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Oral History Interview
With
ELLIOT L. RICHARDSON
On
May 31, 1988



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Oral history interview with Elliot L. Richardson
conducted by Frederick J. Graboske
in Mr. Richardson's office in Washington, D.C.
on May 31, 1988

ELR: In the transition period 1968 with Dr. [Henry A.] Kissinger and others, my only role involved the Department of State and focused particularly on the structure and table of organization of the the NSC [National Security Council] system. The next question on the New York Times editorial, I don't really think that's worth going into much. I don't think the statement is particularly true. It implies a gross lack of imagination and even education on the part of lawyers, to which I would not be willing to plead guilty, but we could elaborate on it if you want. Do you want?

FJG: This is a quote from the January 6, 1969 editorial....

ELR: They have to write something every day. I think it's a half-assed statement.

FJG: OK, well that's certainly a comment on it. I'd like to get back to...

ELR: I think there are serious limitations that lawyers bring to government. I don't think that the Times point is a particularly relevant one. The problem with lawyers in government, particularly in the State Department, is the tendency of lawyers to think in terms of "cases"--the solution of particular problems as distinguished from dealing with broadly inter-related dynamic processes, in which success may be measured simply by containing risks and preventing disaster. Certainly understanding of history is a fundamental asset to anyone who addresses worldwide problems, not for the reason so commonly supposed, that history

contains applicable lessons to be learned by its students, but rather that one can gain a sense of the interaction among social forces and national traditions, including cultures, attitudes. One can see the way in which these aspects of society and the processes of economic change, technological development, and so on, interrelate with the role of individual political leaders, between nations, and so on.

I think it's true in large part that the reason why Bill [William P.] Rogers gave a clear field to Henry Kissinger was that Rogers thought of himself as a problem-solver: a man whose judgement was valuable in dealing with particular issues or crises, and indeed it was. But he was impatient to the point of disdain with the whole process of speculation and analysis of geo-strategic forces, looking towards the formulation of long-term strategies, and so on. It was precisely in this area that Richard Nixon's primary interests lay, in which he excelled, and for which he drew on Henry Kissinger as a knowledgeable, sophisticated source of historic learning as well as strategic and tactical judgement. Nixon was, from the outset, the principal architect of a foreign policy resting on a series of quite clearly formulated strategic aims. It's fair to say that Bill Rogers never entered into, and never wanted to enter into, that kind of wide-ranging and long-range thinking, et cetera, et cetera. That I could elaborate on sometime, if you want.

I used to see Kissinger.... He and I, as I say, were involved at the outset with setting up the NSC [National Security Council] system. I had the understanding that I would serve on

the National Security Council, or at least attend all the National Security Council meetings. I had more contact with him than anyone else in the Department of State.

FJG: You had weekly meetings with him, didn't you?

ELR: Had regular weekly meetings to plan the work of the NSC and the Under Secretaries committee, but other meetings beside that: various working groups we belonged to, like the verification panel on SALT I; like the group on the Middle East; and other more ad hoc meetings.

I first met Nixon during the [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower first term. Those contacts were brief. I worked for the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee when Republicans held the majority in the first two years of the Eisenhower administration. I drafted the [Christian A.] Herter speech nominating Nixon for a second term as Vice President. I took the draft to him in his office in the summer of '56. That's an interesting story in itself.

FJG: Why don't you tell me that one now?

ELR: After Eisenhower's heart attack, various friends and admirers of Christian A. Herter, then Governor of Massachusetts, began to try to put him forward as a potential nominee to replace Eisenhower in '56. At that point I was enlisted as a speechwriter for Herter for national audiences, and I wrote a few speeches for him. Eisenhower recovered from his heart attack. It was quite clear that he would be a candidate for a second term. At this point Stassen began to beat the drums for the substitution of Herter as the nominee for Vice President. Through a process in

which I was not involved some kind of a deal was made between the supporters of Nixon and Herter under which Herter agreed to nominate Nixon at the convention in San Francisco, and pursuant to which, I later inferred, it was also understood that Herter would be named number two at State, the Under Secretary of State, which job he did, in any case, undertake when he finished his second term as Governor in January 1957.

I was asked to draft the nominating speech, and wrote what I thought was an OK speech. I took it to Nixon to look over in his office in what is now the Russell Building; it was then, of course, the Senate Office Building. Nixon went over the speech with remarkable rapidity; so quickly so that one wondered whether he could possibly have taken it all in. He put it down and said, "That's fine. It says everything that needs to be said." I was a little more alert than I often am, and I said, "Thank you, Mr. Vice President. Apart from what needs to be said, are there any other things that you would like to have said that are not there?" Well, he turned back to page three and he had a couple of suggestions on page three, and then a couple more on other pages. When he came to the end, he said, "The trouble with this speech is that it has no cheer lines." And then he developed the distinction between a speech to be delivered to a large, live audience and how you would talk to people in their own homes through television. He gave me a couple of examples of cheer lines. I said, "Thank you, Mr. Vice President." I took the speech back, and I did the best I could with it. I've never been very good at delivering cheer lines myself, nor, indeed, at

writing them. But, anyway, this speech as amended was the speech that Herter gave.

Late in 1956 I began to work for the Republican candidate for Governor who had been Lieutenant Governor under Herter: a man named Sumner G. Whittier. Around August I was asked by then Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Marion B. Folsom to become the Assistant Secretary of HEW for Legislation, replacing Roswell B. Perkins. I told him I couldn't because I was committed to Whittier, who had asked me primarily to focus on the development of the initiatives he would propose in his Inaugural message, when elected. As it turned out, I got drawn away from that loftier task into the daily grind of trying to get him elected, but in the end he was defeated. The very day he was defeated I got a call from Folsom saying the job was still open. So after some thought, I agreed to come down to Washington and arrived around November or so of '56 and was sworn in early the following year.

From then on I saw quite a lot of Nixon in legislative leaders meetings. I was quite often Acting Secretary of HEW, and also saw him in Cabinet meetings. I would see him, indeed, toward the end of that term get up from Cabinet meetings or legislative meetings literally shaking with tension because of the necessity of suppressing reactions to decisions being made by the President that he saw as undercutting his chances for election in 1960. A footnote, incidentally, that has some bearing on the dilemma that has been faced in recent years by George Bush.

In any case, Nixon associated me with some expertise in health, education and welfare related matters, and when he became the nominee in 1960, he invited me to become a member of his "kitchen cabinet". I attended a couple of meetings at his home in [Wesley Heights]. Then I discovered that, as United States Attorney for the District of Massachusetts, I was under the Hatch Act, so I sent a telegram declining participation in the next meeting, which I think was going to be in New York City.

But still, when he was elected in '68, the first invitation to join his administration I got was an invitation to be number two in the Department of HEW under [Robert] Finch. I declined, because I was then Attorney General of Massachusetts and carrying on what I thought were important efforts to strengthen the state's criminal justice system in ways that I hoped would become a model for other states. It was not until I later got offered the job of number two in the State Department that I let that temptation override my sense of obligation to the state. I'd always thought of that as one of the great jobs in government, although I tried to convince Rogers that it would be a mistake to have two people in the top jobs in the State Department neither of whom had had extensive experience in foreign policy. I did not convince him, and so came to Washington. I saw Nixon of course from then on up until my resignation in '73.

I first met Rogers, I think, when I was United States Attorney for the District of Massachusetts. I may have met him before that casually when he was Deputy Attorney General. I served in the Department of Justice during the last year and a

quarter of the Eisenhower administration. I had no real contact with Rogers at all between 1961 and the beginning of 1969.

FJG: So it was Nixon who offered you the job in the State Department, not Rogers?

ELR: Rogers must have acquiesced in it. The call I got came from, of all people, John Mitchell, evidently for the purpose of sounding me out on whether or not I would be willing to serve. But it must have been Nixon's idea. Nixon had, I should add, spoken at my fundraiser to help reduce the deficit hanging over from my campaign for Lieutenant Governor in '64.

FJG: Can I get back for just a minute to your comment about him leaving the Eisenhower Cabinet meetings shaking with frustration? Did he ever express that frustration during the meetings?

ELR: No. I only attended one Cabinet meeting ever, as Acting Secretary in the Eisenhower years or later, at which any real decision was taken. This sense of tension and frustration came less from specific decisions being taken than from the tenor of the attitudes being expressed.

I do remember one meeting, at which Nixon, ironically, saved me from resignation, at which a decision actually was taken. This is a rather long story in itself. It goes back to the conclusion by my then boss Arthur Flemming and me in late '58 that we needed another success in education to follow the enactment of the National Defense Education Act in '58. We knew that there were going to be budgetary problems, so I came up with a proposal for the federal funding of elementary, secondary and higher education construction, including construction of

facilities at non-public institutions, through a federal obligation to pay a given amount on account of debt service, thereby in effect subsidizing interest, and, I forget, maybe to some extent principal payments also, for such construction. The result was a proposal which had low costs at the outset, although they were going to balloon considerably in the course of time.

At any rate, Flemming and I had no success in selling this to OMB [Office of Management and Budget, then called the Bureau of the Budget]. We got turned down by the White House staff. In desperation, Flemming asked for and got a one-on-one meeting with Eisenhower in which Eisenhower (I gather with some exasperation), finally, in the face of Flemming's persistence, agreed to let the question of administration support for such a proposal be put on the Cabinet agenda. Flemming immediately went to work to try to line up support among other members of the Cabinet, particularly the more liberal ones like [James P.] Mitchell, the Secretary of Labor from New Jersey and [Henry Cabot] Lodge, and I forget who else off hand. He thought he was going to have a reasonable array of support when the time came, but, as it turned out, a couple of strong-minded conservatives delivered some withering blasts at this proposal at the very outset of the meeting.

FJG: Who were they?

ELR: The leader of the charge against it was Ezra Taft Benson, and Robert Anderson was, I think, by then Secretary of the Treasury; he was equally frosty to the idea. Our allies were weak and wavering. At this point Nixon said, "Well, now, Mr. President,

do we have any objections in principle to the federal role contemplated here, in the light of your initiatives in support of elementary and secondary construction in 1956 and 1957 and the enactment of the National Defense Education Act of 1958?"

Eisenhower looked around the room and thought a minute, and he said, "No, I guess not." Then the conversation went on awhile and there were some additional blasts against our proposal, and Nixon intervened again. This sounds like a made-up story, but it's literally true.

I had, I should explain, decided that, if this proposal went down the drain, I would quit. I had too much involved in it, and it was the flagship of my effort at the time. Nixon intervened a second time by asking whether there was any fiscal reason to be concerned about this proposal. Of course that elicited the answer that it would cost very little in the remainder of the Eisenhower second term. A little while later Nixon again said, "Well now, is there any question that we are dealing here with a very serious problem, that the institutions of education in the United States, particularly in the elementary school systems, and so and so on, are under extremely severe pressure, and so and so on, to meet the baby boom coming on, and so on and so on...?" This got it established that "No, there was no question that there was a need."

Finally, after a bit more conversation, Eisenhower looked across at Fleming and said, "All right, send it up." And it did go up [to Congress], but it never got any significant help from the White House and in due course died. But as soon as the

President said "Send it up," I figuratively tore up my resignation. That result was exclusively attributable to the skill with which Nixon played his hand in that meeting. But it was the only meeting that I ever attended at which a Vice President played anything like that kind of a role, and the only one at which a President made a specific decision on the spot on a matter of legislative substance.

FJG: President Nixon didn't like to make decisions in his Cabinet meetings?

ELR: Never. Neither did Eisenhower. And, of course, no Cabinet member wants to have decisions made in a Cabinet meeting. Any Cabinet member would seek to avoid having anything he cared about put on the agenda. If you're Secretary of Agriculture, you don't want all those ignoramuses from Interior and Treasury and HEW sounding off on the merits of your proposal, and vice versa. The only reason our education bill got on the Cabinet meeting agenda was because it was an absolute last resort. But you look at the agendas of Cabinet meetings, they do not involve questions like that. One of the reasons why, as Charles G. Dawes said, "Every Cabinet member is the natural enemy of the President" is that Cabinet members are Department heads. If, as the Secretary of HEW, you don't speak for education or the elderly or for [the] mentally retarded and the mentally ill, who will? You have to be an advocate. Not only that, but you are the leader of an institution. Your troops have to perceive that you are fighting in their interests.

FJG: Did Nixon understand that?

ELR: Oh, sure.

FJG: It seems to me he had a lot of problems with [Robert] Finch, as a good example, of a man who was not doing what he [Nixon] wanted to do with the Department.

ELR: Finch had a lot of problems other than that. I don't think that was a.... Finch's problems stemmed, in my view, largely from two things. One was that he didn't have enough real background in the issues confronting the Department at a time when the trend lines were all still up. The greatest period of creative legislation perhaps ever in the field of human social concerns was in the Nixon administration. I don't think that would have happened but for the overshoot of the forces generated under [Lyndon B.] Johnson.

You just take a look at the legislation on aging in 1972, for instance. Nothing like it. There was enacted in that one year: twenty percent Social Security benefit increase; by far the biggest increase in the administration on aging appropriations of any year before or since; the indexation of Social Security benefits; the enactment of the nutrition for the elderly program; the enactment of Supplemental Security Income program. I forget what else. And that was just in aging.

In any case, Finch.... I spent three years in the Department of HEW in the Eisenhower administration. As Lieutenant Governor I had a deal with the Governor under which I was delegated responsibility for all the human services agencies in the state. I had worked in various voluntary organizations as well, so that, by the time I came to HEW in 1970, I had the

equivalent of six years, full-time, in health and education and welfare. I had worked in the Department and I understood the process, and I knew a lot of the people, and I already had their respect and liking.

But besides that, Finch was much too secretive. He tried to do things in little groups, lest they leak, which was foolish. I did exactly the opposite. I made sure from the day I arrived that, if any significant issue was going to be discussed at any staff meeting, the people who had worked on it, no matter how far down the line, were invited to be there. Because I wanted them to see--in a tough issue arising, let's say, between the head of the Bureau of Public Assistance and the Commissioner of Social Security over an issue of health care for the elderly as it affected Medicare on the one side or Medicaid on the other--I wanted the staff people in both these bureaus to hear the discussion. Anybody who works on one side of an issue very soon becomes convinced that the side he's familiar with and has helped to formulate is right. When you hear that your boss has lost, you're liable to think he got screwed. But if you see the Secretary of HEW, or any other Department, listening to arguments which make clear what a tough call he had, and then your boss loses, you cannot feel that way. Most leaking is a product of a self-righteous feeling that your position or interest or whatever it was was unfairly addressed.

FJG: Finch was bedeviled by White House accusations of leaking in his Department.

ELR: Ah, that's a lot of crap. (A) The leaks didn't matter much. (B)

The way to promote leaks is to behave secretively. I never had any problem with leaks. And I had big meetings, as I said, always. I never did anything in small meetings. I didn't always make the final decision at the meetings, because they were sometimes too hard, but at least I created a feeling that everybody involved knew what the factors being weighed were. When the decision came down, they respected it and supported it.

Well, that's another subject I could talk about at great length: running Departments. People, I think, tend not to appreciate the extent to which, in a government Department, you lack the resources of line discipline that a business corporation has. There are a lot of things you have to do to generate morale, a sense of common purpose, a sense of commitment to the merits, a sense of service to the general public, a sense of synergy among what the operating units and their professionals tend to think of as isolated and unrelated activities. I used to spend a lot of time resisting the notion that HEW was a conglomerate. A lot of this you'll find in my book. I used to talk over and over again about the fact that you were dealing with whole people--the problems of people and families. And that problems of drug abuse and alcoholism and poverty and lack of employment and lack of training and racial discrimination, and so on, are all manifestations of human situations that merge into each other. The same is true of the responses to these problems, and so on and so on.

Then, of course, Finch became the victim of the reactions to the Cambodian incursion and anti-Vietnam War feeling, and so on,

which didn't directly affect the Department as such, but they did stir up things and contribute to the occupation of his office and sitdowns and things like that.

FJG: If I could get to the Cambodian incursion for just a minute. Some allegations have been made about your role in that in Sideshow, William Shawcross's book about the Cambodian invasion. He says of the [Peter] Rodino committee, while it was investigating the Cambodian bombing, "their investigation showed that the Senate had been lied to by Richardson." What he means there is that although you were aware of the "Menu" bombing of Cambodia in 1969, the classified printout that you sent to the Senate Armed Services Committee showed that no bombing had taken place in Cambodia prior to May 1970.

ELR: I don't know what that alludes to. I had a number of meetings as what they now call Deputy Under Secretary of State with Senator [Stuart] Symington and his staff people, one of them now on the Washington Post (I can't quite think of the name at the moment). But of course we've got to distinguish between the bombing that took place in '69-'70 and the "incursion". These were quite different. The bombing was bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and of ammunition dumps and so on on the Cambodian side of the border.

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But it seemed to me that, given the use of Cambodian

territory for the logistical support of regular [North] Vietnamese forces in [South] Vietnam, no significant question was presented by that bombing. I don't see now what question was presented by it. And apart from whatever measures were appropriate to maintain the secrecy of it and the circumstances of--I'm not aware of any.... No, I don't think of it as a situation that was being "covered up". In any event, I would never have thought of that as occurring. Whether the data I submitted [were] correct or not, I don't know. But anyway, whatshisname, those two guys--they knew a lot more about it than I did. They'd actually been there. They did their own surveys in Vietnam on what was going on, and I know we gave a hell of a lot of stuff to Symington. That's all I know about that.

FJG: So Symington was aware of the bombing while it was taking place?

ELR: Well, I thought he was. I thought that's what they were.... My recollection is that that was what they were mainly interested in. But my recollection of all that is not very clear. I do remember going up and talking to him a couple of times and negotiating with him about what data we would furnish. But I know that I never had any role in the falsification of figures. That doesn't mean that I can vouch for their accuracy, either. I only know that the only concerns I had were with what I thought were legitimate security considerations with our doing it,

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I would have thought that any American, given the continuation of the war, would have thought it was dumb not to bomb the trail. The international

legal aspects of the situation of course were given great prominence after the incursion itself. (I'm ashamed to say, not so much for our own sake as for the sake of the system, that I don't think Rogers knew about that until maybe the day it occurred. I didn't learn about it until the day after it occurred, but I supported it after that). The applicable provisions of international law in such situations are, I think, entirely clear.

But I'll never forget a session I had in my office shortly after the incursion with a whole bunch of people who had been in one way or another associated with the Johnson administration's operations in Vietnam, including "Mac" [McGeorge] Bundy and Tom [Thomas] Schelling, Roger Fisher--must have been six or seven of them, mostly from Harvard, but not all--and they professed to believe that this was just awful. I didn't see what the hell they were talking about. One thing I'll never forget, I took them to the door of my office (the same one the Deputy Secretary has now), and I said, "Gentlemen, I can only say that somebody here is not being entirely rational about this, and I'm quite sure it's not I." I've never understood their behavior except as a kind of catharsis of their own sense of guilt toward our involvement in Vietnam. This gave them an excuse to get off, and they did, and they were very emotional about it. I have had almost twenty years now to reflect on that; I don't mean I've reflected on it very often, but when I do, I come out at the same place.

I don't think the Nixon administration has ever had as much

credit as it deserves for the effort we made to get out. We had commitments to the people of South Vietnam that had been undertaken for better or worse. We had created expectations toward the responsibilities thus undertaken that were widely held by the countries of the region in particular, but [also] the world community in general, including the Soviet Union and [People's Republic of] China. We wanted to get out, but, as we kept saying, we wanted to get out in a way that would give the South Vietnamese a fair shake at maintaining their own sovereignty and independence. But, from the very first meetings Henry Kissinger and I had in the White House, from January on, we were concerned with what kind of a negotiated solution we could achieve.

[End side one]

[Begin side two]

ELR: I had in my office an individual whom I called my "Vietnam coach". The fellow who had that role when I came to State was Dick Moorstein. He later went to Rand [Corporation] and then died prematurely. I brought in to replace him a fellow named Charlie [Charles] Cooke, an Air Force officer who had taught at the Air Force Academy and who had also served in Vietnam. Both were critics of the U.S. role: clear-eyed, intelligent. Cooke had a rather uniquely astringent quality of mind. I took him with me to HEW and, to find a role for him there, created an office called the Office of Special Concerns, which he headed. It was concerned with the problems of native Americans, blacks, Mexicans--anybody who didn't think they were getting a fair

shake. He later went on to the Department of Education in California, and I'm still in touch with him.

I tried to learn all I could, through my Vietnam coach and through others, about what was going on there and what might make sense as a negotiated political settlement. I developed a number of ideas about that that Henry and I discussed and which we put into what we thought was reasonable form. [At] one point he asked me to stop in Paris on the way back from Brussels, where I'd been at a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] meeting, and see a man named Jean de Sainteny, who had been the last French commander in Indochina, [and] before that leader of the French resistance in Normandy. Sainteny was a man, Kissinger believed, who had retained the personal respect and confidence of the North Vietnamese leadership. My mission was, first, to try to convince Sainteny of the fairness and reasonableness of our proposals and, second, to enlist his help in conveying his own assessment of our sincerity to the North Vietnamese.

Of course, during all this period [Melvin] Laird was bringing about the reduction of the U.S. presence in South Vietnam (the so-called Vietnamization of the war, and so on). One of the things that concerned me particularly was what would happen if a ceasefire took place. Under what terms could we agree to a ceasefire and what would be the likely political consequences in its wake? Would the political structure of South Vietnam unravel? Would the [South] Vietnamese armed forces be able to maintain the South Vietnamese control of the territory, and so on? That led to my suggesting a group that would go to

Vietnam and try to assess the situation in the villages. I forget what we called the group. It was agreed that Larry [Lawrence] Lynn, a member of the NSC staff, would be responsible for this assessment. Charlie Cooke and a number of others, both State Department and military people who had served in Vietnam, were sent back there for a month to try to gauge the vitality of the political structure and whether or not it could hold if a ceasefire occurred. That was one of the later things I did while still at State. As it turned out, I later got Lynn back to HEW as Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. He had in the meantime taken a job at the business school at Stanford. He's now Dean of the Business School at the University of Chicago. (It was with him that I later developed the so-called mega-proposal at HEW.)

This was a part of what we thought was a realistic effort to bring about a peace as soon as it could be accomplished without, as we used to say in those days, "cutting and running."

FJG: Was there any thought of what is now called the "decent interval" theory, that, if the South Vietnamese government would just last another year or two years, we could legitimately claim we had won the war?

ELR: I think we doubted the ability of the South Vietnamese to survive without any U.S. support on the ground. We didn't want to be seen to have left Vietnam entirely, without some negotiated peace or ceasefire that had a reasonable chance of holding. Besides that, a considerable part of our bargaining power with North Vietnam lay in the prospect of getting us out. So the short

answer to your question is no, there wasn't. We, of course, were aware of George Aiken's famous line about declaring that we'd won and getting out, but we viewed that as an amusing remark rather than a serious proposal.

FJG: There are indications that, early in the administration, perhaps as early as March of 1969, President Nixon considered military actions of the sort that he took much later in 1972: the mining of Haiphong harbor, the intensive bombing of Hanoi. Even going so far as to bomb the dikes on the Red River and to destroy the railroad links with the PRC [People's Republic of China]. And, he [has] said now, to his regret he rejected that course of action. Were you privy to this?

ELR: When was this?

FJG: This would have been early in the administration, March or April of 1969.

ELR: No. I wasn't. It's certainly not out of character. One thing Nixon understood was that unpredictability is a significant factor in a negotiating situation, and I'm sure he was willing to use any combination of carrots and sticks that might work. Ernie [Ernest] May's bombing survey--[are] you familiar with that?

FJG: Yes.

ELR: Well, you remember that it concluded that bombing was effective only when you were uncertain whether you would be bombed or not, or how much, but that any stable pattern creates adaptation. Which of course is a characteristic of humanity, that it shouldn't take bombing to have to demonstrate--in fact it doesn't take bombing to demonstrate--but it's a characteristic that

simply cannot be overstated. When you fly over remote areas.... You know, I've often remarked that it takes a bit of imagination to grasp the fact, to understand why the world is not consumed by envy. The only answer to that, of course, is that healthy, struggling, striving human beings can adapt to almost anything. They don't have time to.... It is striking. You ever see a healthy kid who continued to express regret that [he] didn't get into the college that was number one on [his] list? Never happens.

FJG: Right. One of the more recent books about the Vietnam War is by Jerry [Jerrold] Schecter and Dr. [Nguyen Gregory Tien] Hung.

ELR: About what?

FJG: The Vietnam War. They cite, in fact they reproduce in the book, over two dozen letters sent by Presidents Nixon and [Gerald R.] Ford to President [Nguyen Van] Thieu, promising him continued American support--military support--in the struggle against the communists. Letters that, of course, in the end proved to be meaningless because the Congress would no longer maintain that level of support. These kinds of secret letters are not unknown in American foreign policy. In Kissinger's book he cites them, albeit in a footnote, about the India-Pakistan War of 1970, in which President Nixon justified his support of the Pakistani cause by citing aides memoires given to Ayub Khan by officials of the [John] Kennedy and Johnson State Departments. I wondered what your opinion was of this as a way to conduct foreign policy, since in fact these secret commitments made by previous Presidents bind the hands, as it were, of the current President.

ELR: It doesn't bother me much. I suppose you might, if you were scrupulous enough, write into the letter, "Of course you understand that this promise is subject to at least two caveats. First, that my successor agrees with it. Second, that I, as long as I'm here, and he, when he takes over, can get the Congress to go along." I don't see how anybody with even a modicum of understanding of the United States could think that such a promise could mean any more than that the President would do his best to convince his successor and/or Congress to sustain the commitment.

I think two things can be said about the outcome. One is that, had Nixon not been weakened by Watergate, he might well have gotten the Congress to support some U.S. reaction against the invasion of South Vietnam by regular North Vietnamese forces after the peace agreement had taken effect. Second, that, in retrospect, it all matters far less than one might have supposed. The people who are by far the most hurt by what they did are the Vietnamese. Absolutely tragic situation. The U.S. would have been happy to come to the help of the Vietnamese, North and South, in rebuilding the country.

The Vietnamese of course now.... Look at them now, for Christ's sake. Their economy is in miserable shape, and they're pitifully beseeching multinational corporations to enter into joint ventures; they've passed a new law to encourage it. They're feeling the same pressures to modify their economy that all state central systems are feeling, or ex-state central systems. I always thought myself that Indochina under North

Vietnamese domination would become a kind of Southeast Asian Yugoslavia, not subject to manipulation by either the Soviet Union or [People's Republic of] China.

It's one thing to agree that U.S. involvement in South Vietnam was a mistake. It's another to make up your mind as to the terms and conditions on which we should have gotten out. And of course, as I often thought at the time--I used to use a very simple analogy, sort of a trivial one really. You know how it is when you're waiting for somebody to meet you at a street corner. You wait five minutes. It's quite awhile. But three more minutes is only a fraction of what you've already waited. By then you've waited eight minutes. So you can wait five more. By that time you've waited thirteen minutes. You get sucked in.... This kind of behavior, of course, is manifested in all kinds of situations.

FJG: One of your duties with the State Department was in attempting to arrange the release of our POWs [prisoners of war]. How did you go about trying to do that particular job?

ELR: There were all kinds of communications with all kinds of groups and people and the military and attempts to deal with the North Vietnamese. I had relatively little direct role in it. It was a responsibility that more or less came with the office. The guy whose daily assignment this was was Frank Sieverts, who, incidentally, it turns out (I didn't know this until I read it in some magazine), was a college roommate of Mike [Michael] Dukakis. Sieverts is now on the staff of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. I think he's sort of a spokesman for the Committee.

But my role was mainly supporting his efforts and signing letters or meeting people that he wanted me to talk to.

FJG: Somewhat later, when you were Secretary of Defense and the POWs were in fact released, I've been told by people in the PR side of it that there was a serious dispute between the Department of Defense and the White House over how the return of the POWs was to be handled. And that in fact the White House insisted, unsuccessfully as it turns out, that there was to be no press coverage. I think this was one of the times when they were angry at the press. Do you have any recollection of that?

ELR: I can't say I do. I can't say I ever imagined that there wouldn't be press coverage. I remember being concerned about the physical health and psychological wellbeing of the prisoners, the ex-POWs, and that they be taken to military hospitals, where they could be given some time to adjust themselves and get rested up and fed and treated for any illness or physical problems they had. That was all very well done, I thought. I visited a couple of hospitals and met and talked with some of them. I thought everybody did a good job on that. It was really quite a moving and impressive.... I was very impressed by a number of these people as individuals, given what they had been through.

FJG: Well, Mr. Richardson, I've taken a lot of your time already and it's six o'clock, so if you'd like to stop here.

ELR: OK, yeah. Let's see, what else have we got here?

FJG: Oh, we can come up with any number of additional questions for you, but I realize that an hour's talking about these things can be tiring. Many of our subjects have found it so.

[End of interview]

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conducted by Frederick J. Graboske
in Mr. Richardson's office in Washington, D.C.
on May 31, 1988

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