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Transcript of "A Conversation with Clark Clifford -- Vietnam and Its Aftermath"

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DR. HENRY KISSINGER (March 26, 1975): We must understand that peace is indivisible. The United States cannot pursue a policy of selective reliability. We cannot abandon friends in one part of the world without jeopardizing the security of friends everywhere.

PRESIDENT GERALD FORD (April 3, 1975): I am convinced that this country is going to continue its leadership. We will stand by our allies. And I specifically warn any adversaries they should not, under any circumstances, feel that the tragedy of Vietnam is an indication that the American people have lost their will or their desire to stand up for freedom anyplace in the world.

BILL MOYERS: American policy in Indochina has failed. Cambodia is in ruins, South Vietnam is beseiged and crumbling. Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford say the failure of our policy there has seriously undermined our credibility with other nations. And events in Indochina have not been the only bad news for American policy in the last few weeks. A series of disappointments has led to a hard look at American power and influence in world affairs.

I will be talking about these issues tonight with Clark Clifford, adviser to Presidents since 1946, and Secretary of Defense in 1968, at a critical turn of our involvement in Vietnam.

I'm Bill Moyers.

(MUSIC)

MOYERS: There seems little doubt we are watching the final throes of the Vietnam war. It did not fade away quietly for Americans, as some imagined it would after our troops withdrew and the POWs came home. Rather, it is ending as it always was, a nightmare of horror and human suffering, as terrified and weary refugees flee along with the collapsing South Vietnamese army.

Americans are tired and frustrated by our long involvement in Vietnam. They have not, as a whole, responded with renewed debate over past arguments but have been engulfed by compassion or stricken by guilt.

Few people question the argument that the Vietnam experience was a blow to American power and prestige. We invested billions of dollars and thousands of lives and encouraged and tolerated immense suffering on the part of these people in an effort to prevent what is now happening.

Now questions are being asked about our future commitments and the impact the defeat of South Vietnam will have on American allies and the future of American foreign policy. The two most prominent voices raising the question of American reliability are President Ford and Secretary Kissinger.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: The problem we face in Indochina today is an elementary question of what kind of a people we are. For fifteen years we have been involved in

a -- in encouraging the people of Vietnam to defend themselves against what we conceived as external danger. I am saying that, as a people, we should not destroy our allies, and that once we start on that course it will be -- it will have very serious consequences for us in the world.

PRESIDENT FORD: I believe that there is a great deal of credibility to the "Domino" theory. I hope it doesn't happen. I hope that other countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand, the Philippines, don't misread the will of the American people and the leadership of this country to believing that we are going to abandon our position in Southeast Asia. We are not.

Let me say to our Western European allies we are going to stand behind our commitments to NATO and we are going to stand behind our commitments to other allies around the world.

MOYERS: The Administration's argument is in fact a resurrection of the "Domino" theory, the notion that the loss of Vietnam would make other nearby countries vulnerable to subversion and aggression, causing them to be toppled, one by one.

Nor is it in the mind of Ford and Kissinger only a question for Southeast Asia. The Secretary of State cited American reverses in Vietnam as one of his problems in persuading the Israelis to agree to a treaty with Egypt. He suggested the Israelis doubted the credibility of our willingness to help them, after Vietnam, in event of another war with the Arabs.

Kissinger said peace is indivisible. The statement suggests that in his mind foreign policy is a seamless web, unadorned by distinctions. That view is certainly open to challenge. But what is obvious is that on several fronts American diplomacy has met some reverses. Those reverses and the general drift of events have led to images of the United States as a helpless giant of diminishing influence. They have also led to serious questions in some places about our ability any longer to control or shape affairs.

The British news magazine, the Economist, summed up the predicament this week with a cover headline: "The Fading of America."

The series of events precipitating the doubts was crystalized by Secretary of State Kissinger's recent failure in the Middle East and the possibility of renewed war there. Shuttling back and forth between Cairo and Jerusalem for seventeen days, Kissinger was unable to get the Israelis to give up the strategic passes and oil fields or Egypt to make public statements of non-belligerency toward Israel. It was personally a diplomatic failure for the increasingly troubled Secretary of State, who probably would not have attempted the mission, in the first place, had he not thought there was a reasonable chance of success.

Kissinger told newsmen traveling with him that the crisis in Indochina and the questions of America's longterm commitments may have stiffened Israel's intransigence.

As Washington reassesses its Middle East policy, the troubling questions is this: If America cannot persuade Israel into some kind of accommodation, is there any other hope to avoid war and another embargo of oil?

The Middle East was complicated by the assassination of King Faisal of Saudi-Arabia. He had been a friend of the United States, an admirer of Kissinger and a force for moderation among Arab nations. As heads of state gathered for Faisal's funeral, the Saudi Cabinet selected Faisal's brother to be king. For the moment, Faisal's policies continue. But for America the familiar has been replaced by the unknown.

Another unexpected development is the triumph of leftwing forces in Portugal and the possibility of the first Communist-dominated nation in Western Europe. Following an unsuccessful coup attempt by moderates, leftist military officers consolidated their control of the government with the help of a well-organized Communist Party. Communists may soon dominate Portugal, with serious effects on the Atlantic Alliance. Their success in Lisbon could also encourage Communist Party efforts in other Western European states.

Across the Mediterranean, Cyprus has become another thorn for U.S. policy.

Secretary Kissinger interrupted his Middle East mediation for a hurried visit to initiate a compromise between Greece and Turkey. Both have been allies, and both are unhappy with our policy toward Cyprus. The Greeks are mad because the United States long supported the now-deposed rightwing junta and did not act to stop the Turkish invasion on Cyprus. The Turks are angry because the United States cut off military aid after they invaded Cyprus. Somehow, in Cyprus, we've managed to hit two friends with one stone. Now we face the possible closing of military bases in both countries just as the Soviet Union has become a major naval power in the Mediterranean. No wonder those smiles have since disappeared from the face of Henry Kissinger.

So troubles mount. But do they represent impending disaster or the pain of simply inevitable adjustment? Despite the errors of judgment, the tactical mistakes, the fizzling of Kissinger's miracles and the frowns of some of our allies, the United States still has friends in the world and a role to play, an important role. We still have enormous power and influence, although we have learned there are limits to our power, and our influence does not guarantee things will always go our way. It's a dangerous world, of course, and it runs on self-interest, not benevolence. Surely we've learned that in recent years.

What the United States has been given is a chance, not to retreat like an ostrich from the world, but to assess anew what it can do in the world, what it ought to do, and the difference. Above all, we have a chance now to begin to make distinctions between what is truly a danger and what is only a nuisance.

These are the issues I want to discuss with my guest this evening. His name is Clark Clifford, and he has been close to power in Washington for almost thirty years now. He has been called the most powerful private citizen in the nation's capital since Bernard Baruch.

A native of Missouri, Clark Clifford came to the White House in the 1940's as a naval aide to Harry Truman. In 1946 he became special counsel to the President and was a principal agent in shaping American foreign policy from within the White House and in unifying the armed forces into an integrated command under the Department of Defense.

In the Eisenhower years Clifford was a highly successful lawyer in Washington. And then President-elect Kennedy asked him to serve as liaison to the outgoing Administration during the transition following the 1960 election. Then Mr. Kennedy named him chairman of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

A close friend of Lyndon Johnson, he was an intimate, behind-the-scenes adviser to LBJ on domestic and foreign affairs. President Johnson named him Secretary of Defense when Robert McNamara resigned in early 1968. And it was Clifford, according to most participants, who played the key role within government in the tumultuous weeks that spring when Lyndon Johnson began to reverse himself on the war in Vietnam. Clifford's role led some to describe him as the man in power who started stopping the Vietnam war, and his critics to call him an s.o.b. who walked out on the President.

One fact is indisputable. Like much of the nation, he evolved from a hardliner toward containing communism to believing that America had to withdraw from Vietnam. He is an old friend of mine and a former colleague.

Clark, we were both part of those years when the Vietnam buildup really intensified. And I'll come back to that later. But I'd like to ask you in the beginning, have you been surprised by what's happening now in Vietnam?

CLARK CLIFFORD: Yes, I have been surprised by the haste with which the end has come in these past few weeks. We had been led to believe these last five or six years that the program of Vietnamization was succeeding and that the South Vietnamese would be able to take care of themselves. When the test came and the South Vietnamese forces retreated, in many instances without even fighting, I think it was a surprise, and even shock, to most knowledgeable Americans and was very definitely a startling development to our own military.

MOYERS: How do you account for it? What do you think happened?

CLIFFORD: I think when the final test came that the will to defend the Thieu

Government was lacking in these men. They had everything they needed, insofar as equipment was concerned. But when you are faced with the question of defending the land in which you live, then the question is: Are you devoted enough to that government to sacrifice yourself for it?

MOYERS: Is that an absence of patriotism?

CLIFFORD: I think it's an absence of fidelity to the government that you have at that time. One might state it sharply by saying these men had everything to fight with but really nothing to fight for.

MOYERS: What about the fear of communism and the fear of the North that has always seemed to be at least a part of the outlook of the people in the South? Wasn't that something to fight for?

CLIFFORD: Well, the fact is that it's not sufficient now for them. They are not willing to fight and die to keep communism from becoming part of their part of South Vietnam. The fact is the Thieu Government has been a dictatorial and very repressive government. You will see from time to time the people have no rights. You are placed in jail if Mr. Thieu decides you should. The newspapers are closed. There have been thousands of political prisoners there. So there was no feeling of being part of the government, no feeling of being part of South Vietnam, that would warrant making the sacrifice that troops have to make.

MOYERS: Wasn't the regime in the North -- isn't the regime in the North also dictatorial and repressive? And I am wondering how that affects the relationship between the forces? Is there something more than that?

CLIFFORD: This has been one of the age-old problems since the world has been troubled with communism. What is the sense of dedication that impells ordinary people to invade other countries, perhaps, as distinguished from defending the fatherland? I am sure I don't know the answer. I don't know that anybody does. But there is a discipline that is inculcated in these forces, and they have fought well. They went through those years and years of the terrible bombing to which we subjected them. They got down to where the very young boys were part of the military service. There was still a sense of dedication.

One of those reasons is that this war has been Vietnamese against Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese were fighting to stay separate. The North Vietnamese were fighting to unify their country. And it's entirely possible that that was a motivating factor that led them to make the sacrifices they have.

MOYERS: Is it too late for any additional military aid from the United States to make a difference?

CLIFFORD: In my opinion it is.

MOYERS: You would not be for sending any more military aid from this moment on?

CLIFFORD: I wouldn't send another dollar in military aid. I wouldn't send another dime in military aid. If you look at what has happened here within the last few weeks, Congress appropriated seven hundred million dollars for fiscal 1975. Most of that has already been sent. There is a hundred and seventy-five million of it that hasn't even been sent. It's still in our Treasury. It hasn't been used.

As the South Vietnamese forces retreated from the north, they abandoned over a billion dollars' worth of equipment that we had sent them. So what would the possible sense be at this stage, after over two-thirds of the country is now in the hands of the Communists, all they really have left is an enclave around Saigon and down into the Delta -- there can be no question -- I don't know whether it's going to be next week, I don't know whether it's going to be next month or whether it's going to be

next year, but it is inevitable now; the South Vietnam that we know, the Thieu Government, cannot endure. And why should we now come up with any more money? We have -- over the last fourteen years we have put a hundred and fifty billion dollars into that war. We have lost fifty-five million American men. And I say that, after that investment, when the time came for the Vietnamese to show that they could defend their own country we got this perfectly, thoroughly, unfortunate and shocking result of men fleeing without even fighting.

MOYERS: Some people argue that if we gave more money right now the Thieu Government could hold that enclave around Saigon -- they've given up a lot of territory now occupied by the North Vietnamese, their defense lines are shorter, the North Vietnamese defense lines are longer -- that Thieu could maintain a defense around Saigon that would at least hold out some possibility for a political and negotiated settlement rather than more blood.

CLIFFORD: The time for a political or a negotiated settlement, in my opinion, is now. It doesn't do any good to go on sending more money there for military equipment. I am perfectly willing to send whatever money really is needed to help the South Vietnamese people. I want to send them food and clothing and medicines. They need it very badly. But I don't want to send another penny for military, because, after all these years, to continue on with the fighting is not going to bring about any kind of a peace. Let's have the peace now. Why do we have to go on with the killing before we have a peace?

This gets into a different subject. But when the accord in Paris of 1973 was signed the Thieu Government agreed at that time to have elections and put into control there an administration of national reconciliation and concord, which was then to start to negotiate for peace. That was January of 1973. Not one gesture has been made toward peace by the Thieu Government. And as long as we continue sending the money there and sending the material of war the fighting is going to go on. When we stop sending the material of war some time the fighting will stop. And the gainers will be the people of South Vietnam, as distinguished from the Thieu Government.

MOYERS: Except those who bet on us. Aren't they likely to be the victims of a blood bath?

CLIFFORD: That's entirely possible, that there are a number of people who should and can be removed from South Vietnam.

MOYERS: You mean evacuated.

CLIFFORD: That's right. And be evacuated from South Vietnam. I would think that we would want to take part in that. Those people who worked with us and who are identified, you see, as enemies of the Vietcong, particularly, they can be evacuated. The great majority of the people, whether it's some seventeen or eighteen million people in South Vietnam, are substantially the same people that exist in North Vietnam. Some of them are Catholics, some of them are Buddhists, some of them belong to the Cao Dai. They're exactly the same kinds of people. Those people aren't going to be destroyed. And, as far as the people of Vietnam are concerned, the finest thing we could do for them is do whatever is necessary to stop the war, and then they can get back to their farming and to their usual occupations and raise their children and do it in peace. They've not had peace there for so long it's difficult to find anybody who can remember peace in that land.

MOYERS: One of the reasons they haven't had peace is because we chose South Vietnam as a place to make a stand against communism. And, in effect, we have invested so much of the region's present importance and therefore exaggerated, it seems to me, the consequences of a defeat there. Don't we, because of our urging them to make this war, don't we have some moral obligation left?

CLIFFORD: I find absolutely none. After we have spent fourteen years -- this started in the first year of President Kennedy, and that's fourteen years ago -- when we've made this enormous investment to help them -- it's unheard of in the annals of human history that a country like the United States would send a hundred and fifty billion of its treasure and fifty-five million of its finest young men over to defend them, and then, after we withdrew our men we've sent them untold billions in addition in equipment. And finally, when the time comes and they are still not able to demonstrate the spirit to defend their own homeland, then we not only have done everything that's expected of us, we have gone far beyond any responsibility that we might ever have had.

A man sat in my office some -- maybe a year or so ago. He had been a lieutenant-general in the Vietminh, which was the indigenous force in Vietnam that opposed the French and finally defeated them. He had been a Cabinet-member in the Diem regime. And he said, "Mr. Clifford, the greatest service that the United States can render is keep your troops out and keep military equipment out. That just continues the war." This was a South Vietnamese. He was born in the Delta. He wanted peace for his land, and he knows we will never get peace as long as we continue to have the Thieu Government. And we are the ones who have kept the Thieu Government in power. And if we continue to send military aid we will continue to keep Thieu in power. The only way they're going to do it is for the people to rise up and other sects to come into being, get rid of Thieu, ask the North for a ceasefire, and then adjust their differences and make a peace.

MOYERS: Clark, everything you say spells d-e-f-e-a-t for the United States. After all you say we have put in there we have come to a defeat.

CLIFFORD: Not to me, not to me. I am proud of the fact that we have made this contribution. I wish we had not done it. If we had known in those years when we got into it what we know now we never would have done it. But it was a very humanitarian move on our part. We thought that we could help these people in South Vietnam. We were the only member, really, of the SEATO pact, the only signatory, who really made a substantial investment, because we thought that we were really defending these people. It was a misapprehension of the situation that existed. But our motives were right and good. And now that we have made this investment, I say let's don't invest any more.

MOYERS: But we did set out to prevent North Vietnam from taking over South Vietnam, and North Vietnam is about to do just that. That's not a defeat?

CLIFFORD: It is not, in my opinion, because so many conditions changed from that that existed when we decided to go into Vietnam. The world has changed a great deal. The reasons why we went into Vietnam really no longer exist at this time. So what at the time seemed as though it was the right cause, as the result of many developments and changes in the world that took place, it was not the right cause. And therefore there continued to be, in my opinion, no continuing obligation. When you say this is a defeat, does that mean that we have some obligation of staying in Vietnam indefinitely? Would you stay there another year or five years or ten years?

MOYERS: I'm not arguing for staying there. What I'm saying is, isn't it best to admit that we did not succeed there, that we did take a defeat, and do so honestly and go on to what's next?

CLIFFORD: Well, I feel a little differently about it. I want very much for us to stop giving any further aid, except humanitarian aid. I'm not convinced that this constitutes a defeat. What I believe is it is the result of a course of action that we felt was right when it started but, due to events over which we had no control, after awhile lost its meaning. And therefore when it lost its meaning and there was no justification for our continuing to be there, then was the time for us to withdraw.

If some wish to call it a defeat, that's all right with me. If it is, then let's accept it. Other nations have grown in maturity when they faced up to problems of this kind. You will remember when General De Gaulle made the very unpopular decision for the French to withdraw from Algeria. And it almost caused a civil war in France. It was a wise decision. This is a wise decision for us. Every decision a nation makes can't be the correct decision. Nations are like human beings. They'll make mistakes, just the way human beings do. And when they recognize they've made a mistake, then they ought to write it off.

MOYERS: Don't you think that there is some possibility that the success of the Vietnamese Communists, after a long, drawn-out war, will be a very powerful encouragement to other Asian insurgents?

CLIFFORD: I don't believe so.

MOYERS: You don't?

CLIFFORD: No. I don't believe so, because this has such a narrow application. At one time I would have thought so, a good many years ago. But I now know that that was an incorrect evaluation of that situation out there. Now there is this very narrow, restricted war between North and South Vietnam. We know now that it is a civil war that's taking place within the one country. We know that it's related to a war next door that's going on in Cambodia. I don't anticipate any real fallout from either one of these conflicts when the end comes, which will not be far off in both of them.

MOYERS: There was a time when neither you nor I accepted the fact that it was a civil war. You were a principal architect of the containment policies of President Truman. In 1960 you I think accepted the "Domino" theory. Now you are saying that -- were we wrong?

CLIFFORD: If you're going to understand the situation in Vietnam today, then maybe it takes a minute to go back. After the Second World War the French came back into French Indochina. Vietnam was part of French Indochina. And then an indigenous national movement started within Vietnam, under Ho Chi Minh, to drive out the French, which was a colonial power. It took them nine years to do it. And they succeeded finally in 1954 in the battle of Dienbienphu, and the French then withdrew.

And at that time, at the peace agreement in Geneva, the arrangement was made arbitrarily to divide Vietnam, which had not been divided before, into North and South Vietnam and separate them by the 17th Parallel. The North, where Ho Chi Minh lived, had a Communist government. The South was to have elections and, within a period of a few months, decide whether they wished to join the North. The United States and others at that time felt that those elections might be a mistake. Our concern was that they might vote to go ahead and combine with the North. So those elections never took place.

Then the North Vietnamese, feeling that the South had abrogated the agreement of the Geneva Accords, proceeded then to attempt by force to combine the country which had formerly been a unit. Now, when that started the climate of the world was such that the United States, as the greatest power after the Second World War, felt it was its obligation to oppose communism wherever it might appear in the world. Maybe that's difficult to understand today, but it wasn't then, because you had before you the experience -- at the close of the Second World War and thereafter the Soviet Union started in and took all the countries on their western periphery: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Yugoslavia, you name it, Poland, later Hungary. Just took them. And then they started this very aggressive expansionism into Western Europe.

Then we had the example of Red China driving out the Nationalist government, and the Communists coming in in China.

Then we had Korea in 1950, in which the Communists in North Korea wanted to take over South Korea.

So we had a pattern behind us of very powerful Communist aggression. And there was a real concern on the part of thoughtful people that, with this going on all over the world through the Comintern that had been set up by the Soviet Union, a cell in every nation of the world, that we might ultimately, we and the nations of Western Europe might ultimately just be an island of capitalism in a sea of communism. And we felt we had to oppose that.

MOYERS: You were the liaison between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Did you ever hear Mr. Eisenhower and Mr. Kennedy discuss this very subject you have raised?

CLIFFORD: On January 19th, 1961, the day before President Kennedy was inaugurated, I had the privilege of accompanying President-elect Kennedy to the White House and participated in the conference that he had with President Eisenhower. And the most important question confronting this government, according to President Eisenhower, was the trouble that existed in Southeast Asia. Laos at the time was under particular pressure. He did refer to South Vietnam. And he said that he hoped that he might get the other signatories to the SEATO treaty to help in defending South Vietnam. And then he said -- and I took it down because President Kennedy had asked that I take notes. He said, "If our allies will help us, that would be a better arrangement. If they refuse to, then we will go it alone." That's how strongly he felt about coming to the defense of South Vietnam.

MOYERS: And yet he was always reluctant to use force, military troops, in a situation like this.

CLIFFORD: He was, he was. And I think it had something to do with that age-old military maxim, which has a great deal of merit to it, and that is the United States should never get engaged in a ground war in Asia.

MOYERS: And yet President Kennedy made just that mistake.

CLIFFORD: Well...

MOYERS: And President Johnson.

CLIFFORD: Yes, because at the time there was this feeling, that if we did not come in and help, and nobody else was helping -- if we didn't come in and help, the feeling of most thoughtful men at the time in this country was that South Vietnam would fall, and then Laos and Cambodia would go, and then the Philippines would go, and then perhaps Malaysia, do you see...

MOYERS: The "Domino" theory.

CLIFFORD: The "Domino" theory. And Singapore, and then -- then possibly, before you knew it, why, Australia and New Zealand would be under attack. And so it was felt that when the first one topples that then this whole process would go into effect. And here would be a whole big section of the world that would have fallen to communism and would make the problems of the free world greater.

Now, right in that regard, now it's easy to criticize individuals for the decisions that were made. But you will remember that in 1964, when President Johnson wanted authority to go in and defend, I think Da Nang it was, we had some men there, and one of our vessels was shot, he asked the Congress for authority, and the Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, giving him authority to use American military forces to come to the aid of a signatory of SEATO. And that included South Vietnam, because it was a protocol, a signatory. And that resolution in the Congress was passed 504 to 2. That's how universal the feeling was then that we were engaged in the right course of action.

MOYERS: Yet there are some reasons have been suggested, and suggestions have been made, that the evidence for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was exaggerated, distorted, or at least misread. The question that arises is, you were heading the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in the early sixties. Were you getting the intelligence from around the world that supported the heavy conviction in those days that the "Domino" theory was in fact a valid theory? Did you believe that Laos and Cambodia and Thailand and Korea, and the other countries, were in danger?

CLIFFORD: Yes. And the information that we received through the Intelligency Board, which was current and excellent, showed this unceasing pressure from the Soviet Union, from Communist satellites, wherever they might be in the world. They were engaged in an effort, trying to communize the world.

Do you remember the time that Khrushchev was once in this country and he said to our country, "We are going to sink you"? This was the whole attitude. Whether that meant economically or militarily. But the Soviet Union was engaged in an effort at that time to spread communism wherever an opening was found.

And we had another example before us. You will remember that when Hitler came into power in the Third Reich that, against the advice and counsel of the Imperial German Staff, he went into the Lowlands successfully, and the Allies did nothing. He went into Czechoslovakia, the Allies did nothing. He went into Austria. Each time that he did he became more powerful, and the Allies did not move. And we had that example before us.

MOYERS: And you saw that repeating itself...

CLIFFORD: We did.

MOYERS: ...in Indochina.

CLIFFORD: We did at that time. We did.

MOYERS: Who was the enemy? The Soviet Union or China or as far as you were concerned, you personally?

CLIFFORD: I don't know that you would say that there was any particular enemy. The enemy that threatened us at the time was communism. And when we saw to it at that time that an effort was being made, we thought, to communize a very large section of the world, with a hundred and twenty million people, or so, in it, then we felt at that time that that was a threat to our security.

MOYERS: Your evolution has certainly exemplified the evolution of the country, from hardline to retreat and withdrawal in Vietnam. You were in the early sixties, in private counsel, you supported the buildup of military forces and you advocated or supported the bombing. Then you suddenly changed. Why did you change?

CLIFFORD: It was a process that took longer than might have appeared on the surface. I accepted the reasonableness of the policy that had been advocated by President Kennedy. It had been adopted by President Eisenhower. It was inherited by President Johnson. I thought it was right. I was a product of the Cold War, having served President Truman in the White House for five years right after the war closed.

What first caused me considerable concern was a trip that President Johnson sent General Maxwell Taylor and me on in the early fall of 1967. They sent us to each of the so-called troop-contributing countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific to discuss the war with them and possibly to get them to increase the contribution that they were making to the war. And we went to Thailand and we went to Korea and we went to Australia and New Zealand. We went to all the countries. And it was a very disturbing experience to me.

MOYERS: Disturbing?

CLIFFORD: Disturbing, yes. Because here we felt this great concern over South Vietnam toppling and then these other nations going. And I found a singular lack of concern as I discussed these problems with either the chief of state or the head of government in each one of these countries, and with their cabinets. They did not feel the same degree of concern. They didn't feel enough concern to increase their troops any. The Philippines, which lie just a few miles off the coast of Southeast Asia, never sent a combat man.

MOYERS: What did President Marcos say to you when you asked him to?

CLIFFORD: Well, he didn't say anything to me at that time because President Johnson wrote him and told him that General Taylor and I were going to be there, and President Marcos wired him back and said that he hoped we wouldn't come, that it might create some political troubles for him in the Philippines. That's how concerned he was over the so-called "Domino" theory.

MOYERS: What about Australia?

CLIFFORD: Australia had sent some men. But when we reached there and spent the day with Prime Minister Holt and his Cabinet, he had a memorandum that must have been that thick of all the reasons why they couldn't send any more men.

MOYERS: Did they think that we would do it for them, or did they genuinely not think the "Domino" theory was valid?

CLIFFORD: Some of each, perhaps. One thing that disturbed me, one experience I had on that trip, I had a friend in Thailand, a lawyer who was then in the Cabinet in the Thai Government, spoke excellent English. And I had dinner with him one evening on that particular trip. And he explained to me that the Thai's did not accept the "Domino" theory, and look how close Thailand is to South Vietnam. I said, "Well, that's remarkable, that's astonishing." "No," he said, "if you stop and analyze this for a minute, North Vietnam is a backward, non-industrial nation. They have no power to overrun Southeast Asia." "But," I said, "they have China behind them, yes?" But he said, "China is an age-old enemy of North Vietnam. They were under Chinese control for a thousand years and they never want that to happen again. The fact is," he said, "if China ever went on the march North Vietnam is the best roadblock there is, and South Vietnam, to Chinese expansionism."

MOYERS: When you came back -- I had left the White House then, I had left Washington. When you came back, did you say just this to President Johnson?

CLIFFORD: Yes. I had long talks with President Johnson about it. It did not coincide with the views that he had of the situation. He felt that there was a great indisposition on the part of these countries to send more troops; it wasn't popular politically. They didn't want to go to that additional expense. And he felt that that was the main reason for their declining to aid us more, and that they would perhaps come up with a number of reasons, and that there was not as much merit to this particular argument as I attached.

MOYERS: And didn't you continue to support military action in South Vietnam?

CLIFFORD: I did, I did. That was our country's policy, and this was a disturbing, worrying, nagging doubt, but not of sufficient depth at the time to cause me to change my basic attitude.

MOYERS: Then in the spring of 1968, after you had been appointed Secretary of Defense, you literally came to a new realization about Vietnam, if I am told correctly, and recommended to Lyndon Johnson that we couldn't win there militarily. What happened?

CLIFFORD: I already had this nagging doubt that I have described about the merit of our basic position. It seemed to me, however, from the past visits that I had made -- I'd been every year at least once, sometimes maybe two or three times, to that area of the world. It seemed to me that our arms were prevailing. And, even though I might have some doubts, still we were going to come up with a result that I thought would be of benefit to the United States and of benefit to that part of the world.

When I reached the Pentagon and we were assigned the task of reexamining our entire posture, particularly in view of the fact that the Tet onslaught had occurred just shortly before I went into the Pentagon, and whereas we had felt that we were winning the war -- and I remember so well in the late fall of '67 our two top men coming back from Vietnam, civilian and military, one of them saying there is light at the end of the tunnel and the other saying we can start to plan to bring our men back. And that coincided with what I had heard. With that very optimistic report, within two months or so after that, the enemy, which was supposed to be in its last throes of desperation, staged the Tet offensive, which was a very, very serious defeat in the early stages for the United States and for the South Vietnamese. That shook me.

So I had the opportunity then to discuss with the Joint Chiefs and with other top people in the Defense Department the request of the military to send another two hundred and six thousand troops. We already had five hundred and twenty-five thousand. So I had a number of questions, and we spent days at it. And that's all I did my first few days over there. I would ask the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "If we sent another two hundred and six thousand, is that enough?" They didn't know. "Well, if we send that, will that end the war?" "Well, nobody knows." "Well, is it possible that you might need even more?" "That's possible." "Will bombing of the North bring them to their knees?" "No." "Is there any diminishing will on the part of the North to fight?" "Well, we're not conscious of it." Then finally, "What is the plan for victory on the part of the United States in South Vietnam?" There wasn't any. I said, "There isn't any?" "No. The plan is that we will just maintain the pressure on the enemy and ultimately we believe that the enemy will capitulate." Well, that wasn't good enough for me, after all the years we had been in there at enormous expense. I reached the conclusion that it was the kind of war that we were not ever going to win.

In addition to that, some other changes had taken place. We had thought originally, when we went in there, that the onslaught of the North against the South Vietnam was the result of this great worldwide, monolithic Communist conspiracy. And then we found out that it wasn't. We originally thought that Red China and the Soviet Union were partners in this. They weren't. They broke after awhile and ended up at each other's jugular. They almost went to war. So that took that argument away.

Also we began to learn that there were different kinds of communism throughout the world. There are different degrees of communism. And it didn't seem to me that there was any responsibility for us to oppose every form. For instance, there is a different kind of communism in Yugoslavia than there is in other parts of the world.

MOYERS: Everything you say adds up to a tremendous indictment of our political and military process back in the sixties. Wrong assumptions -- or, if they were right in the beginning, we clung to them too long. Or fighting a war without a plan to end it.

And I wonder if you agree with me, and, if you do or don't, whether you think that we aren't about to enter, as a consequence of all of this, some deep tunnel of psychological doubts, loss of national will, a real sense of disillusionment with ourselves for all of this.

CLIFFORD: I don't get that impression of this experience at all. I cannot be critical of the decisions that were made by these men at the time, in the climate with which we were surrounded. It was so pervasive. We lived with it every day. When the times changed we did not change as we should have. I had hoped when Mr. Nixon came in in '69 that he would take into consideration the experience that all of us had had who

had been going through this for a long period of time, and that he would recognize all the changes that took place and that...

MOYERS: You must have met with the incoming President and some of his people in that time. Did you tell them your doubts?

CLIFFORD: I did, I did. I had a number of meetings with them. I had a number of meetings with Mr. Kissinger. And I went over in detail all that had happened. I expounded my views as persuasively as I could. I wanted very much for Mr. Nixon to go on the air within ninety days or so after he had taken office and inform the American people that we were going to have the American troops out of there by the end of 1969.

MOYERS: What did they say when you made these recommendations?

CLIFFORD: They thought -- I got the impression that they seemed to feel that they had merit. I later learned, however, that Mr. Nixon never considered any such arrangement as that. He believed in the war. He believed in the principles that I thought had long since become outmoded. And the war went on for four more years, at a cost of twenty thousand American lives and another seventy or eighty billion dollars.

But countries learn by difficult experiences. I believe we are a better country today because we went through this experience. I am sorry about the sacrifices that so many of our people made. I have the most enormous sympathy with the parents of men who were lost there. But we have learned a lot from this experience. I regret that it happened, but oftentimes nations are like human beings; they learn the difficult way. I believe that it will go a long ways toward preventing our getting into this kind of posture again.

MOYERS: Might it not also, however, make us too benign? Do you think this is still a dangerous world?

CLIFFORD: Oh, unquestionably, unquestionably.

MOYERS: Do we still have an international role to play?

CLIFFORD: Oh, unquestionably.

MOYERS: Where?

CLIFFORD: We have it to play in the world. I would hope that we could recover from this catastrophe we have been through the past six years and that we might resume the kind of moral and ethical leadership that we gave to the world for so many years. I believe that what we must do also is have a better analysis of our place in the world.

MOYERS: Well, what places in particular, Clark, are -- do you think are places we ought to be active right now?

CLIFFORD: Well, before I mention that let me say that we are going through a difficult time now. It seems to me that probably it's logical, because it's almost as though we were going through withdrawal pains. From this position of omnipotence that we had at the conclusion of the Second World War our place in the world has changed very materially. We were the only major power that was not prostrate after the Second World War. We consumed fifty per cent of the world's goods and services at that particular time. So we thought that carried with it, and properly so, a sense of enormous responsibility. And I think that we did go through a period that's been described as "the arrogance of power." We were too spread out. That was part of the reason that we got into Vietnam. We got into a number of other places. I think, I hope, we have learned now.

And when it is said by some of our leaders that peace is indivisible, that you must treat one ally as you treat another ally, and that if you forsake an ally, why then you forsake, in effect, all allies, that isn't so at all. That's a thoroughly erroneous approach.

What the United States must do now is carefully examine what its responsibilities are in the world and where its interests lie. And our interests lie particularly in this continent, our neighbors to the north and south. We must continue to maintain a great interest in the Caribbean because of some possible threat it could be to us. I would hope we would maintain the right kind of interest in South America, not interfere in their elections.

But, outside of the Western Hemisphere, then I think the great areas of our concern are, one, Western Europe. We've always been so close to Western Europe. When Western Europe has had a war, as it did in the First World War in 1914, then the Second World War that started in the late thirties, we become involved because we are inextricably tied, through family, through tradition, through inheritance, through economics, and so forth. So we must maintain our position with reference to Western Europe.

Also a very important part in the world is the Middle East, for a number of reasons. One of the great interests -- one of the great reasons is our interest in and support of Israel. And that goes back to President Truman, back in the early spring of 1948, and that's a fascinating story, the way he stood up against a lot of pressure and made the United States the first nation to recognize the new Republic of Israel.

MOYERS: Europe, the Middle East.

CLIFFORD: And Japan.

MOYERS: And Japan.

CLIFFORD: Japan is enormously important to us now. They have come along so well economically.

And also, as we plan our foreign policy for the future, I want us to take into consideration that we will be significant, insofar as our foreign policy is concerned, if we are strong at home. We have been weakened a great deal at home. We have been weakened politically. One of the great problems that confronts this country today is the loss of confidence on the part of the American people in their government. And I hope that we would be able to restore...

MOYERS: Plenty of reasons that that has occurred, as we discussed tonight, but...

CLIFFORD: It's been an abomination and it's hurt our country deeply.

Now, our economy is in bad shape, and I hope that we would give great attention to that. I hope we would watch our expenditures with care. I think our defense budget is grossly excessive.

MOYERS: Are you advocating a policy of thinking small?

CLIFFORD: Oh, under no circumstances. What I am thinking about is, let's recreate the kind of strength that the United States had before. And we have weakened ourselves badly in these past years. I would like to regain that strength. We can always be an enormous influence for good in the United States. I don't want us to waste our substance and our treasure in getting into areas that really are not our foremost concern.

MOYERS: In the last few weeks Portugal has moved to the left, Mr. Kissinger's venture in the Middle East failed. We have seen the collapse of our policies in Vietnam and the seemingly inevitable loss of Saigon. We have found ourselves suddenly

on the defensive, with people saying the United States is not what it used to be. Are you troubled?

CLIFFORD: I'm troubled but I am not worried. We are going through this period. It's a metamorphosis from our overweaning position of power in the world to taking a more reasonable position. Some time ago I was in Norway on business, and a friend of mine there said, "We in Norway think America has lost its way." Well, maybe we did temporarily. But we can regain it. And we can again become the leader that the world needs. We must never retire from that. We must never go back to the "fortress America." We must continue to give the world the leadership that it so sorely needs.

MOYERS: Isn't that like the 1940's, when you were advocating a very active role in the world? Are we back round-circle?

CLIFFORD: Yes, we are back, but we are wiser and more mature and more experienced. And we will use better judgment with reference to those actions that we take that I think are in support of our policies.

MOYERS: Thank you, Clark Clifford.

I'm Bill Moyers. And next week I will be back with a look at "The Year of the Woman." Good night.

(MUSIC)

ANNOUNCER: For a transcript, please send one dollar to "Bill Moyers' Journal," Box 345, New York, New York, 10019.

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