the South Vietnamese army.

That pacification and big military operation would weaken the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army. And that international diplomacy would lever Soviet and Chinese cooperation. These stratagems would thereby postpone for one or two years, they hoped, the possible collapse of the Saigon government after American withdrawal.

Nixon and Kissinger understood that even if the Communist side won control of South Vietnam in the long run, which was the most likely outcome, this reasonable or decent interval scenario would disguise their willingness to have pursued policies that contributed to Saigon's collapse. One other effect of the decent interval strategy was to prolong the war to 1972 and beyond.

Nixon and Kissinger later argued that it was their triangular policies toward Beijing and Moscow and their military measures against North Vietnam that caused an intransigent Hanoi to accept a diplomatic solution in 1973, January of 1973. An agreement, they said, that favored Saigon and Washington. The new evidence does indicate that China and the Soviet Union did attempt to influence the North Vietnamese.

But the evidence strongly indicates that Moscow and Beijing lacked the will or ability to have a decisive impact on Hanoi. In any case, by 1971, Nixon's effort to put pressure on Hanoi through great power summitry, took the form of trying to convince the Soviets and Chinese that he was interested in a decent interval solution for South Vietnam.

Moreover, we must remember that the terms of the Paris Agreement of January 1973 did not favor Washington or Saigon. It favored Hanoi and the Viet Cong guerillas. And the new evidence tells us that Nixon and Kissinger understood this fact as well as his advisors. Furthermore, big ground and air escalations in Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam succeeded only in countervailing the military initiatives of the North Vietnamese army and the southern Viet Cong.

But while Hanoi failed in achieving its maximum aims, it still gained political and territorial ground with the Easter offensive of 1972, which gave them leverage in the final phase of negotiations. The documentary record indicates that the political bureau in Hanoi decided to compromise at the negotiating table, mostly in response to their assessment of the balance of forces in South Vietnam. These forces were deadlocked in 1972. But the balance would favor them after a US withdrawal, a complete US withdrawal.

Nixon and Kissinger's decent interval exit strategy won for them a sufficient interval from having to accept their own share of responsibility for what

happened. Their post-war spin on history scapegoated others for the American defeat in Vietnam. They blamed dissenters, the press, liberals and Congress for stabbing the military in the back. This spin in both its virulent form and its more subtle forms encouraged individuals, groups and government entities then and later to use the same argument. Namely, that the Vietnam War had been winnable, at acceptable costs to the nation, that indeed defeat had been snatched from the jaws of victory.

At the time, however, the documents show that Nixon and Kissinger did not believe that even greater military force than they actually deployed would have been possible or would have succeeded. The Vietnam policies and strategies of Nixon and Kissinger along with their spin on history contributed to a deep national sense of loss and betrayal, something not unlike the American south's reaction to defeat following the American Civil War.

Their policies and historical spin fostered continuing divisions between Americans about the meaning of the war and the lessons to be drawn from its history. With the new documentary evidence a more complete and accurate historical record will perhaps free us from this burden of the past. Or if it cannot free us, this new evidence may at least clarify the nature of the burden.

Now, what I'd like to do in the little time remaining is show you a couple of documents. First of all, let me introduce this by saying that the two

documents I'm going to show you, while I think they are smoking guns, do not stand alone. And I say that because when one of the documents was written about by the *Associated Press* in August 2004, after the Miller Center had sent out a press release, this document was dug up by Ken Hughes, a researcher there, and transcribed. And he had told me about it.

I had just finished a book and I was taking a break from research at the time. But anyway, the *Associated Press* covered it, interviewed me and Ken and also Dr. Kissinger. And we explained to the reporter, to the *Associated Press* what the context was, namely the decent interval strategy. And Dr. Kissinger, at the end of the conversation he had with the reporter said about us, "The trouble with writing history the way it is now done on the Internet is that you guys find one sentence or one conversation, something that everyone can run with and have a good time, and have a sentence that proves it. But it was not the thrust of his policy."

Now, again, I want to suggest that the two documents (I only have a limited amount of time.) I'm showing you, can be understood in the context of-- I hope you have the handout that was distributed containing many other excerpts from textual documents and audio documents, tape. It is still only a sampling.

So there is a large body of evidence. Of course, there's the record of their behavior. So it's not that we just have one document. With that said, let's look at one of them that I think might be called a smoking gun. [Oops!

There is one right before that.] Well, this is taken from a briefing book drafted by Kissinger's staff, just before he headed for Beijing. This was a meeting Kissinger was going to have with Chou En-lai before Nixon's visit several months later.

And in the Indochina section of this briefing book, if you look at the black type here, that is the text that the aide drafted. This text, if you read it carefully, it is diplomatic language, states the decent interval thesis. For example-- I don't want to take the time reading all of it. But if you look here, Kissinger says, "If the Vietnamese people themselves decide to change the present government, we shall accept it, but we will not make that decision for them."

Well, that would have convinced me, not most people, perhaps. But, interestingly, in the margin, Kissinger wrote this. I guess he was-- Maybe he was on an airplane and he wrote this down. Perhaps he was thinking about how he would present this to Chou En-lai. But he wrote, "We want a decent interval. You have our assurance." Now, if you're a researcher, eureka! We want a decent interval. He is using the term and so forth.

[Would you move to the next slide.]

This is just a photocopy of the actual document. And you can see, although part of it is off the screen, Kissinger's hand, verified by an archivist that this is written in Kissinger's hand, "We want a decent interval. You have our

assurance.” All right. Now, if we can-- Well, hold on a minute. Let me introduce this.

This is the tape I mentioned before August of 1972. This is a critical moment, the Easter offensive has petered out. The election is coming up. Nixon and Kissinger are talking about many issues. Do we try to get a settlement before the election or after the election? They are not certain about that. What are we going to do with Thieu if we push for a settlement? What compromises do we make and so forth?

So that is more or less the background. So if we could now roll the recording.

[AUDIO CLIP BEGINS]

**President Nixon:** Let's be perfectly cold-blooded about it. If you look at it from the standpoint of our game with the Soviets and the Chinese, from the standpoint of running this country, I think we could take, in my view, almost anything, frankly, that we can force on Thieu. Almost anything. I just come down to that. You know what I mean? Because I have a feeling we would not be doing, like I feel about the Israeli, I feel that in the long run we're probably not doing them an in-- uh, a disfavor due to the fact that I feel that the North Vietnamese are so badly hurt that the South Vietnamese are probably gonna do fairly well [unclear-- overlapping voices]. Also due to the fact-- because I look at the tide of history out there, South Vietnam

probably can never even survive anyway. I'm just being perfectly candid--  
I--

**Henry Kissinger:** In the pull-out area--

**Nixon:** [Unclear-- overlapping voices] got to [unclear-- overlapping voices] that we can get certain guarantees so that they aren't, uh, as you know, looking at the foreign policy process, though, I mean, you've got to be-- we also have to realize, Henry, that winning an election is important. It's terribly important this year, but can we have a viable foreign policy if a year from now or two years from now, North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam. That's the real question.

**Kissinger:** If a year or two years from now North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam, we can have a viable foreign policy if it looks as if it's the result of South Vietnamese incompetence. If we now sell out in such a way that, say, within a three- to four-month period, we have pushed [unclear] [South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van] Thieu over the brink-- we ourselves-- I think, there is going to be-- even the Chinese won't like that. I mean, they'll pay verbal-- verbally, they'll like it--

**Nixon:** But it'll worry them.

**Kissinger:** But it will worry everybody. And domestically in the long run it won't help us all that much because our opponents will say we should've

done it three years ago.

**Nixon:** I know.

**Kissinger:** So we've got to find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after which-- after a year, Mr. President, Vietnam will be a backwater. If we settle it, say, this October, by January '74 no one will give a damn.

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

**KIMBALL:** Just one more little document or an excerpt-- A few years later he is talking to the Ambassador Martin to Saigon and they are talking about the possibility of Saigon falling. Notice that Kissinger says, "Well, when I made the agreement," that is the Paris Agreement, "I thought it might be a one or two year thing." That is before the fall would come-- So there was that expectation.

[Would you go back to the first one?]

By the way, you asked the question, Sharon, about comparing textual documents and oral documents. In my experience, what one finds in the textual documents is the formal presentation of the policy analysis, the options papers, often written in formal diplomatic language. What you get

in the tapes is the more informal setting but also more honest, to the gut, to the heart sort of conversation.

But I think you need two documents. You can't just rely on one as opposed to the other. There is more to say about the two. But one impression, too, is that when I found that document, "We want a decent interval," I give you my assurance, there were some people, including historians who just weren't convinced, despite all the other evidence I had presented, that they were pursuing this decent interval strategy.

But when tapes like the August tape of 1972 came along, somehow it was more convincing to people when they heard the voices of both Nixon and Kissinger. Thank you very much for your attention.

[Applause]

**FAWCETT:** Before Jeffrey spoke, we were talking a little bit about Vietnam and the Cold War. How did each president view Vietnam in terms of his own Cold War strategy? Was there a difference or were they just nuances of differences?

**KAISER:** Between the presidents?

**FAWCETT:** Between Nixon, Johnson and Kennedy, Vietnam's place in their own Cold War strategy?

**KAISER:** Well, it seems to me by the time of Johnson, it's central, with Nixon as well. I think you made the point before, the chessboard, the metaphor of the chess board. The way I think about this, though, is that Vietnam-- The reason the US was in Vietnam, because it was a third world revolution-- That created certain problems for the United States, given the way the policymakers looked at the world, credibility and all that stuff. Capitalism, revolution, socialism.

The Cold War added to those concerns. Who was it? I think it was George Herring who was quoting, or maybe it was someone else quoting Acheson. Maybe it was Marilyn Young. That at some point it didn't matter whether this was an indigenous revolution or not. The fact that it was a revolution, it was in some way anti-capitalist. But also, if that revolution succeeded, not only would it encourage other revolutions and cause allies to despair, but it would somehow assist the Soviets.

So the two things got connected, the Cold War and America's struggles with revolution. But I don't think that the Cold War is the cause of American involvement in Vietnam. That is another big question that would take a semester to explore.

**FAWCETT:** Tim or Jeff?

**NAFTALI:** I would just focus on strategic pessimism among American elites in the late fifties and early sixties about which direction the third world was going in. It is very, very important to keep in mind that all of President Kennedy's generation was convinced that the Soviets had an advantage in competing for the hearts and minds of the people of the third world.

It sounds strange now, given that we know the end of the story. But this was a sense that ran across the political spectrum, that somehow Communism was more appealing. And that we had to do a better job in the third world, of letting them know what American democracy meant and what it could do for them. And so, Vietnam gets wrapped up in the struggle for allies in the third world and the struggle to defend American friends in the third world.

It's something that I would say is almost true of most American presidents. Most American presidents in my experience, studying the modern period, underestimate US power. We're always more powerful than our presidents think we are. And in Kennedy's case it meant that he was more concerned about problems in the third world than I think he should be. I've looked at the Soviet side. So that is why I say it.

The other point about Vietnam is, among his concerns, I think it would be fair, safe to say Vietnam was not at the top of third world issues that challenged Kennedy. I would certainly put Cuba at the top. I would also put British Guiana higher up in that list of places than Vietnam. And I would argue that one of the reasons you see the disjointed policymaking in the

summer of '63 that Kennedy complains about in that tape that David played, is that Vietnam is not problem issue number one.

So that you don't have the Ex Comm structure set up to deal with it the way you did for Cuba. In a sense they are remaking the mistake of the Bay of Pigs. It is as if the learning from the Bay of Pigs, which made them much better at thinking about Cuba and about number one issues, is not applied to Vietnam. And the result is the President complaining about his own foreign policy system in '63.

**FAWCETT:** David?

**KAISER:** I agree very much with what Tim said. I put it a little differently, that President Kennedy, as I said, saw us as engaged in many, on many fronts in many ways with Communism and the Soviet Union. And he viewed Southeast Asia as a disadvantageous area for us, militarily and in many other ways. And one that he did not want to emphasize. Now, I do want to make a related, broader point. And I feel I'm echoing some of what Marilyn Young said, although I might put it a little differently.

And it has taken me many years to reach this conclusion, reluctantly, because we all like to think that we make decisions for rational reasons. There is no question that since the Second World War, for the most part with rare exceptions, the momentum of American foreign policy had been forward. And the default assumption that our leadership seems to have is

that when there is a problem in some part of the world, it should be resolved unequivocally to our satisfaction.

And that pushed us into many areas in the world during the Cold War, where I think we did not have to go. And now, we see the same thing in dealing with the Muslim world in the Middle East where it is our default assumption, which may very well let us down again, that somehow we are going to find the solution that is extremely favorable to us. And we may not.

So I do feel that all these decisions took place in an overall context of great American influence, because we were one of the two major victors in the Second World War. And of a kind of a forward momentum that great powers inevitably seem to get. And certainly, President Kennedy was the exception, I do think, in having grave doubts about war in Southeast Asia, grave enough to keep him from doing it.

And the argument has been made, for instance, by Richard Holbrooke, 20 years ago, it is quite possible that if we hadn't gone into Vietnam, our overall stance would have led us eventually to do something similar somewhere else, maybe even something worse. Who knows? I'm not talking-- I'm talking about history as how we could have lived happily ever after. That may happen in heaven but not here on earth. But I do think there was a broader, overall momentum, definitely.

**NAFTALI:** I would just like to add that, remember that this is not a two-sided story. This is a multi-sided story. And the Vietnamese are players and the Chinese are players and the Soviets are players as are we. One of the things that struck me a few years ago when I was in Moscow reading Soviet materials on Laos, was the extent to which the North Vietnamese were pushing the Soviets aggressively.

And I think you have to keep in mind that North Vietnam was a very aggressive state that was much more prepared to go to war than the Soviets. I don't know as much about the Chinese. But time and again the Soviets would say to the North Vietnamese, "Stop. Don't do this." And one of my favorite stories of how the North Vietnamese played around the Soviets involved arms shipments that the Soviets sent to the Laotians.

And the Soviets send modern rifles to the Laotians. This is 1961. And they had to go through Hanoi. And what the North Vietnamese did, was they took the Soviet weapons, which were pretty good and they replaced them without the Soviets knowing with old, American Enfield rifles that they had captured. And so the Laotians kept getting these awful, I mean they were old, American Enfield rifles and were complaining to Moscow, "Don't you love us any more?"

And Moscow said, "We didn't send you American rifles." And it was the North Vietnamese who were stealing the Soviet rifles for their own

purposes. So there are many players in this story and some of them have a logic you have to keep in mind, when understanding how history turned out.

**KIMBALL:** I'm not quite sure how Tim means the North Vietnamese state was aggressive. I certainly don't want to be in a position of defending Communists, of all things. But, again, we have to remember the history of this war. It began as an indigenous movement against the French. Were Communists involved? Yes. But it was a nationalist movement, which eventually received Soviet and Chinese aid.

At the time of the Geneva Conference, it was the Chinese and the Soviets who were pressuring the Viet Min to compromise more than they had actually won. So it wasn't that kind of international Communist conspiracy. But at the same time I'm not sure that we should help to perpetuate the notion that we had two states fighting one another.

The Geneva Agreement-- Whatever you think about South Vietnam, North Vietnam, the Geneva Agreement provided for the temporary partitioning of Vietnam. That's what the war was about. And the national liberation front, the North Vietnamese were assertive, aggressive because they were still fighting for what they believed was independence and reunification. So I'm not sure how that fits into the Cold War. I'm sure they would have preferred not to be caught up in the Cold War.

**FAWCETT:** I have some good questions here from the audience. It seems that assassinations can often conjure up various theories of what happened. Maybe unbeknownst to them, our panelists today set up a situation with the assassination of Diem. And we have the question from the audience, the LBJ tape seems to dispute Professor Kaiser's assurance the coup was not US sponsored and initiated.

Would you care to comment on what each president was thinking about as they reflected on this assassination? Because the comments that-- The little tape segments that we heard were post, long since, post the assassination. So, David, first.

**KAISER:** Well, again, perspective is very important. There had been coup plots and assassination attempts against Diem for the whole of his time in office. There was one that could easily have succeeded, for instance, in November of 1960, when the presidential palace was surrounded and they were in a position to remove him or kill him. And instead they negotiated with him and he had enough time to get some friendly troops to come in and break up the coup.

Now, that original cable and what Henry Cabot Lodge and the CIA people in Saigon did with it, triggered a new round of coup plotting. Yes. Which then Lodge reported only a week later that the coup had completely broken down. But from everything I saw, the initiative for the actual coup came from the

South Vietnamese generals led by General Dang who was the chief of the general staff, and Big Minh.

And they came to Conein, again, and said, "How about this?" And he went to Lodge, who was very much in favor of it, there is no question. And then to Washington. And the decision was reached, we are not going to stand in the way. Now, it is quite true, Lyndon Johnson, who had visited South Vietnam and made very fulsome statements about Diem, as Vice President, in the spring of 1961, was very much against the coup all through that period. And expressed himself forcefully in at least one meeting about that.

Now, with respect to the way he talked, and this has already been alluded to by Tim, to be very frank here, because I don't see any reason to do anything else. And we are dealing with human beings here. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon had both been defeated by John Kennedy for president in 1960. Both of them knew very well that John F. Kennedy had personal qualities that they did not have and that they suffered for not having. And they were very jealous of that.

And, above all, by the time Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon had to grapple with the problem John F. Kennedy was dead. This made him a very convenient target to blame for everything. And, as we know, President Kennedy and people around him were sufficiently obsessed with this to have E. Howard Hunt fabricate cables that would directly implicate President Nixon in the assassination of Diem.

So, I think that there was a very powerful psychological dynamic at play. Now, it is fair to say, on the other hand, when you look at the people who work for Kennedy and what they said later about what Kennedy felt about Vietnam and what he would have done, it depended entirely, I mean just about 100% on how they retrospectively viewed the war. If they were against, they said President Kennedy never would have done it. If they were for it, like Dean Rusk, they claimed that he felt the same way they did.

**FAWCETT:** Tim, why did Johnson feel so strongly the other way?

**NAFTALI:** I think David pretty much summed it up. I would only add one point. Johnson had a difficult relationship with Henry Cabot Lodge. And what many historians will agree that it is Lodge who is pushing for this coup. This is Lodge's coup. And there are a few relevant tapes on the Vietnam decision that are still being worked on by the Kennedy Library.

And one of them will help us, I think, understand the cable that goes out to Lodge in August, 1963, which basically has been described as a blank check to allow Lodge to go ahead and help organize a coup. I think that part of what Johnson is reflecting is this decision and also his dislike of Lodge.

**FAWCETT:** Was Lodge actually trying to get Diem out Vietnam?

**NAFTALI:** Well, what you have here is, it is sort of a flip-flop from what normally associates with American decision-making. In this case it is the State Department that is pushing for a coup. And it is DOD that doesn't want to have anything to do with it. And CIA is also not happy with it. And the State Department is doing it really because of, in part, on good government grounds.

The sense that the Diem, but particularly his brother and sister-in-law have created such trouble throughout the country, because of their persecution of the Buddhists. And this is a country that cannot fight for itself anymore. And if we don't do something to put in a better government, we are going to end up having to fight this war (How ironic.) on their behalf.

So it is the State Department that is pushing it and they have a big advocate in the US ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge. Again, the 1960 campaign comes back to haunt us.

**FAWCETT:** The tapes themselves almost seem like a window into the soul of each of the presidents. There are many moments of reflections. There are conversations. How do you-- All of you have listened to some parts of all of these presidents' tapes. How do you see that they reflect on the war? How do they handle dissent differently than one another? What are their reactions that you get from listening to the tapes?

**KAISER:** I'll take a swing at that with respect to two of them. President Kennedy is very philosophical about everything. And when problems come up he recognizes them but he shrugs them off. President Johnson, who-- Well, I'll leave that. President Johnson, as you could hear, takes it all incredibly personally. And when somebody dissents with him, this guy is out to screw him. And, well, something has to be done about that.

And, actually, I would like to make a point about President Johnson. When you start listening to these conversations and looking at his appointment calendar, he was addicted to the telephone, literally. It was not unusual for him to make 30 or 40 calls a day. And he used it to blow off steam, to touch base, to get information, all kinds of things.

And I do think you have to be very careful, although I thought Tim's excerpts were very revealing. But he will say almost anything depending on the mood that he is in. And he agonizes a lot but he belonged to a generation for whom your emotions were something you had to rise above. And, ultimately, he usually would.

**NAFTALI:** I know when I listen to Richard Nixon, I feel he is putting the country on the couch with him. The tapes truly are, I think, a window into the psychology of the leaders. They are also a reminder of how documents are created. I mean, we are historians. We live or die by documents. But documents are pretty versions of history. If you think about-- Those of you

who have been in government, if you remember how memoranda of conversation are written, how the documents are produced--

I'm not saying that they are lies. In most cases they are not. What I'm saying is that government documents don't reflect indecision as much as they could. And it is often difficult to know what mattered to a leader. What bit of Intelligence mattered to them? Did Intelligence matter? What got to them? What did the *New York Times* editorial that morning have to do with the decisions they made?

What did the fact that there was a crisis going on in Mississippi, while he had to deal with Cuba? What did that have? The president's day is so busy. No president had the luxury that we have of dividing up their analysis. Some of us are foreign policy experts, some are domestic experts. Presidents have to be experts on everything and they have to juggle these constantly. And time is of the essence in the White House.

That comes across in the tapes in a way that documents couldn't give you. There are smoking guns on tapes. But I think their great value is the added dimension to the documentary record. And that is why we are so lucky to have tapes from presidents, from Franklin Roosevelt through Richard Nixon. Now, most of the five thousand hours come from Nixon and Johnson and Kennedy. But we do have tapes from the earlier presidents. And they do give you this sense of the thinking of the leader. And I don't believe documents and memoirs do that as well.

**KIMBALL:** Getting back to your question, I suppose it is very difficult for a public figure to take any criticism. And if you are the president, maybe it is more difficult. I think, at least with Johnson and Nixon, there was also a tendency, perhaps with all presidents, to identify themselves or the office of the presidency with the nation. And that might be self-serving but I think that often happens. So a loss of credibility for themselves is a loss of credibility for the nation.

For what it reveals about the person, you know, there are many, many, many tapes. And I haven't listened to them all. But there is one. I think it was June 3, 1971 as an example in which Nixon is talking with Haldeman, his chief of staff, and Kissinger. And Nixon had just come from a press conference. One of the questions was from a long-haired reporter who had raised the question of the morality of the Vietnam War.

And this really angered Nixon. One of the things that was interesting about this conversation is that it does show that he had a morality. They all had a morality, in case anyone assumed they did not. But as the conversation develops, he is defending that morality. And namely what it is, is a morality in which you use means which are violent and destructive for a good cause.

And he uses examples from World War II, about visiting the destruction in World War II in Dresden and so forth. Look what we did there. It was awful. Look at the American Civil War. Look at what Sherman did to the

south and so forth. Sometimes he had his numbers, they were incorrect. But nonetheless, that was his moral position. I think it was moral position of other World War II generation people, that World War II is not comparable to the Vietnam War. So people drew different lessons. But he did have a morality.

Then he moved on to talk about his politics. And he revealed himself as being a conservative, "I am not a liberal. I am a conservative. Tell Erlichman that. I don't like all these domestic programs he is pushing through." "We have to do it because there is a liberal Congress and so forth." So there are moments when they reveal perhaps their innermost selves.

**FAWCETT:** Do you think the presidents who wrote their memoirs, Johnson and Nixon, used the tapes very much in the production of their memoirs? Are they reflected? Are there great differences in what you read in their memoirs versus what you see on the tape or hear on the tape?

**KIMBALL:** Somebody might have an answer to that. I don't know about Nixon.

**NAFTALI:** Well, Johnson certainly used the tapes. He used transcripts because his staff, particularly in '64 but even afterwards, produced transcripts of many of the conversations. The number of transcripts dropped off as the amount of taping continues. But Johnson did use those transcripts.

Or at least the staff had some access to them, it is my understanding. I don't know-- Nixon couldn't really have access to his tapes when he was writing his memoirs.

But Nixon left voluminous records. He liked to write. He liked to sit in that little office in the old executive office building, now the Dwight Eisenhower Building. And he would sit and write notes. I think it is fair to say that the Nixon administration is the best documented administration that we have. You've got the tapes. You've got Nixon's writing. You've got Kissinger's tapes. You've got Kissinger's writings. And you've got, of course, all the other papers that the administration created.

**FAWCETT:** Well, that goes back to the first question I asked at the end of my presentation earlier. How has having these tapes changed and the knowledge these tapes exist and the opening of these tapes changed how documents are kept on the presidency?

**NAFTALI:** I just wanted to add one point about one president who didn't get a chance to write his memoirs. I'm convinced that Kennedy installed the taping system in order to write his memoirs. And there is evidence that in 1963 he and the Attorney General had transcripts made of the Cuban missile crisis conversations for a book, a book that I think ultimately will be *13 Days* but I can't know that for sure.

But I think they understood the historical value. And when you ask why do presidents tape-- Kennedy, if you look at the nature of his taping, the tempo of his taping, he is taping conversations he thinks are historically important. He is taping as one of us. The other presidents don't have that same approach. Of course, Nixon taped everything. But I think that, in a sense, John F. Kennedy's memoirs are the tapes.

**KIMBALL:** To your question about what the tapes have contributed-- Again, I have-- You do all this research for years. But still you are only covering a little part of it, a little piece of it. But it seems to me that there are many documents out there that are still classified. Even if they are declassified, I don't think that policymakers at this level want some material in those documents that would be difficult to follow. So, therefore, if you have tapes, perhaps you will find the kind of thing you are looking for, for want of a better phrase for the time being, smoking gun, for example.

Or the little insight you need-- The other thing I want to mention is that there are other kinds of sources that are extremely valuable. Haldeman's diaries, which weren't taken seriously by many when they came out, and especially the CD version-- the printed version was edited somewhat-- did provide for researchers like myself, and I think for the archivists who are working on the Nixon project, a narrative.

So you could go to this diary and it would help you know what to go and look for. As a researcher, you need to have a strategy. You just don't sit in

the archives and start looking through a pile of papers. You have to sort of target certain documents. So I think we need all of it. But, obviously, the tapes are extremely useful. I suppose they are not being used. People are not being taped anymore.

**FAWCETT:** No. Not any more. Another question from our audience. Is there any discussion in the JFK, LBJ or Nixon tapes on the decisions to use defoliants like agent orange and what the impact of that might be?

**KAISER:** In the Kennedy period there is a lot of paper about it and it was quite controversial. There were pros and cons in the administration about it. And the President eventually approved it. But I certainly haven't heard any discussion-- in those about it-- in tapes. No.

**FAWCETT:** What?

**NAFTALI:** There are. In the August 1962 tapes. Yes. And, in fact, if you want to hear Kennedy's uncertainty about using defoliants, you can hear that and you can hear the arguments that are being made. Averill Harriman is the greatest opponent and Harriman actually stops the policy. Kennedy was being pushed in a direction and would have go ahead earlier than he did but for Averill Harriman. And that is clear from the tapes.

**FAWCETT:** For Tim. And here is someone who came very well prepared, typed question. Or maybe they have a printer out there. Six weeks before it

happened, President Johnson received from the CIA in Saigon an analysis correctly predicting the January '68 Tet offensive. On advice from CIA higher ups, who deemed the analysis to be alarmist and not reflective of the true situation, the President rejected the conclusions of the report and took no action.

Of course, the ensuing all-out attack, which caught the nation's military and civilian leadership unprepared, proved to be the turning point of the war. And there are two questions to this. What would have happened if President Johnson had accepted the report's conclusions and the US military ARVN and also the US public opinion fully alerted and prepared for the impending countrywide attack? And, two, how would this have affected the eventual outcome of war, if the American people had been better prepared for the Tet offensive.

**NAFTALI:** Unless he submitted that set of questions, the person in the audience how can best answer that question is John Prados, not me. I will say that there are some remarkable tapes from 1968 that I predict will be as important for understanding policymaking as the Cuban missile crisis tapes from 1962. Those are the Johnson office conversation tapes.

Johnson installed a system like Kennedy's system, not as widespread. But it did cover conversations. In 1968, while he was mulling over whether to run or not. And so there are, I believe, 128 hours of these tapes. Some of them

are repetitive. So maybe it is 80 or 90 hours of just unique conversation with the wise men, talking about Vietnam.

So I don't know the answer to this question about the Tet offensive. But perhaps in five or six years we might have that answer. I think that the taping started after the Tet offensive. But knowing the way in which politicians go over historical ground, we might have them talk to each other and hear them talk to each other about the Tet offensive and its effects on the American people and on the strategy in Vietnam.

**FAWCETT:** We need to wrap up. But as a concluding question one of our audience who I think must be a teacher asks, are these tapes available for classroom use on the Internet. And there are many different answers to that question. Yes, some tapes are available on the Internet. All of the tapes? The answer is no.

Various presidential libraries have digitized and made available some of the tapes. We are working on the presidential timeline. And one of the early areas we would like to populate the timeline with is material on Vietnam. And then, of course, there is the project of the Miller Center, which I will get Tim tell you a little bit about.

**NAFTALI:** With the exception of just a few of the Nixon-Khan releases, we have put online on [www.whitehousetapes.org](http://www.whitehousetapes.org), all of the tapes because they belong to all of us. They belong to the public, the people of the United

States. And we have put on these tapes, you can download them at your leisure. Listen to them. And we've also, to the extent we can, added transcripts to make them easier to understand.

These are remarkable resources. And they don't just cover foreign policy. They cover domestic policy. They cover civil rights. They cover this period of the sixties when there was so much change here, a period that we are still debating. I hope high school teachers will use them.

**KIMBALL:** I believe the National Security Archive also has a few tapes and transcripts on its Web site at George Washington University. Plus CDs I believe that are available. So if you go to that Web site, you may find what you are looking for.

**KAISER:** I think CSPAN dot org has a good many as well.

**FAWCETT:** In fact you can listen-- I think it is Saturday afternoon. C-Span radio plays the tapes. I've often had the wonderful experience in Washington, D.C. of getting into a cab and having the driver ask what I do. And I say, "Well, I work in Presidential libraries." And they will immediately begin talking about the tapes and how wonderful they are. It is nice to know that everyone is listening.

**KIMBALL:** There are books, too, that have been published, which include some tapes or at least transcripts.

**NAFTALI:** Well, and the Miller Center is transcribing and annotating Johnson's tapes. And we've put out volumes through January of '64. And our next three volumes are coming out next year. And we are doing the same for the Kennedy tapes as well.

**FAWCETT:** And I would say that each of the libraries, Johnson, Kennedy, and Nixon are pushing forward on finishing the last groupings of their tapes that need to be opened. We are getting to the end, hopefully, and we will have everything open in the next three or four years.

[Applause]

**FAWCETT:** Thank you.

**NAFTALI:** Are you going to play that tape?

**FAWCETT:** Oh, I almost forgot. Tim had a closing segment that I think he will tell you about.

**NAFTALI:** We had a wonderful discussion. It began in the first panel. It continues on this panel about Kennedy. And I brought along snippets from the October 2, 1963 conversation where Kennedy is presented with McNamara's plan to withdraw troops. As Bob Schulzinger mentioned and

David added, this is Robert McNamara's plan. And listen to how skeptical John Kennedy is about withdrawing troops from Vietnam.

There was a wonderful editorial about this that my colleague Mark Silverstone wrote and published in *The Boston Globe*. This is really the material on which he based that Op Ed.

[AUDIO CLIP BEGINS]

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** The question that occurs to me is whether we want to get publicly pinned to a date? [Unclear]

**MCNAMARA:** Well, that goes back to paragraph two, Mac.

**BUNDY:** Yes, it does. It's . . .

**MAXWELL D. TAYLOR:** Well, it's something we debated very strongly.

**MCNAMARA:** Yeah.

**TAYLOR:** I think it is a major question. I will just say this: that we talked to 174 officers, Vietnamese and U.S., and in the case of the U.S. [officers] I always asked the question, "When can you finish this job in the sense that you will reduce this insurgency to little more than sporadic incidents?" Inevitably, except for the Delta, they would say "'64 would be ample time."

I realize that's not necessarily . . . I assume there's no major new factors entering [unclear]. I realize that--

**KENNEDY:** Well, let's say it anyway. Then '65 if it doesn't work out [unclear: we'll get a new date].

**TAYLOR:** '65 we'll [unclear].

**MCNAMARA:** I think, Mr. President, we must have a means of disengaging from this area. We must show our country that means.

[6:05 p.m.]

**BUNDY:** Then the next sentence, after "to do so," [unclear] say "These actions have not yet significantly affected the military effort but could do so in the future."

The President is himself . . . wants to be sure that the document as a whole reflects the notion that the object here is to win the war and he thinks putting the sentences in those order . . .

**MCNAMARA:** [Unclear] that order?

**UNIDENTIFIED:** [Unclear.]

**BUNDY:** . . . strengthens that proposition.

**MCNAMARA:** Why did you say the President wanted to make clear, Mac, that the primary objective was to win the war?

**BUNDY:** He wanted the-- he thought the . . . didn't want to have it said that we were just Pollyannas who couldn't stand a little authoritarian government, or that we were-- to making these noises out of a sort of a . . . we're making them--

**MCNAMARA:** Yeah.

**BUNDY:** --because they're really seriously related to this central purpose up in [paragraph] 1. And he thought that changing the order of the sentences would have that impact on paragraph four.

**AVERELL HARRIMAN:** Did he mention this?

**KENNEDY:** My only reservation about it is that it commits us to a kind of a . . . if the war doesn't continue to go well, it'll look like we were overly optimistic, and I don't-- I'm not sure we-- I'd like to know what benefit we get out [of it] at this time announcing a thousand.

**MCNAMARA:** Mr. President, we have the thousand split by units, so that

if the war doesn't go well, we can say these thousand would not have influenced the course of action.

**KENNEDY:** And the advantage of taking them out--

**MCNAMARA:** And the advantage of taking them out is that we can say to the Congress and people that we do have a plan for reducing the exposure of U.S. combat personnel to the guerrilla actions in South Vietnam-- actions that the people of South Vietnam should gradually develop a capability to suppress themselves. And I think this will be of great value to us in meeting the very strong views of [Sen. J. William] Fulbright and others that we're bogged down in Asia and will be there for decades.

[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]

**NAFTALI:** So, as you can see, really the policy of applying selective pressure on Diem to make him fight harder, is not really President Kennedy's idea and he-- There is at least in these conversations a sense of uncertainty on his part as to which, what is the best way to go. Which is exactly what Bob Schulzinger and David Kaiser were saying. And since looking at Vietnam in the Kennedy context is like asking what Abraham Lincoln would have done in Reconstruction.

[Applause]