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WITH LBJ IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
Interview #5
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RITCHIE: At the end of the last session we talked briefly about your trip with Lyndon Johnson in 1961 to Southeast Asia, and I wondered if you could tell me some of the story behind that trip?

VALEO: Yes, I believe that Kennedy had mixed motivations in sending Johnson to Southeast Asia in 1961. On the one hand he wanted to get some clarification of the Indochina situation from a politically sensitized person; most of his information at that point was coming from people who were not. As a matter of fact, if you look at the State Department's position papers of that whole period, they don't vary much from about the time of the very early Eisenhower period right on through. The pattern was essentially the same and it had to do with asserting our position in Southeast Asia in ways which we could, usually involving some sort of a military show of force. I think that was the advice that was going to Kennedy. I don't think he trusted it completely, and he wanted to get some outside view, so I think he asked Lyndon to go at that point even though Lyndon had never been in Southeast Asia. In addition to that, I think Lyndon may have been getting in his hair a little bit too much down in the new setup of the White

House. He was undoubtedly very restless in that period and Kennedy probably thought that the mission would be a good way to keep him occupied. Then to be on the safe side I think he included sister Jean in the party, and her husband, Steve Smith. Johnson also brought along some people that he could trust, or that he thought would be desirable, one being the black columnist, who was an ambassador for a while under Johnson.

RITCHIE: Carl Rowan?

VALEO: Carl Rowan was part of the press party. So was Nancy Dickerson, then Nancy Haunchmann. It was an interesting press group. Jack Bell was in it. Bill Theis of the U.P.I. who was their senior correspondent on the Hill and a friend of Johnson's. There was a good selection of press. There were two planes, one was the press plane and one was the party's plane.

Johnson asked Mansfield to go with him, and Mansfield said, "I'm just taking over in the Senate. I can't very well leave now for two weeks." "Well," he said, "I've got to have some advice from the Hill." This was related to me later. He said, "I don't trust those fellows downtown that much. I need somebody." Mansfield said, "Well, why don't you take Frank? He's been traveling with me on all these trips." So he said, "Well, if you think so, and anybody else you can think of." Mansfield talked to me about it and said, "I think you should go with him and try to

steer him right, because he needs a lot of advice on the area. He doesn't really know it." He said, "Anybody else you want to take with you that you think would be worthwhile?" I immediately suggested Frank Meloy, one of the people whom I had known earlier in Vietnam. I knew him as a fine Foreign Service Officer who would give me a straight and honest story but at the same time would do his best to present and defend the department's position no matter what it was. Even though we might disagree I knew he would at least give me a straight story. I knew I could count on that.

The other fellow I asked for was Horace Smith. I knew Horace Smith through Bourke Hickenlooper. He was a good friend of Bourke Hickenlooper's. Horace had been in the Philippines and had been a great China specialist at one time. He was an incredible guy. When he was a young vice counsel he walked out of China during the war by way of the Himalayas. I think he went straight from Nanking, running back away from the revolution—or from the war, I'm not sure which—going all the way through Tibet and into India. So I asked for these two people. Both were Foreign Service officers; both were totally unobjectionable to the State Department. Johnson didn't know either of them, and I thought between the three of us we could come up with something that might be a fairly well balanced picture of the situation, and also reasonable recommendations in terms of what was doable.

Johnson accepted all three of us without any question. We had a briefing downtown a couple of days before the departure. The State Department handled most of the briefing, and it was true to the long-standing position papers. After the briefing, Johnson grabbed me by the lapels, which was his usual way, and he said, "You know, I don't trust anybody down here. I'm counting on you. I know your first loyalty is to Mansfield, but I want you to give me the benefit of your advice. I want you to be absolutely honest with me." I said, "Well, Mr. Vice President, I'll do what I can. I'll most certainly give you a straight story as far as I see it. I could be wrong, but I'll give it to you the way I see it." He said, "Now, remember that, and remember it all through the trip." Well, this was my first real close-up exposure to Lyndon Johnson.

There's a little side story to this. Just before the trip, my wife asked if I could get the vice president to speak before her group. She was having a national convention of the National Committee for Children and Youth, which had then just finished the White House Conference on Children and Youth and this was an outgrowth of it. First, of course, her people wanted to get the president, but when they couldn't they thought they'd settle for the vice president. She came to me and asked if I could get the vice president. Well, I didn't know him well enough to go directly to him, so I went to Bobby Baker and said, "Can you get the vice president to make a speech before my wife's group?" I

said, "It's for a good cause. It won't pay anything, but it's for a good cause." He said, "I'll talk to him and see what he says." So he did, he went to Lyndon, and Lyndon said, "If he writes the speech." So I had him lined up for the speech, which happened to coincide with the exact day we got back from the trip. All during the trip, in dribs and drabs, I wrote the speech for him.

That's a side point which I will come back to, but to get on with the main narrative: I went back and told Mansfield what had happened at the briefing. He said, "Well, do it that way. Give it to him straight. Whatever it is, just tell him." That's a rather formidable task with somebody like Johnson. It's hard to say what you think in front of somebody whose sort of beaming down on you—scowling down on you is probably closer to it. But I felt I had the right to do it. I had a preliminary meeting with Horace Smith. Frank Meloy was then in Rome, and he came in for the trip. We agreed that it would not do for us to take the lead, the lead would have to be with the people in the executive branch. Our role would be that of observers and commentators on what he was being advised or what conclusions he was drawing for himself.

All three of us saw the situation in Asia in just about the same way. We had our own nuances, but basically we were in accord on the central role of China in the situation and the way the flow of events would probably go, and what would eventually emerge from it. So with that as starters, we set off.

Johnson was surrounded by people like Carl Rowan, Horace Busby and the big fellow that worked for him as his press secretary for a while, George Reedy, and two or three other intimates as well as Lady Bird. But they had one thing in common: none of his immediate people knew anything about Asia. He was relying primarily on the Department of State and some military attaches for advice on the substance of the mission. Jean Smith and Steve Smith were brought along primarily for window dressing. He would always push Jean out in front. She was young and attractive, looked a little like Jack Kennedy. Steve Smith was amiable and pleasant. That was the party that took off. I guess we were about twenty-five or thirty in the main party, and there must have been thirty or forty correspondents.

We went by way of San Francisco and then Guam, as I recall. And if I'm not mistaken our first stop in Asia was in Hong Kong. It was a rest stop. We went then from there to the Philippines. Up until this point I had placed as much distance between Johnson and myself as possible on one plane. I did not want to push myself forward, I didn't see my role in that context. I thought when we started to get memorandums and press releases, any part I would have to play would be more effectively done in that setting.

Johnson was continuous energy. He moved restlessly on the plane back and forth. There was a lot of comic relief. I think

it was Knight of the Secret Service who was on the trip. Johnson kept saying to Knight, "I don't want you hanging around close to me. I get this from you wherever I go, and I don't want it." The poor guy would reply, "But that's my job." He said, "I don't care what your job is, I don't want you near me. Don't get yourself in between. You did that in San Francisco and you did it in Guam and I don't like it." It was one of his beefs, the Secret Service. The other was his personal military attaché. Johnson wanted soup in his diet at all times and he had asked this fellow to bring along some Campbell's Soup, I think. He was a Colonel. Well, they didn't have it and, so Johnson was furious at this fellow. He said, "Do I have to get myself a General in order to get a can of soup on this plane?" There was enough comic relief of that kind to make the flights bearable.

The people in his immediate circle, like Horace Busby and Walter Jenkins and others, were very energetic. They were part of the whole pattern of the early Kennedy period. They were sort of the Johnson version of the Kennedy mafia. So there was really never a dull moment. Lady Bird Johnson would sit in the forward cabin knitting most of the time. Later on, I decided she was like Madame Lefarge in a Tale of Two Cities, knitting my name into her patterns, as one whose head would have to come off later. But it was a great experience.

When we finally got to the Philippines, Johnson said to me, "Where have you been? You been with me on this trip or not?" He said, "I haven't seen much of you." I said, "Well, I've been around." He said, "I want you up front. I want you near me so I can see you, especially in the Philippines." Well, I knew something of the Philippines by this time, I'd been there so many times. I knew the politics of the situation and I found myself writing speeches on one-minute notices. He'd come up with something from the State Department and say, "Look at that, they want me to do that. I can't do that. That's not a decent speech. You go back and rewrite it." Well, he was due to make it in two hours or so. Fortunately, the State Department had a marvelous administrative man along at the time who gave full support for this kind of thing. His name was William Crockett. He was assistant secretary for administration. He was not a Foreign Service officer. He was an administrative type, I believe from Nebraska, awfully effective as an administrative officer. Wherever we went he could marshal any kind of resources he wanted in the embassies. Between that and help from Frank Meloy and Horace Smith I must have put together two or three speeches for him to use in the Philippines, all in about three hours as I recall. But he always wanted more political context than the stuff in the State Department drafts. Again, understandably, they

were doing their thing, and he wanted to do his. So we had one really difficult period in the Philippines. He would turn to me frequently for that kind of assistance.

My recollection is wrong; we probably went to Vietnam first. But in any event it was either the Philippines or Vietnam first. In Vietnam, which was the most tricky of the stops, Meloy, Smith and I had, as far as we could, alerted him to be very careful, warning him that there were a lot of dreams about the possibilities there, but not too much reality. Most of that dreaming was an effort to build up South Vietnam's confidence, which was at that point still pretty shaky. As a matter of fact, it was very shaky.

Well, we got to Vietnam, and the first thing struck us was this statement by Johnson about Diem being the Churchill of Asia. We did not see that until after it was done. I believe it came from a fellow who was to be ambassador in Bangkok, his name was Ken Young. He was not officially a member of our party, but he had asked for a ride out to Bangkok, and the vice president was rather taken with him. Ken Young—who by an odd coincidence had had the same Chinese teacher I had ten years before, my Chinese teacher had been a schoolmate of his at Lingnan University in Canton. He apparently struck Lyndon's fancy. Ken Young supplied, I believe, that statement on the Churchill of Asia. I didn't see much of Ken in that early period. Yes, we did go to Vietnam

before we went to the Philippines. He was up front with Johnson most of the time, and I was in the back. But I began to have some difficulties with Lyndon at that point because he—well, let me go back first and tell you something of the details of what happened.

Of course, Johnson was received with wide open arms in Saigon by the government. He played it to the hilt. He didn't know what else to do except play it as a politician. So when we landed at the airport in Saigon, he immediately made a stump speech as though he were running for office in Vietnam. The initial reception was conducive to that because it was a very colorful setup, with thousands of people literally jamming the airport. Lyndon went around shaking hands, with this fellow from the Secret Service still trying to get between him and the crowds, and Lyndon ignoring him as far as he could! That was where he first pushed Jean Smith ahead of him and I remember him saying in one place, "We think so much of this country, I've even brought the president's little sister with me." Well, she was about as tall as he was. But it was "little sister."

These were typical political gestures, which I found no fault with, because Americans were not expected to behave like Vietnamese. His behavior was in no sense offensive. Some of the stories which later appeared about how he had been so ridiculous and so forth, may be true, but people in Asia expect Americans sometimes to be a little ridiculous in terms of their mores. So

he was very much characteristic of an American politician from anywhere in the United States. I didn't think any of that was in any way offensive or hurt us with anyone.

He got along well with Diem. I sat in on the interviews, most of the interviews, and I thought he did well. They discussed the aid program and how the war was going. It was a kind of generalized discussion. But the event that struck me most strongly was a meeting we had at midnight in the U.S. Embassy, at which Johnson wanted to discuss the situation only with Americans. Not being able to sleep early at night, he was restless and worked very often until two and three in the morning. Well, he called this meeting at midnight and we rounded up through the embassy people about as many of the relevant officials as we could. Some were in the sporting club, Le Club Sportif, which was Saigon's foreign club. Others were out wherever they were, but they brought them in for the meeting. In comes the man who was in charge of military aid, a general carrying a riding crop, which was part of the foreign affectation of that period. The riding crop and the white suit were so much the hallmarks of the era.

Well, we sat around the room—about twenty of us—and they gave him a briefing on the aid program. After he'd listened for about twenty minutes Johnson said, "That's all very fine, but what I really want to know is: what can we do to end this situation?"

He added, "The American people are getting very tired of what is going on over here. We're spending something like 350 million dollars a year on this country, and they're tired of spending that kind of money. They want to wind it up. Now what's it going to take to end it, to get rid of the Communists?" Well, everybody hemmed and hawed or was absolutely silent. He said, "Well, you know, tell me what you need. How many men do you have here now in your military aid group? You've got seventy or eighty? Do you need to double that number?" He said, "Or do you need another twenty?" I think he started out with twenty or thirty. He said, "You get 350-400 million dollars. What do you need, another 100 million dollars?" Well, this general who was trying to answer the questions said, "That would help."

Johnson said, "I don't just want to help. I really want to get the thing wound up. The president's getting tired of it. The people are getting tired of it. It's time to do something about it." He said, "Tell me what you need." Well, obviously the guy didn't want to say it. So Johnson said, "Suppose we doubled it. Suppose instead of giving you 350 or 400 we gave you 800 million? Suppose instead of leaving seventy men here, or eighty men here, we give you 160?" The general said, "Well, that would help a great deal. I think we could do it. Johnson said, "Well, how long? About a year?" He loved to put words in people's mouths and then

say: well, he agreed with me. The fellow didn't say it in so many words that it would end in a year, but he permitted Lyndon to think that.

What he needed to say—and I can understand with the overbearing manner of Johnson why he might not have said it—but his responsible role there as an official of the U.S. government, in a very difficult position, would have been to say, "No, Mr. Vice President, it can't be done that way. There is no way in which we can wind this up in a year if we mean to keep to the objectives which we seem to have set for ourselves here." That would have been a responsible answer, and that's the answer he would have gotten from somebody like General Marshall. He would have gotten it from a number of the generals in the postwar period. He would have gotten that kind of an answer from Bradley. But this was an aid general and he just couldn't say it; perhaps he didn't know himself at that point. So Johnson came away with an optimistic view that a solution could be found. All we had to do was increase the amount of aid.

He wrote up, or somebody in the group wrote it up, I don't know who—it may have been Ken Young, who's now dead—but he wrote up a report to wire back to the president on the Vietnamese stop. I remember there was a reception at the palace, given by Ngo Dinh Diem. I was in the room, I had gotten there earlier, and before Johnson came into the room he sent word for me to come out. I

came into the hall and he thrust this cable into my hand. It was his first report back to the president. He said, "What do you think of this?" I read it and I said, "Well, Mr. Vice President, it's awfully optimistic. I just don't think that that's realistic and that you can expect that." "Well," he said, "how do you want to change it. You change it." I said, "Well, I can't just sit here and change it in five minutes. It's going to take a lot of adjustment." "Oh," he said, "I can't wait for that. But will you write a memorandum to Mansfield, and I want to see it before you send it." I said, "I'll do that." He said, "All right, sign this that you've seen this memorandum," the one that he was going to send to the president. So I signed that I had seen it—I didn't write "I have seen it."

But that was the way he operated. Having made up his own mind then, he wanted to be able to say, "Well, you told me that." It was a very destructive characteristic, destructive for himself as well as for the people who worked around him. Anyhow, I wrote a telegram for Mansfield, praising the way Johnson had performed in public and being much more cautious than he had been in the report on the situation.

At that dinner, which was an elegant dinner, and at the reception before, Diem looked quite different to me at that point. I already detected there was a change. He was not unfriendly, he was simply removing himself. He was almost going back deeper into

the characteristics of a recluse that he certainly had before that but it seemed to be developing even more intensely at that point. He exchanged pleasantries, but the person who took over the occasion was the wife of his brother, Madame Nhu. She was a beautiful woman, very elegant and imperious in her behavior. I had never met her before; she had not been part of the scene in the early trips to Saigon. But she sort of presided at the dinner. Diem was there, but he said very little. She did most of the talking. The dinner was otherwise a rather formal occasion. Johnson said the right things about our cooperation with them, and so forth.

There was one other point: Johnson got his first taste of the real Asia of that period in Saigon. He began to see it, I believe—this would later come out more strongly when we got to Bangkok—but I think he began to see it as an enormous challenge in a constructive sense, that this was a place that was big enough for his talents. Here with the right kind of American know-how and energy, why, you could transform this area of great poverty into something that would be rather spectacular and beautiful and democratic. This was the preacher part of Johnson.

There were two parts of him: one was the soldier who never was, really, and the other was the preacher who never was. But these were, I think, the two fantasy characters in Johnson that operated simultaneously. That's why he could be greatly fond of a [William] Westmoreland later, and Bill Moyers, who was a

missionary type at that time, and I think was actually part of the ministry. Both of these forces worked simultaneously in Johnson. I think he saw for the first time the other side of Asia, which was not a military problem but which was essentially a social problem and a development problem. I think that's about it for the Vietnam part of the trip.

RITCHIE: Is it possible for an American official of his level to travel into an area and really get a good view of what's going on? I would imagine in some respects their schedule is arranged by their hosts and things must be orchestrated to a great degree.

VALEO: No, he can't really get a good view of it. Except that he asked for certain things. But even then, it was a kind of bird's eye view of it. There's no way that you can do otherwise. So much of the demands of an official on a mission of that kind are official in nature. Much of it is ritual. He wasn't there really to get a picture. He was there primarily to express our solidarity with the Saigon government, to give them a boost, and to find out what they needed from their officials, not from the people. So, no, you can't say that he would have come away with a greatly clarified view of the whole situation, except that he may not have realized the extent and the nature of what was at that time the poverty of these places. They were very much impoverished.

Again, one has to be careful. Our sense of being impoverished and theirs is quite different. In Southeast Asia you live under a tropical sun, you really don't need a shirt and tie. You're much, much happier if you have nothing on the top of your body. It doesn't mean that you're poor, it just means that you're feeling better with the kind of heat that's involved. Sihanouk told me that one time, and I was very much taken by the observation. He said, "You know, Americans come here and they say, 'Oh, the poor Cambodians, their children go around naked.'" He said, "It's not because they don't have clothes, it's because they don't need clothes. This is a much more comfortable way to be when you're in a tropical country." There is a great deal of truth in that. What we see as poverty sometimes is an adaptation to the environment. That's not to say that there isn't poverty, but we can be easily confused by that.

RITCHIE: After Johnson saw the memo that you wrote to Mansfield, did he raise questions about Vietnam or his meeting with Diem?

VALEO: No, he did not. He really was looking for somebody to okay what he had already reached as his conclusion of what needed to be done, which was essentially to double the aid, and that would clear it up that we just weren't doing enough.

RITCHIE: When Johnson came back to the Senate after that trip he made a presentation to all the members of the Senate . . .

VALEO: Yes, and he asked me to be there and I was there with him. He did it in the House and the Senate both. I was at both briefings with him, but I did nothing in connection with it. I just listened, that's all.

RITCHIE: On two occasions at that time, senators asked him would we have to send troops to Vietnam. And in both cases he said flatly no, that the last thing we should do is send troops.

VALEO: And he meant that. But then again he was going by some of this advice that all you needed to do was have another eighty or ninety military advisors there and a little more money and the whole thing would be cleared up. That was the prevailing wisdom in Saigon in the bureaucracy, and it applied to the military bureaucracy primarily. I must say, the Foreign Service at the time was not much more enlightened. A fellow named Durbrow, I believe, was ambassador. His staff, from my own contacts with them, were limited people who were running an establishment without really much knowledge of what was going on in the country. I guess they had begun to get some people who spoke Vietnamese, for the first time. There was young fellow, who later became assistant secretary of state for the Far East under [Jimmy] Carter. He was then a very young Foreign Service officer, but I

believe he was studying Vietnamese. He and one or two other very young officers were used as interpreters by Johnson in going around among the people.

RITCHIE: That wasn't Richard Moose, was it?

VALEO: No, it wasn't Richard Moose. We had him as an intern in Mansfield's office for a while too, for a brief period of time. I can't think of his name.

RITCHIE: I'll look it up. Was that Richard Holbrooke?

VALEO: Yes, it was. He's one who still talks a great deal on Southeast Asia. He quit under Johnson, somewhere along there he decided to get out of the Foreign Service because he felt they were wrong on Vietnam. He had been, in effect, right on it. Then Carter made him assistant secretary. He was very young even when he became assistant secretary.

RITCHIE: At the time you got to Vietnam, the most troubled place in Southeast Asia was really Laos. Was there some concern that because Laos was so uncertain, that maybe it was better to focus on Vietnam where things were a little more stable?

QVALEO: Well, I get this from some readings and also from some of my own personal recollections. It was again part of the same thought process which I mentioned the last time we discussed Vietnam: The officials there don't worry about Hanoi falling,

they can't be thinking about that, they can't be thinking about North Vietnam now, all they can think about now are the refugees who are coming south. Something has to be done immediately about them and that is a full time preoccupation. I think some of the same sort of thought processes worked on the Laos and Vietnam thing: We can't really think about what's going on in Laos, we've got to concentrate on Vietnam because this is the really critical area. The most immediate thing becomes the target of all energies and efforts. Of course, the long-range factors which are moving in on this, and moving in relentlessly, are lost in this process. No matter how immediate the danger—and it wasn't that immediate in Vietnam, by any means, the Viet Cong were not moving in Saigon or anything of that sort, there was no sign of that. But in an effort almost to avoid thinking about Laos, everybody began concentrating then on Vietnam. How are we going to save Vietnam since we're obviously going to lose Laos? That attitude was prevalent among all of the careerists, or many of the careerists with the exception of people like Frank Meloy and a few others. So there was no discussion of Laos in Vietnam, and that's ironic.

Another thing that happened, which was intriguing to me, was when we were setting out, Johnson had first sent me his schedule of places to visit, and Cambodia, which was neutralist, was conspicuously absent from the proposed itinerary. I sent it back with the observation that the schedule looked fine except I

thought that it should include Cambodia, which was probably the most stable place in Indochina and probably where we had the most hope of not seeing some sort of collapse because of the political strength of Sihanouk personally. Well, he took that up with the State Department and they just ruled it right out. They didn't want anything to do with Sihanouk—and we're talking about 1961. We're back to that same business of how policy gets off the track. Now we're backing him, when it's far too late. But at that time nobody wanted to even touch him, except Mansfield. The State Department successfully dissuaded Johnson from including Cambodia.

We went up to Laos, as I recall, on that trip, and again the position paper was already established. The State Department position paper, which came, I expect, out of the National Security Council, was that we would not move troops into Laos, but we would land them in Thailand to make a show of force. That had not yet happened at the time of the Johnson trip, but that was planned in that period on the belief that would be enough to dissuade the Laotian communists from a complete takeover.

We were still reluctant at that time to deal with Souvanna Phouma, who was essentially a neutralizing figure in that situation. We did not like the concept of neutralization. That dislike went all the way back to Dulles. I don't think Dulles personally was that opposed to it, but he was dealing with the whole McCarthy situation, and the prevailing political wisdom was

that you don't have neutralization, you don't have coalition governments with Communists or anything of that sort, they're all what lost China. And because they lost China, therefore they will lose every other place in Asia, all this with a complete unawareness of the complexity of the backgrounds in these situations. I mean in the case of Laos, what was ignored by this approach was that Souvanna Phouma was dealing with his brother the Communist, or his half-brother the Communist and his half-brother the militarist!

There was no awareness of the relevance of factors such as these in those very, very, primitive (in a political sense) societies, where you still had the old Japanese concept of the king living in one place and the functioning government in another place so that they wouldn't get in each other's hair. All of that was completely lost because of that one overriding concern with who lost China. And it applied whether you were in Vietnam, or whether you were Bangkok. The whole State Department bureaucracy had shifted gears from some relatively intelligent policies on China, in my judgment, primarily because of the fears induced by the McCarthy period.

RITCHIE: Was China seen as the principal threat in Southeast Asia, as opposed to Russia?

VALEO: At this time, yes. Well, of course we were seeing both as being a unified threat. It was a monolithic concept. It ran from Moscow to Peking to Hanoi or wherever else, or to Vietienne for that matter. But the truth is that at this time, the only people under modern arms in Laos were people we had armed with rather sophisticated military equipment. All our modern equipment did was to build up casualty counts without really changing the fundamentals of the situation. This was part of the whole tragedy of this area, which was composed basically of societies so simple and really so remote from any of our experiences. And of course, Johnson had absolutely none of this background. It was all black-and-white. He would come back and say time and again, "If we don't stop them here, we're going to have to stop them in San Francisco." He missed Honolulu somewhere in between—he lost that! He said, "I'd rather stop them there." That was the pattern of thought that prevailed in this period.

RITCHIE: Do you think this trip really set Johnson's thinking about Vietnam?

VALEO: Yes. We go to Bangkok for that, and in Bangkok he'd gotten all kinds of warnings about cultural niceties, you know, don't touch a Thai on the head! These were the kind of things that were taken out of nineteenth century missionary tracts. How to behave with Thais. Well, Johnson would have none of that. I don't know how much you want of humorous asides but,

there's a marvelous story of what happened in our first official meeting in Bangkok. By this time he wanted me present at all of the formal meetings, largely because of the Philippine experience. He said, "I want you in the room where we meet."

I sat in on this meeting with the fellow who was the then prime minister. He who was a typical peasant general. His name was Sarit. He was right out of the rice fields, you could see it. He was as coarse and as growling as Johnson was, except he didn't talk as much as Johnson. He grunted most of the time. They sat there together. The audience room in Thailand, where I had been many times before, is a sort of horseshoe shaped room in one of their beautiful palaces. It's all plush. Invariably, the minute everybody sits down all the photographers come in and take the pictures of the horseshoe with the people sitting around it. Johnson was up front, and I had gotten a seat maybe about six or seven down on the horseshoe. He motioned to me, "Sit here," so I came closer to where he was sitting. Sarit, who was a rather portly man sat next to him. He sort of fell into the cushions and lay there as though he couldn't move.

Johnson started off on what by this time had become the usual pitch. You know, how we have to stay together and fight the Communists, and we've got to stop them wherever we can. In this meeting with Sarit, he did the pitch with appropriate gestures, and whenever he made a point, Sarit would simply grunt, "Uuuuuh,

uuuuh," periodically to indicate his concurrence, as his interpretor relayed to him what Johnson had said. As a climax, Johnson said, "You know, Mr. Prime Minister, this is like a fire. What do you do when you have a fire? You try to put it out." Sarit grunted: "Uuuuh." Johnson went on, "How do you put it out? You take out your hose," he said it again with proper gestures, "and you put the fire out." And Sarit grunted "Uuuuh." They got along famously.

One result was that there were some immediate problems on the aid budget or something and we sat across the table from the Thais and worked the problems out immediately, but they were minor. By comparison with Vietnam, these were trivial. In Bangkok, Johnson liked the idea of getting out early in the morning on the klongs, the canals where a good deal of the life of Bangkok at that time centered. You get a view of what looks like appalling poverty, you know, people living in houses on stilts with trash and what not flowing down the rivers. That's where I first had the very strong impression that Johnson was beginning to discover the other mission in Asia, which was to uplift these people and bring them up to not Christianity necessarily but to Americanism or something of the sort, maybe American capitalism, I don't know. But anyhow he would look around with a kind of fascination at the size of the

problem. I had the feeling that running through his mind at that time was the thought that here we could really do something constructive.

There were two other major stops on that trip that I think were significant. The first one was in New Dehli. I remember the meeting very well. I had met Jawaharlal Nehru on previous trips, and he was a rather standoffish man. I think he probably was very suspicious of Americans generally, and felt disappointed by America's attitudes towards India. But at that time he was feeling the threat of a potential invasion from China. Something had gone wrong with the whole Bandung concept, the five principles that he and Cho En-lai had worked out. There was a lot of tension over the border situation in the northeast, in Assam and along the borderlines there, as well as on the western borders of Tibet. The Chinese had really only entered in force and were moving fully through Tibet at this time. They were beginning to come into contacts with, I guess it was the McMahon line, which had originally been designed by an early British official as a delineation of the border between Tibet and India. There had been some clashes between Indian and Chinese troops, although not to the degree that came later. The border had clearly come into dispute.

So Nehru, swallowing his pride, had come to the airport to greet Johnson on the tarmac. I remember the day so well because it was viciously hot. I had never been in India in the spring.

This was I think early spring, just before the monsoons. When I got out of the plane I thought I was going to be blown away by the heat. It was just so fierce. The hot wind was blowing, very strongly, and the heat was overwhelming. Nehru was standing out there, I think the plane was delayed, waiting under a canopy. He came out to greet Johnson. And if I'm not mistaken, his daughter, Mrs. Gandhi, who was then Nehru's official hostess, also came out to the airport. They greeted Johnson with open arms. Nehru was in his Gandhi cap, and the white, closely fitted pants and white jacket that was the Congress party uniform of that period. They went through the usual greetings. John Kenneth Galbraith was ambassador at the time, but I don't recall his being there for that particular experience. He may have been out of the country at the time. Anyway, Johnson and Nehru had meetings and, as I remember, discussed the Chinese threat. I mention it because it was Johnson's first meeting, I believe, with Nehru, and he may have formed his opinions of him then. Or maybe he had seen him at the Hill before that when Nehru made a speech to a joint session. But Johnson did not seem to be impressed with Nehru and the meetings were rather stiff and formal.

We went from New Delhi to Pakistan, where Johnson was greeted by this Sandhurst graduate, General . . .

RITCHIE: Ayub Kahn.

VALEO: Ayub Kahn, the president or prime minister who was a charmer, a total charmer. He affected very British clothes and mannerisms. His English was good, as was his humor. His mannerisms were Sandhurst. He had the moustache, and the full-figure and the fleshiness of a Colonel Blimp. This had a certain appeal for Johnson. They had a meeting and Ayub Kahn presented the Pakistani position vis-à-vis India with great perfection, Johnson listened closely to it. It was the open-and-shut, black-and-white kind of thing that Johnson liked. He mentioned the Soviet threat, again in those black-and-white terms that Johnson seemed to like so much. This meeting was in Kharachi. At that time they had not yet moved the capital north.

On the next leg of the flight, Johnson showed me a dispatch he was sending back to Kennedy. After Vietnam these dispatches were routine and I didn't find any great fault with them. Unless I saw something that was really offensive, why I just said, "It looks fine," and let it go at that. But while on the plane after Kharachi, he was showing me one of these dispatches; it was the Karachi report. Afterwards said, "What did you think of that fellow, Ayub Kahn?" I said, "Oh, he's a very impressive man." So he said, "Yeah, but I didn't think much of that fellow Nehru. I sure think a lot of this fellow." I said, "But there's one thing that you ought to keep in mind, Mr. Vice President. Did you notice how he was dressed?" "Yeah," he said, "he had a sport

jacket on, pants, and a tie." I said, "He was dressed in a very British style. And did you remember how Nehru was dressed?" He said, "Oh, yeah, yeah. He had on that white suit and white cap." The point I was trying to make was that one was deeply rooted in the mores of his own country and the other, Ayub Kahn one was essentially a superficial reflection of the short period of British control in the history of the area.

I tried to make the point but failed to do so. The idea that leaders in Asian countries needed to be rooted in their own culture rather than ours was something that went beyond Johnson. In that way he was being very representative of American attitudes, at least of that period. If people were like us, if they spoke English, that was enough to make them the right kind of people. If they didn't understand us when we talked, and if they didn't look like us, or didn't dress like us, why, they were either people to be uplifted or shunned, one or the other. These were the black-and-white attitudes which existed in the country at the time. Johnson was no monster. He was representing the realities of American attitudes towards the rest of the world.

RITCHIE: Was that also true of the State Department's view of those things?

VALEO: I'm not really sure whether you could say that. There were certainly people in the State Department who knew better than that. But to some degree there was some of that in their approach. From the State Department's point of view, it was easy to deal with certain people, and that was a primary concern: how easy is it for us to deal with them? You can read into that, if you want to, in many places: how easy is it for us to dominate them? But basically the State Department saw in that period as its mission two things in approaching Asian countries: make sure that there were no Communists involved in the government, and make sure the country is safe for American investments. They didn't even think in terms of trade very much at that point. They thought in terms of U.S. investment in the country and in terms of making it safe against communism as our primary national interests. Of course the third factor was: can we deal with them? If you could deal with them in those two contexts, it was safe. It was safe for our diplomacy, it was safe for our aid program, therefore it was desirable. That seemed to be the general thought. Whether or not the government was really rooted in its own people seemed, at best, to be a secondary consideration.

RITCHIE: They just had to be adamantly anti-Communist.

VALEO: That, plus the secondary factor was to be safe for American investment. Those seemed to be the way they read the national interest at that point.

RITCHIE: Was that the prevailing view on the Foreign Relations Committee as well, or did you see some members breaking away from that?

VALEO: There were people on the Foreign Relations Committee who certainly subscribed to that view, perhaps even more adamantly than the State Department, but there were also others who saw it another way. They were beginning to be heard a little bit more frequently. I'm trying to remember whether that included Fulbright at that point.

RITCHIE: In 1959.

VALEO: He had taken over in '59? That early? Yes, he would see the situation with a deeper perspective. But even he had his limitations. I'm not going to suggest that he looked at it only with depth.

RITCHIE: He really hadn't paid much attention to Asia.

VALEO: That's right. He was interested primarily in Europe. On the committee at that time, Mansfield was really the only one who had spent a great deal of time and a great deal of thought on Asia, and had done his homework, really, on the

situation. I guess [Frank] Church was on it. Hubert was on the committee at the time. Church wasn't really interested yet in the situation. Hubert was on to so many different things that Asia didn't really have much meaning for him as such.

RITCHIE: Morse and Gore seemed to be beginning to pay attention to Southeast Asia.

VALEO: Morse was interested because of the aid program. He had then become really a bitter enemy of the aid program and the way it was operated. Gore, as we discussed the last time, was Gore. He had his own way of getting interested for a brief period of time, and posing and displaying great erudition in regard to a problem, and then kind of dropping it and leaving it.

RITCHIE: Were there any Republicans at that stage who were interested in that area?

VALEO: Again, in the same category, not quite the same as Gore, I think would be [John Sherman] Cooper. Cooper had the sensitivity. I always thought he was in some ways, in terms of dealing with foreigners, the most effective of all the Republicans. I think he was seeing where we were going wrong. [Jacob] Javits sensed it with a kind of brashness and a hardness out of New York City. If you wanted to do some business effectively with Asian countries, then you'd also better have some people that

you're dealing with who have some connection with their own people. He saw it in brash terms that turned other senators off, but he was beginning to see it.

There was a certain rivalry between Javits and Mansfield. Whenever Mansfield would take up a new point on the floor, or break new ground on the situation, Javits would first oppose it very vehemently, and then come around, and wind up in about the same place. This was a common pattern, particularly on Asia. Javits didn't know it that well, but he had enough sense to know that Mansfield had done a great deal of homework on this. At first he would resist it, partly because he hadn't said it first, but then he would come around to it. I think that's what probably bothered him. But he was good on Asia, basically.

RITCHIE: George Aiken was always very quiet on this subject, but he seemed to be a little more perceptive than most.

VALEO: George Aiken had a good deal of sensitivity. He was on some of the trips with Mansfield. I don't know how deep his understanding of the problem was, but he was certainly inclined to trust Mansfield's views on anything dealing with Asia. I think he had, again, the sensitivity to recognize that Mansfield did have some unique characteristics which made him extremely useful in that situation.

RITCHIE: When you got back, what kind of report did you give to Mansfield about this trip?

VALEO: Well, I think more important, before we get to that, was the rest of the trip. The rest of the trip is sort of a haze to me. I'd been working eighteen and twenty hours a day as we moved around the world, and I was beginning to get very tired. We stopped on the way back in Athens, Cairo and in Libya. And I think from there we went directly to Bermuda. Bermuda was a rest stop. We were supposed to rest up over night before we landed. Instead, I worked the whole night through with Frank Meloy and others.

Somewhere in there, Johnson called us in. Someone else had drafted the report. It was probably a combination of Carl Rowan, Horace Busby, and the State Department people who were along on the trip. They drafted the report, and Johnson gave it to me for comment. He said, "You look at it with Frank Meloy and Horace Smith and see what you think." He said, "Everybody else is going to have a rest here, but you fellows look at that and work it over." We looked at it and we just thought, God, if he gives this to the president and it prevails, it's going to be so misleading in regard to the ease of the situation or the optimism—basically it was the optimism—that it's going to really give us all kinds of problems. I think the way we decided to deal with it

was that we would go over it line by line and draw up, in effect, a clear-cut opposition to what we thought was invalid, and have some alternative to give him.

I remembered my first experience when we landed in Vietnam, when he had given me this thing and said, "Sit down there and rewrite it." So instead of having a good time—he gave a big party and gave each of us one of those Johnson watches, and there was a lot of camaraderie with the press plane as well at this point, we had a good time, but we left it early and everybody else went on having a good time. We went up to work on the report. We worked it over and over and over again. We worked, I don't know, until two or three in the morning, and the plane left shortly at dawn.

We got on the plane, and Frank and I went in to see him with our comments on the report. We said that we thought it would be a very serious mistake to give the president the report that he originally showed us. I remember the scene very well, because there was a table on one side of the plane. He was on one side and Frank and I were on the other side of this small table, and the bed almost came up to the table. Mrs. Johnson was sitting on the other bed, knitting. Frank and I really gave it to him straight, to try to get him to tone it down in terms of its optimism. He was irritated with us, but I must say that he took a lot of the suggestions that we made. It wasn't completely to our

satisfaction, but at least it did change it somewhat. We made it clear that you could not suddenly put in a big shot of new aid—especially in the dimensions of which it had been discussed—and expect that to have any real influence on the situation. We went so far as to say, if you really meant us to have an influence on the situation, you have to think in terms of thousands of people and putting them out into every village, practically, and the towns, which we did not recommend, but which would be what would really be involved in it, if you really tried to change the situation from what it was. I don't know how much of that survived, I can't remember now. I never kept a copy of the report.

RITCHIE: The section on Diem was interesting, because it said that he was a remote figure who was not close to his people, and this was after Johnson had just called him the "Winston Churchill of Asia."

VALEO: Exactly, and I think that was part of our doing.

RITCHIE: Some commentators have noticed the difference between that final report and his earlier statements.

VALEO: It could very well be. I remember what Mrs. Johnson said while we were doing this. She said, "Mr. Valeo, you strike me as a man who always objects." She didn't say anything else. She said it with obvious disdain and distaste. I

said, "Mrs. Johnson, I have to speak my mind. If I'm asked to do it, I have to tell it the way I see it," or something to that effect.

We got back, we were on the last leg of the flight, and Johnson came out on the plane and said, "Frank, where's that speech I'm supposed to give for your wife's meeting tonight?" I said, "I gave it to you two days ago, Mr. Vice President." He said, "I know you did, but I can't find it. Do you have a copy?" I said, "No, I don't have a copy, that was the only copy." So he said, "It must be those State Department people. They're always losing things." So the plane was turned upside down. I'm trying to remember the name of the chap who was the administrative undersecretary's assistant who had come out on the trip, and who was later an ambassador to Iceland, Ericson. Dick Ericson was the paper carrier on the trip for the State Department. He was quite young at the time. He was being badgered and he said, "I don't have it! I haven't seen it! I haven't seen it! I haven't seen it!" The search went on for two hours on the plane while we were flying in from Bermuda, and no speech.

So Johnson said, "Well, there's only one thing you can do. I don't have a speech, I don't know what the subject's about, I don't know anything. You're going to have to write another one." I said, "Okay, when we get in, I'll go to my office." "No," he said, "I don't want you to go to your office. You have to come to

see the president with me." We got to the airport, and we separated into groups. Two or three of his closest people, and I guess a couple of State Department people and myself went with him by helicopter to the White House to see Kennedy. Johnson knew why he took me. It wasn't that he wanted me to be there for advice or anything, he wanted to make it clear that Kennedy thought: now, here's Mansfield's man and he's in agreement with it, and everybody else is in agreement. So Johnson made his presentation to President Kennedy who was sitting behind his desk in his rocker and the rest of us were sitting in sort of a semi-circle. Johnson handed Kennedy the report and the president threw it on the desk without looking at it and said, "How did Jean do?" Then he said, "How was Steve?" You know, that family tightness showed up immediately. He sort of heard with only one ear what Johnson was saying about Vietnam. He was more interested in what Jean and Steve did. At least that's the impression he gave at that meeting.

Well, after the meeting, I went back to my own office and I tried to reconstruct this speech out of memory. It was probably one of the most difficult things I ever did. I was so angry, I wrote a line in it at the beginning. It was about school dropouts, and I wrote as the first line in the speech something to the effect of "There but for the grace of God went I. I could have been a school drop-out!" I went on from there and developed this horrible speech on school drop-outs. Johnson, of course, had not

seen any of this. When I left him, after meeting with the president, he said, "I'll see you at the hotel tonight. You be sure you have that speech, and have enough copies." So I said, "I'll meet you at the hotel before you go in for the speech."

Sure enough, he was there. My wife was all aflutter because she'd gotten all the credit for bringing the vice president in. So I was waiting at the foot of the stairs, where I knew he was going to come in. When he arrived, he said, "Where's the speech?" I gave it to him, and he didn't even open it. He went up the stairs into the ballroom, it was at the Capitol Hilton down on K Street. I found a seat in the back; it was a banquet. It came his time to speak, and he got out the speech, and after looking around he said, "You know, I have an associate but the best thing about him is his wife Rita Valeo." Of course, he had never met Rita before that day. Of course, that got a good laugh. Then he opened the speech and he read the first line! He stopped short, and I could see him looking around to see if he could find out where I was sitting! By this time I had sort of slunk a little bit further into the chair. But he went on with great generosity and made the speech. He skipped parts of it. He was so tired, I could see that he could hardly stand on his feet. He got through about fifteen minutes out of a half hour speech by skipping paragraph here and there. Of course, he got great applause and then he left.

But that was typical of Johnson. On a personal level he could be a very warm and very endearing person. It was one of the things which unfortunately was probably his undoing, because it led people to be kind of taken into his trap. You didn't really want to offend him at times by opposing him. So it probably did him a lot of damage, and probably did people around him a lot of damage too, because in a way they lost their objectivity where they shouldn't have lost it. It was a very hard thing if you were close up to Johnson. I noticed that George Reedy left, and Horace Busby left, and a couple of others of his real close aides. Bill Moyers left, and maybe that's why Jack Valenti left, even though he felt better sleeping at night because Johnson was president. That's not the end of the Johnson story by any means, it goes on from there.

RITCHIE: But in some respect, since that covers the trip, this might be a good breaking point. I just wanted to ask one more question: did you report to Mansfield when you got back and brief him on the trip?

VALEO: Oh, yes. I don't know if I gave him a written report on it or not. But I told him what I thought. I said I thought the State Department was unfair in their reports and leaks to the press on Johnson, that he had done a very good job in his personal contacts in these various countries. He left maybe a picture of an eccentric, but nevertheless an amiable one, not a

bad one, not a brutal one. I thought that was good. And I thought for a man who had not been exposed to that area before, that he had learned a good deal, which I think is true.

The bad treatment of him was not by the press who traveled with him. In a way, they sensed probably the same thing. The stories that came out were of a kind of snob stuff. Oh, there was the famous story about the camel driver. That was in Karachi. I was not with him, but he was out sightseeing. Typically, he'd give everybody he met a ticket to get into the Senate gallery. He carried them around, and would say, "When you come to Washington, you come to see me at the Senate." It was part of his technique, and his invitation to the camel driver, which he probably never expected any response to, was probably in that same category. Again, as a human-interest story, I never thought it hurt us. It probably helped.

RITCHIE: I think that was the single most memorable thing about that trip, to most people, that camel driver.

VALEO: Yes, that's the way it comes out. And probably it was a good thing on balance. It may look foolish, but it might have been a good thing. Johnson didn't know what to do with him after he got him here! But that was Johnson.

End of Interview #5