

Conversation with Willard Matthias

by Dr. Harold P. Ford

12 February 1990

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Conversation with Willard Matthias on Vietnam
Issues, 12 February 1990

1. At my initiative, Ken and I lunched with Willard Matthias today, and later talked with him in the History Staff. Williard, an old O/NE colleague of mine, was in Army G-2 in Washington during WWII (in charge of sigint analysis re SEAsia). He later went to State when his unit was transferred there, thence to the nascent CIA. He was one of the first of O/NE's original staffers (having come there from CIA's ORE); [redacted] then an O/NE Board member; then special senior-level analytic duty [redacted] (b)(1) [redacted] then O/NE Board again. He retired from CIA when O/NE was (b)(3) wrapped up in 1973.

2. Of chief importance for our Staff's Vietnam undertakings, Willard was the O/NE Board Member in charge of the ill-fated NIE 53-63 (the one McCone remanded in February 1963). Then, a little over a year later, Matthias wrote an Estimate of the World Situation that was later semi-declassified--and leaked to the press, where it raised quite a rumpus because it was so pessimistic about Vietnam (at a time, mid-1964, of great rhetorical (only) optimism on the part of the LBJ administration) that Willard received a lot of flak for having taken such a view.

3. CIA-NSC liaison on Vietnam events prior to 1962-1963. It is Matthias's recollection that in the 1950's Allen Dulles himself was the principal go-between, CIA-NSC, on Indochina and other matters. Later that duty was delegated to Bill Bundy of O/NE. Thence to Bob Komer of O/NE, beginning about 1962, who physically moved into the DDI's office to perform that chore. Then, ditto, in 1963 to Chet Cooper of O/NE. Willard says that on a few occasions he filled in for Bundy, Komer, or Cooper.

4. The sad fate of NIE 53-63.

-- George Carver was the staff drafter of this estimate (initiated by his immediate boss, CFE/ONE Hal Ford, in the fall of

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1962). This was about the first Estimate Carver had drafted, having just joined O/NE at the time. (Ford was out of commission much of the time until about February 1963 -- with ear trouble and a mastoid operation). Matthias says that he redrafted Carver's whole paper because "it was just a lot of facts about Vietnam, not an estimate."

-- In any event, even though Willard's draft NIE then got through the coordination process OK at the working level, it hit the fan when it got to Ray Cline, then the DDI, who at the time had an overseeing responsibility for Estimates. According to Matthias, Ray felt that the draft was much too pessimistic -- in part because his daughter's boyfriend was then on duty in Vietnam, and the three of them were, in Willard's terms, "gung ho to kick the Communists out of Vietnam." Willard assumes that Ray conveyed his dislike of the draft to McCone.

-- Willard then met with McCone, who told him that the pessimistic tone of the paper did not square with what he had been hearing from senior USG officers (Krulak, Walt Rostow, etc).

-- Then the paper went to the USIB in February 1963. (I was present on that occasion, HPF). There McCone remanded the paper, directing Sherm Kent to contact Rostow and the others, learn their views, and work them into a revised draft. Willard's recollection and mine differ on this matter: his view is that on that occasion McCone was not as steamed up on the matter as Cline had been. I am unaware of what position Cline had taken, but McCone was extremely frosty to Sherm and the O/NE contingent at USIB, raked Kent over the coals in front of big roomful of Generals and Colonels, and directed us to check "with the people who know Vietnam best." Guess who.

-- After hearing from Rostow and the other drum beaters, the O/NE Board watered the paper way down (over the objections of Ford and Carver). Willard's recollection is that the draft wasn't changed that much (I definitely disagree; the two texts, side-by-side, create an entirely different impression/tone). Will defends his action, stating that he didn't want to provoke a State dissent. Matthias: "maybe I made a mistake."

-- (The NIE hit the streets in final form in mid-April; it was only three weeks later that the riots in Hue began the months of extreme turmoil in South Vietnam that culminated in the fall and murder of Diem in November 1963). Some time soon after the Hue riots, McCone apologized to Kent for having remanded the draft: "You guys had it right the first time."

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5. Willard's Estimate of the World Situation (in 1964, completed just shortly after [redacted] (b)(1)
(b)(3)

-- At McCone's request, O/NE declassified this paper so that McCone could take it up to Gettysburg and show it to ex-President Eisenhower. Thereafter the paper was "classified" "US Government Only." It then was leaked somehow to the press (Willard says he thinks he knows how, but won't say), where the Chicago Trib was the first to run the story. The NYT and other papers then took up the story. The point was, the section on Vietnam was exceedingly candid and gloomy, it included a suggestion for a possible negotiated settlement that would neutralize South Vietnam (heresy!), and it named Will as the author..

-- This caused Willard some flak [redacted] (b)(1)
(b)(3)

[redacted] (because of the notoriety surrounding the press releases about Willard's Estimate). In the end DCI McCone went to bat for Matthias, [redacted] (b)(1)
(b)(3)

[redacted]

Hal Ford

cc: Ken
Tom
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Interview with Willard Matthias

by Dr. Harold P. Ford

20 April 1990

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20 April 1990

Memorandum for the Record

Subject: Conversation with Willard Matthias re Vietnam

1. This conversation today centered on his role in a public flap that occurred in 1964 regarding the views of O/NE concerning Vietnam. At the time Matthias had been a member of O/NE's Board of National Estimates for some time, and had been the chairman of the ill-fated NIE 53-63 (the one DCI remanded and rosied up).

2. Subsequent to the NIE 53-63 affair, Mr. McCone changed his mind in 1964 about events in Vietnam, and began to share more or the concerned tone O/NE had been voicing since early 1963. McCone's change of mind had been brought about by the domestic turmoil in SVN following the HUE riots of May 1963, the overthrow and murder of Diem in November, and the advent of feckless post - Diem leadership in Saigon.

3. In the spring of 1964 McCone asked O/NE for a estimate on the world situation that he could use in briefing Congressional figures. Matthias wrote that piece, which McCone liked very much. The DCI then asked O/NE if the paper could be declassified because it talked in such general terms. O/NE agreed, but after deleting a very few items gave the revised version to McCone marking the paper "Government Use Only." McCone then circulated a number of copies around to various senior consumers.

4. Meanwhile, CIA had for months been arranging a special tour of duty for Matthias [redacted]

(b)(1)
(b)(3)

[redacted] in August 1964, when the Chicago Tribune made a big thing about the above (leaked) paper he had written. The particular point concerned Vietnam, where Matthias had written (correctly and courageously) that the situation was bleak, and that one avenue the US might possibly examine would be that of negotiating a settlement on Vietnam. Given the times - the Gulf of Tonkin episode et al - this suggestion was anathema. A lot of media people and government officers raised a hue and cry about whether CIA was clandestinely trying to make national policy on Vietnam.

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[Redacted]

(b)(1)
(b)(3)

6. According to Matthias, who heard the account from a participant (Sherman Kent) in McCone's Morning Meeting the next day, [Redacted]

(b)(1)
(b)(3)

[Redacted] whereupon McCone got very frosty, pointed his finger at [Redacted] and said, "I don't want that boy hurt. Matthias is going to stay [Redacted] Kent told Matthias [Redacted]

(b)(1)
(b)(3)

7. Matthias saw McCone a few times thereafter, and on every occasion the DCI went out of his way to signal his regard for Matthias. Willard attributes this in part to (a) the change of heart the Director had had concerning the situation in Vietnam, (b) McCone's belated realization that he, the DCI, had erred a year earlier in remanding NIE 53-63; and (c) the fact that McCone had admitted to Kent and Matthias that he had so erred.

8. Willard says he thinks he knows who leaked the paper to the Trib, and why and how, but he prefers to remain mum on that question for now.

[Redacted]
Hal Ford

(b)(3)

cc: Ken
Tom
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