

**George Herring's Interview Transcription**  
**Interview conducted by J. Ernst & Y. Baldwin**

**John Ernst:** March 2, 1998 in Morehead Kentucky. We are going to ask a number of questions. Why don't you go ahead and state your name real quick chief, so we can make sure it's picking up.

**George Herring:** My name is George Herring and I am from Lexington Kentucky. I am here for an interview in Morehead this morning

**Ernst:** When and why did you select the Vietnam War as a topic for a book?

**Herring:** Well that's a good question and I don't have a very good answer. A lot of people have asked that question from time to time and I wish I had a better answer to give them. I don't have a very good one. I became interested in the subject obviously during the time I was teaching. I got my Ph.D in June of 1965 and started teaching in September of 1965, which was just about the time that the war began to heat up. I will be the first to admit that I knew absolutely nothing about what was going on out there. Even though my teaching and research field was U. S. foreign relations and I had sub-fields in East Asia and South Asian, not Southeast Asia which Virginia did not have at that time. I knew quite a bit about India, Pakistan, and a little bit about China. But, I knew absolutely nothing about it. Almost from the day I stepped into the classroom students who faced various different contingencies including draft boards, if they didn't perform up to certain levels at that time, were asking questions. At the campus I was on, from 1965 until 1969 Ohio University in Athens Ohio, was a very very lively and active campus where anti-war protests early on far exceeded anything at U. K., right up to the time of Cambodia and Kent State. So it was a lively topic of discussion. I had to educate myself a little bit and did educate myself a little bit and that's about all. It wasn't easy to educate yourself, in those days, because there wasn't that much out there. After I came to Kentucky, that interest continued right up through Cambodia. One of your Eastern Kentucky students, fellow students, predecessor George Libby, once accused me of treating every topic I discussed in my foreign policy class including things as esoteric as the Jade Treaty, in terms of Vietnam, and I guess I did.

**Ernst:** *Laughter*

**Herring:** I am making it to long. Bottom line I guess is that the curiosity of students and sort of the way in which the topic so dominated the first years of my teaching experience, aroused a interest in it that eventually led me to write a book. The assumption was I think on my part that I would write that book. I think I proposed it. I had written a little essay in 1975 right about the time the war ended, which **Word Unknown** history and I had a lot of fun doing that. I was under contract to do a book on World War II.. I had a N.E.H. grant. I guess I shouldn't say this on tape. I had a N. E. H. grant to do a book on WW II.. I had so much fun doing this little essay, that something I think the foreign press published, that I decided, and this was the spring of seventy-five about the time the war was ending, that it would really be exciting to expand that into book

length. So I proposed that to Bob Devine at a meeting at Georgetown University in the summer of seventy-five I guess it was. During my N.E.H. year my plan was to work on both of the books simultaneously, but it didn't take long into that year for me to realize where my first love was. I don't suppose the N. E. H. wouldn't complain now and don't tell them all of this.

**Ernst and Baldwin:** *Laughter*

**Herring:** I ended up devoting the next four years to the book with the idea I would do this one book. I had no clue at that time that twenty-three years later I would still be waste deep in the big muddy or whatever. So it just kind of happened, there is no good real reason it just kind of happened.

**Ernst:** Did your political views in the sixties and seventies have an impact when you wrote the book?

**Herring:** Well that couldn't help have an impact, although I don't think my political views were terribly well formed. They kind of evolved as the war itself evolved and the protest evolved. I attended a number of anti-war rallies, but I was never very comfortable with the rhetoric that was being spouted there, but I obviously wasn't very comfortable with the Johnson and Nixon effort to defend the war either. I think then as probably all the way through, I've been in that sort of in the middle of the road. Yeah, they couldn't help influence and that's the way history is written. You try to be as honest as you can be, but I think there is a recognition the way you feel preconceptions, a bias issues you bring to it are going to influence your writing. You have a point of view and clearly my books do. Well **Rosdo** once accused me of being to sneaky about it, that I didn't state my views up front and there was this pretense of objectivity in my work, but I wasn't really objective and so I said o.k.. So for the second edition I state right up in the preface that I believe that this was a war that shouldn't of been fought and couldn't of been won. So Walt. *laughter* Walt can take credit for that. I thought his point was well taken. Not many points he would make that I would agree were well taken. That one I think was.

**Ernst:** The book was very cutting edge. The first edition comes out in seventy-nine. What sources were available to you at the time?

**Herring:** An amazing amount. I was really quite shy and done earlier research on WW II.. I started it in sixty-four and sixty-five. In sixty-four, I guess, I started serious research on WW II. and still confronted a lot of obstacles in terms of classified material. It was really only when I finished the **Name of book too Russia book** in seventy-one. By that time, finally most of the stuff I needed, not all of it by any means, some of it is still classified, but most of the stuff I needed was finally available by then and this was between twenty-five and thirty years after the end of WW II.. So I started with the research in seventy-six and seventy-seven, which was only a year after the end of the Vietnam War. Two, three years after the end of American military involvement. I was really quit shocked when I started out how much was available and how much had been declassified. Much of which ironically can be attributed to Richard Nixon who as a result of the pentagon papers and the bad press they got, sort of presided over a speeding up of the process of declassification. There was a little window of opportunity in the mid-seventies in which **Word Unknown**

particularly on Vietnam were moving along very rapidly. This stopped under Carter who had promised an open presidency, which ironically again, but it stopped under Carter. More for reasons I think a bureaucracy resisted because they didn't have the resources they claimed to do this. I was really amazed when I went down to the Johnson library, for example there was a great deal of material available up through the summer of 1965 which was the big decision on combat troops. Amazing amount of material. A lot of the stuff was declassified stats, but it seemed to me that for the close to the end of the war there was really a lot of information. And the presidential libraries were god sent because things moved faster there. The national archives was not even beginning and obviously the agency state the C.I.A. still hadn't done any of its stuff, but that's another story. I was really quit surprised and gratified and it's what I think gave the book a certain, I mean it sort of set it off. It was the first book to be able too treat the war historically because it was the first one to come out. Written so soon after the event, it had a beginning and it had an end. David **Hopperstem** and Francis Fitzgerald after all published their sort of landmark books in 1972, and there was still three years to go. So it was first in the since, but I think the fact that there was so much material available it permitted me in a lot of areas to do little things that changed conventional wisdom about a lot of specific things. I think that's what gave it a certain stature and credibility among historians at least, it wouldn't have been noticed amongst students obviously or the general public. I found out a lot of stuff for example about the Diebienphu crisis of fifty-four where the standard piece for years had been **Charmers Roberts** little article in the Reporter. He was dead wrong on a whole lot of stuff and the documents clearly showed that. There was quit a bit of new stuff on the Kennedy years. There was quit a bit of stuff on the Johnson years, you ran out in sixty-five for that edition. But I was amazed. I was quit surprised. And most of it can be contributed to the presidential libraries, which were aggressive in declassification and took that little window of opportunity in the mid-seventies to get stuff out. So that was great.

**Ernst:** How important were the Pentagon Papers? Was the book possible with out them?

**Herring:** Well probably not because the Pentagon Paper were, as skewed as they are, were basic source for all of us who wrote in those days. It was also the Pentagon Papers, that as much as anything else I think, helped speed up the declassification and helped get some of this stuff out of the presidential libraries. So I think they were crucial. There's no question about it. More probably for what they did. The problem with the Pentagon Papers obviously was that they mostly came from the defense department from **Word Unknown**. Rusk would not give them access to state department files and they didn't want Lyndon Johnson to know what was going on so they didn't really nose around to much in the White House files. So what the presidential libraries did was fill in the gap that the Pentagon Papers had left because they did their own national security files, which came out of the office of MacBundy, **Rossto**, and other people who were national security advisors. So they kind of filled that gap. They were crucial in sort of unleashing the pond of documents. It was great, I

mean there was just enough in seventy-eight and nine to add a lot of new material and not enough to bog you down. Anybody who would seek to do what I did using primary sources another fifty years down the line is going to be buried under stuff and won't be able to make, if they try to make since may not be able too.

**Ernst:** Are you surprised about the enduring popularity of your book and the Vietnam War; the hold it has on the United States?

**Herring:** Yeah, I guess so. I don't know what I expected. When I wrote the first edition nobody was willing; we weren't talking openly about the subject. It was kinda being put under the table and so I don't think I had any great expectations. I don't know if I really had any expectations at all once you get into something like that it's ceases; what's going to come of it ceases to worry you. All you are concerned about, as you all know, is getting through. And trying to get your self out from under the burden that it places on you. So I don't think I had any great expectations, but certainly I was stunned when it really took off. It was kind of interesting because I had come to ah. When I finished it I guess I was going through mid-life crisis number 3 or 4 whatever and you start to think am I going to be teaching these same classes to these same students the rest of my life. All of the sudden, when it took off then there were opportunities to travel and give talks all over the country and indeed the world and to participate in programs of various kind with people like the **Bundy** brothers and ultimately this summer Robert McNamara. Its led to a lot of things, which has made for a very exciting life over the last twenty years, in that coming at a time when your wondering what's life going to be like for the next twenty or thirty years. So yeah it came as a great surprise. Of course then you come to take it for granted; now I resent all these people, I am saying this with a smile on my face.

*Laughter.* You never know how it's going to come out on tape. You resent all of these people who pretend to do the same thing and compete with you and try to take away. For years I kinda had a corner on the market and then three or four competitors came out in ninety-one and two or three since that time. Its been very exciting and I've never had any notion that I would still be involved with this twenty some odd years down the line. Even now when I am trying to kinda break away from it a little bit and finish a much larger and more challenging project and in many ways more difficult. But it's impossible to break away completely and nor do I really want to I guess in my heart of hearts.

**Baldwin:** It's interesting to me that your book has endured for so long and it has to me a remarkable balance especially to have been published when it was. How did that make you feel?

**Herring:** It pleases me that it has, I mean have done it over, but I really haven't changed the tone of it or the point of view. It's very gratify. I think the most gratifying thing is that every now and then to get a letter from somebody who's read it and learned something from it. I would like to sometime go back and pull all of these out and make a file of them, this includes students who have had it rammed down their throat, but who found something in it that interested them. Even more I think Veterans. I get the other kind of letters too, people say I am full of it and dead wrong on this or dead wrong on that. MacBundy caught me

on one little thing where I was absolutely dead wrong. Tributed to something that John Kennedy that Walt Rostow said, and indeed if I had read it carefully I would of known cause it's vintage Rostow. Letters have been very very gratifying. To have a veteran say something to the effect that, I can deal better with what I went through because I understand. All I could see was in the area of my foxhole and having read this I can understand little better that is very very satisfying and gratifying. To get that kind of feed back is very nice.

**Ernst:** Was it surprising when a bunch of graduate students, I guess in the mid to late eighties began to **Words Unknown**.

**Herring:** Yeah, although I have had a number working on Cold War stuff earlier. But, I guess the difference was that the earlier students, most of them, came to U. K. for one reason or the other and ended up working with me. Whereas the later ones came I guess because of me or because of their interest in the subject. A little surprising, yeah I guess I really hadn't counted on that, but it's been a great run. The stuff that has come out of it. I wish at times I had done it more systematically and had been a little bit more imperial or entrepreneurial in the sense of developing a program and trying to push the university to work with the department to hire somebody in Southeast Asia under Vietnamese history to formalize it a little bit more, but that's not really my style. It has been great and the work that has come out of it I think is going to have an enduring impact on the history of it. Your book and many others books, Bob **Brigahms** book will be out this fall, and a number of articles. So yeah it has been great. I don't look that far ahead. I guess none of this would I have really predicted. Yeah its been great fun.

**Ernst:** I know it's a personal note, but I can't help it. I remember when Nancy **Word Unknown** had me read the book. She taught a foreign policy class and I read your book and John **Word Unknown** Strategies of Word Unknown and for me, it was an undergraduate who was partying quit a bit, the world opened up to me. I just never got it. It's not Apocalypse now. *Laughter* It was obviously something different. But, I remember that and I thought god that's what I want to do. Why do you think America continues to become so fascinated with the Vietnam War?

**Herring:** Well that's what I am going to talk about this afternoon, so you are just going to have to get that on tape, that's the full version. Obviously I think the main reason was, of course it was a defining event for a whole generation. The baby boom generation the biggest population wise and for that reason it couldn't help, but endure. Also I think because of its' length and its' traumatic nature for so many people and it's not over I don't think. Everytime I think it's just about run its' course then something will happen. As I was giving a talk at Davidson college, three weeks ago tonight pretty I guess, pretty much along the lines of what I am going to say this afternoon. I was sitting back relaxing and I picked up a copy of the New York Times and there was a article by Johnny Apple who did a couple of tours in Vietnam. It was an old journalistic hand for the times, who was talking about the discussions that were going on in the Pentagon and the White House all about bombing Iraq. The whole focus of the article was how the ghost of the past, mainly Vietnam, kinda lingered over these

discussions. In a whole lot of different ways Vietnam was still influencing the way. It was a big part of the baggage that these people who were making these decisions who were mostly baby boomers and Vietnam generation types were bringing to this. It was so controversial, it lasted long, and it was so traumatic that it couldn't help, but endure. I really got challenged on this in Mexico a couple of years ago by somebody who said that it really wasn't all that unusual I mean every war produces like the civil war certainly did, and WW II did, but I didn't really have to defend myself because most of the people in the audience were baby boomers themselves and as far as the faculty was concerned I was absolutely right that it is different and it has had an impact. Presumably sooner or later there will be some other traumatic event that will replace it and of course once this generation passes from political power and prominence, arts, and letters and that sort of thing. I mean even in literature its' had a huge impact on the popular culture. Korea there is virtually none and it would be hard to find except for a hand full of bad movies. The influence in popular culture is still very much around.

**Ernst:** I do get the sense that you keep thinking that you are ever going to wane...

**Herring:** Well it is and I mean it has. When I compare for example, the reaction to the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon with the reaction of the twentieth anniversary, which happened to coincide with the last stages of Clintons normalization. Even though we were going through the normalization process, I think still the interest in second anniversary it had obviously waned a great deal. Of course though it was competing with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WW II. So I think when you get again up to the fiftieth anniversary, which if you picked up this mornings Lexington's Herald Leader there on the front page is an article about Hue Thompson and Mai Lai. Hue whom I know a little bit finally getting the medal that he has deserved for all of these years for trying to put an end to the slaughter of Mai Lai. I guess there is going to be an event at Mai Lai itself next week and Hue and some of the other are going to go back. It's going to be with us for a while yet. Not in sort of the dominant way I think it was, say eighty-five and the early nineties, but still very much with us.

**Ernst:** I have to admit though, at least with us, teaching a class on the Vietnam War the students are there. It's one of the most popular class.

**Herring:** How many students do you all have in the class?

**Ernst:** Well, we started with sixty or so and it has trimmed down a bit because of the...

**Herring:** They found out that they are going to have to work and it wasn't going to be all blood and guts and fun. Yeah and that is still true all over the country. Now how long is that going to last? I don't know. These kids were born, I am shocked to find out seventy-eight seventy-nine. So we have to reach the point sooner or later. We're re reaching the point already I expect where they don't have family involvement. Although a couple of them in my class last year had parents and one had a father who was killed there. Yes, I know the interest is still keen. Why? We were talking about this in Washington the other night. I was talking to other people about this and I don't have any real good explanation. Except that, they see enough around them, in terms of popular culture and parents talking or not talking about it, that they know something big,

exciting, and traumatic happened and they don't have a clue what. So it arouses curiosity.

**Ernst:** Have your views of Vietnam changed over the years?

**Herring:** Yeah, I guess so, but I'm not sure, it's another question that people ask. I'm not cock sure, on a lot of things when I guess I knew less and when we knew less probably not as sure about things. Basically no, I would stand by the statements I put indifference to Walt Rostow, but probably a little more nuisances, a little more complicated, even this summer when we were in Hanoi, and McNamara and the Vietnamese were agreeing maybe not meaning to, that the communist monolith was holy, that sort of thing, and I would say "Stop, wait a minute!" We know a lot more than we knew then. From Chinese and Soviet sources that at certain times, and certain circumstances, for ideological reasons they were working very closely together and so let's back off and we know that Stalin was assuming that the Korean War was **kim** unknown word **sum**. We now know that Stalin; I don't want to sound like John Gates here because I don't go down the line with him on these things, by a long shot. It is clear that more of a monolith was there then. We have argued for years and years and while that doesn't change the basic argument, that Nationalism is the key to it all. It does mean that you do have to look at this with a little more nuance, and complexity, so of course you learn more and more things. You think that went one way you find out in time either through your work or other people's work that is not really true. So, yeah, a little more remorse. I expect, basically, I would stick to the main thesis that I developed some years ago.

**Ernst:** How do you feel about Robert McNamara book in retrospect?

**Herring:** There is a lot of different ways to look at it, and I know that I bring to it the same sort of baggage that somebody who fought under him or work with him would bring. And therefore, I didn't react emotionally, as many people understandably did. If I had been somebody out there fighting and he had sent me there, and he couldn't do it. But, working under Lyndon Johnson, if he had sent me there, and I had read the things he said, I would have been irate and furious, and indeed it was hard for me to understand. The things I hit him hardest for in the review I did, in foreign affairs, and in fact, if he had concluded as he said he did, and the evidence suggested that he did, then in sometime between July and December of 1965. If the war was winnable then why in God's name, did he continue to stay where he was, and run the war, and fight it, and leave ground people out there for almost 2 ½ to 3 years? And why did he place loyalty to his presidency over loyalty to the truth and his country and that sort of thing. Why did he not speak out for twenty years, I mean all of this is incomprehensible. I also looked at it another way, I looked at it as a historian, I looked at the memoirs, what can I learn from it, and there I was disappointed, as I told him. True to form, he did not reveal a lot of himself. There weren't a lot of personal, although there were some and they were very revealing. There wasn't a lot there that I didn't already know. And, I really don't think he was as insightful into what was happening around him or perceptive as Clifford's,

which I thought was admirable to a stand-point of his **unknown word** on was a very admirable memoir. I don't think he got to the heart like Clifford's was trying to exercise, some of his demons, and after holding on to them for twenty-some odd years, and this is what it is all about. Which, is what is remarkable most people write memoirs to defend themselves from other people's charges. He is writing one, in the effect to say I was wrong. And in saying that he is absolutely convinced, and that he is as cock sure, now about being wrong, thirty years ago, as he was cock sure, he was right when he was there thirty years ago. It is a very weird situation, but vintage McNamara.

**Ernst:** What was his response to you when you told him he did not seem to put enough personal...?

**Herring:** Nothing he really didn't respond. It is in his character, I think he is a very emotional sort of person. He is a person who has never been disposed to reveal much of himself to those around him and maybe even to himself. Very much in character, he would shrug and go on. That wasn't what I was trying to do.

**Ernst:** What was it like visiting Vietnam for the first time?

**Herring:** It was fascinating and a great trip. Very exciting, my great regret was I didn't get to see more, and travel more. I was hoping to go back this month, but that didn't work out, and use the time to travel. We were pretty much confined to Hanoi, and got to see quite a bit there and that was fascinating, but it only wetted my appetite. To see more of that was the great regret, but it was very exciting, and quite exciting to do it in that context. Sitting around the table with people like McNamara, Chester Cooper, and Nick Kasinback. Turn on the other side, Warren **unknown word** who is the American expert on foreign ministry in the 60's and 70's. Foreign minister himself, Vietnamese historian, Lu Won Win, he was a fascinating fellow, and I wouldn't trade it for anything.

**Ernst:** What he still pretty.....**unknown did not let you finish.**

**Herring:** He was interesting, but he was also feeble, very interesting to be in his presence. He has great magnetism and charisma about him even now, but quite feebly and rambled on. Didn't have much to say, but quite a presence.

**Ernst:** Do you believe that scholars and **unknown word** have drawn the right lessons from the Vietnam War?

**Herring:** They have drawn a lot of lessons, let's put it that way. On all sides and about all things. Many of them conflicting and contradicting. I'm not much into the process of lessons, most of what I have written on this subject is really sort of a conveyed against seeking this sort of lessons from history that we tend to seek. I think we need to be a lot more courteous about doing that. It has been fascinating to watch as a historian over the last twenty years the way in which the Vietnam War has been used as a sort of lesson, on growing exercise, but I am kind of dubious about the process and most of what I have read. It has to be treated very skeptically. I think there is a lot to be learned from

history. I am not sure that lessons, if you do it, kind of as I would say the military could do down on a tactical level. Examining more specifically, things like the twelve months tour and whether or not it was a good idea, some of the more specifics, and nuts and bolts type things. Maybe that is useful, but in terms in broad lessons, like whether we should intervene in Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti and if we do, how are we going to fight them. We probably sort of misdirect or misguide ourselves, as much as we learn from it. My point on that sort of thing all along has been the real value of history, and looking at prophecies or places or situations where intervention might be called for, is that whether than trying to draw lessons from the last experiment where history can really come in, if we look at that situation itself and say what has it's history been, and what does that tell us about this place, and what does that tell us, then what we can or cannot do, and what we might do. I was looking the other night at a tape, that was sent from CNN, which was part of our conference, and I was intrigued. I didn't get it down, it was late and I didn't have time to write it down, but **unknown word** in his discussion in some of these things, it was saying the same thing. He was saying that perhaps if we American's had known a little bit more about the history of Vietnam as a country and a little bit more about the people, we might have acted differently.

**Baldwin:** To what extent do you think the egotism of the “baby-boom” generation has influenced our understanding of the war, and our need to find some final answer, if we can?

**Herring:** I don't know, I am not very good at that sort of thing. I guess my friend, Arnold Isaacs has just written a book, in which he talks at some length about POW's and MIA business. And he talks about that in this context by saying that it's the sort of spoiled nature of American's of that generation. Maybe of all generations who demand answers for everything, and aren't satisfied that simply some things aren't accounted for or beyond our reach, or beyond our control that it's an interesting explanation of, and maybe fits into what we're talking about. But certainly, this perception you will have to fight a lot of people in that generation and the notion that this was the only war ever fought. It's worse than any other war you get the sense that you look at the number people killed compared to the civil war it pales into relative insignificance. If you look at the brutality of the combat of the Pacific Islands, of World War II, it makes Vietnam seemed much more civilized, and so you have to fight that with perspective, but very definitely, it was their war, and the defiance of it. There is a tendency to sort of lose perspective and that way it is something I really thought about or come to explain or understand, but it may have accounted for why it has lingered.

Rick Sargent

History 307

April 23, 1998

### Main Topics Covered in Interview with Dr. George C. Herring

Many of the main topics of the interviewed revolved either around the book America's Longest War or the Vietnam Wars affect on the United States. Toward the end of the interview, the questions could be categorized with other aspects of the war.

Six out of fifteen questions discussed the book. Herring comments on how the book came about, the resources used, and the impact it had made. Other questions address how the war will not emotionally let go of America. Dr. Herring's general response was that, "it was defining event for (the) whole" baby boomer generation. (Pg. 10) He accredits movies and literature for the continuous fascination for other generations. He states that, "they see enough around them that they know something big, exciting, and traumatic happened, (causing) curiosity." (Pg. 12)

Other questions covered various topics, such as his trip to Vietnam. When asked he made the comment that he would not trade it for the world. Dr. Herring also makes a few remarks about Robert McNamara's book In Retrospect. In the interview, it is obvious that Herring knows McNamara on a personal basis, adding even more credibility to his thoughts upon the book. Toward the end of the interview, a question is asked about the lessons drawn from Vietnam. Herring states that specific events should be questioned rather than the entire conflict, which is an excellent point.

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**John Ernst:** March 2, 1998 in Morehead Kentucky. We are going to ask a number of questions. Why don't you go ahead and state your name real quick chief, so we can make sure it's picking up.

**George Herring:** My name is George Herring and I am from Lexington Kentucky. I am here for an interview in Morehead this morning

**Ernst:** When and why did you select the Vietnam War as a topic for a book?

**Herring:** Well that's a good question and I don't have a very good answer. A lot of people have asked that question from time to time and I wish I had a better answer to give them. I don't have a very good one. I became interested in the subject obviously during the time I was teaching. I got my Ph.D in June of 1965 and started teaching in September of 1965, which was just about the time that the war began to heat up. I will be the first to admit that I knew absolutely nothing about what was going on out there. Even though my teaching and research field was U. S. foreign relations and I had sub-fields in East Asia and South Asian, not Southeast Asia which Virginia did not have at that time. I knew quite a bit about India, Pakistan, and a little bit about China. But, I knew absolutely nothing about it. Almost from the day I stepped into the classroom students who faced various different contingencies including draft boards, if they didn't perform up to certain levels at that time, were asking questions. At the campus I was on, from 1965 until 1969 Ohio University in Athens Ohio, was a very very lively and active campus where anti-war protests early on far exceeded anything at U. K., right up to the time of Cambodia and Kent State.

So it was a lively topic of discussion. I had to educate myself a little bit and did educate myself a little bit and that's about all. It wasn't easy to educate yourself, in those days, because there wasn't that much out there. After I came to Kentucky, that interest continued right up through Cambodia. One of your Eastern Kentucky students, fellow students, predecessor George Libby, once accused me of treating every topic I discussed in my foreign policy class including things as esoteric as the Jade Treaty, in terms of Vietnam, and I guess I did.

**Ernst:** *Laughter*

**Herring:** I am making it to long. Bottom line I guess is that the curiosity of students and sort of the way in which the topic so dominated the first years of my teaching experience, aroused a interest in it that eventually led me to write a book. The assumption was I think on my part that I would write that book. I think I proposed it. I had written a little essay in 1975 right about the time the war ended, which **Word Unknown** history and I had a lot of fun doing that. I was under contract to do a book on World War II.. I had a N.E.H. grant. I guess I shouldn't say this on tape. I had a N. E. H. grant to do a book on WW II.. I had so much fun doing this little essay, that something I think the foreign press published, that I decided, and this was the spring of seventy-five about the time the war was ending, that it would really be exciting to expand that into book length. So I proposed that to Bob Devine at a meeting at Georgetown University in the summer of seventy-five I guess it was. During my N.E.H. year my plan was to work on both of the books simultaneously, but it didn't take long into that

year for me to realize where my first love was. I don't suppose the N. E. H. wouldn't complain now and don't tell them all of this.

**Ernst and Baldwin:** *Laughter*

**Herring:** I ended up devoting the next four years to the book with the idea I would do this one book. I had no clue at that time that twenty-three years later I would still be waste deep in the big muddy or whatever. So it just kind of happened, there is no good real reason it just kind of happened.

**Ernst:** Did your political views in the sixties and seventies have an impact when you wrote the book?

**Herring:** Well that couldn't help have an impact, although I don't think my political views were terribly well formed. They kind of evolved as the war itself evolved and the protest evolved. I attended a number of anti-war rallies, but I was never very comfortable with the rhetoric that was being spouted there, but I obviously wasn't very comfortable with the Johnson and Nixon effort to defend the war either. I think then as probably all the way through, I've been in that sort of in the middle of the road. Yeah, they couldn't help influence and that's the way history is written. You try to be as honest as you can be, but I think there is a recognition the way you feel preconceptions, a bias issues you bring to it are going to influence your writing. You have a point of view and clearly my books do. Well **Rosdo** once accused me of being to sneaky about it, that I didn't state my views up front and there was this pretense of objectivity in my work, but I wasn't really objective and so I said o.k.. So for the second edition I state right up in the preface that I believe that this was a war that shouldn't of been fought

and couldn't of been won. So Walt. *laughter* Walt can take credit for that. I thought his point was well taken. Not many points he would make that I would agree were well taken. That one I think was.

**Ernst:** The book was very cutting edge. The first edition comes out in seventy-nine.

What sources were available to you at the time?

**Herring:** An amazing amount. I was really quite shy and done earlier research on WW II. I started it in sixty-four and sixty-five. In sixty-four, I guess, I started serious research on WW II. and still confronted a lot of obstacles in terms of classified material. It was really only when I finished the **Name of book too Russia book** in seventy-one. By that time, finally most of the stuff I needed, not all of it by any means, some of it is still classified, but most of the stuff I needed was finally available by then and this was between twenty-five and thirty years after the end of WW II.. So I started with the research in seventy-six and seventy-seven, which was only a year after the end of the Vietnam War. Two, three years after the end of American military involvement. I was really quit shocked when I started out how much was available and how much had been declassified. Much of which ironically can be attributed to Richard Nixon who as a result of the pentagon papers and the bad press they got, sort of presided over a speeding up of the process of declassification. There was a little window of opportunity in the mid-seventies in which **Word Unknown** particularly on Vietnam were moving along very rapidly. This stopped under Carter who had promised an open presidency, which ironically again, but it stopped under Carter. More for reasons I think a bureaucracy resisted because

they didn't have the resources they claimed to do this. I was really amazed when I went down to the Johnson library, for example there was a great deal of material available up through the summer of 1965 which was the big decision on combat troops. Amazing amount of material. A lot of the stuff was declassified stuff, but it seemed to me that for the close to the end of the war there was really a lot of information. And the presidential libraries were god sent because things moved faster there. The national archives was not even beginning and obviously the agency state the C.I.A. still hadn't done any of its stuff, but that's another story. I was really quit surprised and gratified and it's what I think gave the book a certain, I mean it sort of set it off. It was the first book to be able too treat the war historically because it was the first one to come out. Written so soon after the event, it had a beginning and it had an end.

David **Hopperstem** and Francis Fitzgerald after all published their sort of landmark books in 1972, and there was still three years to go. So it was first in the since, but I think the fact that there was so much material available it permitted me in a lot of areas to do little things that changed conventional wisdom about a lot of specific things. I think that's what gave it a certain stature and credibility among historians at least, it wouldn't have been noticed amongst students obviously or the general public. I found out a lot of stuff for example about the Diebienphu crisis of fifty-four where the standard piece for years had been **Charmers Roberts** little article in the Reporter. He was dead wrong on a whole lot of stuff and the documents clearly showed that. There was quit a bit of new stuff on the Kennedy years. There was quit a bit of stuff

on the Johnson years, you ran out in sixty-five for that edition. But I was amazed. I was quit surprised. And most of it can be contributed to the presidential libraries, which were aggressive in declassification and took that little window of opportunity in the mid-seventies to get stuff out. So that was great.

**Ernst:** How important were the Pentagon Papers? Was the book possible with out them?

**Herring:** Well probably not because the Pentagon Paper were, as skewed as they are, were basic source for all of us who wrote in those days. It was also the Pentagon Papers, that as much as anything else I think, helped speed up the declassification and helped get some of this stuff out of the presidential libraries. So I think they were crucial. There's no question about it. More probably for what they did. The problem with the Pentagon Papers obviously was that they mostly came from the defense department from **Word Unknown**. Rusk would not give them access to state department files and they didn't want Lyndon Johnson to know what was going on so they didn't really nose around to much in the White House files. So what the presidential libraries did was fill in the gap that the Pentagon Papers had left because they did their own national security files, which came out of the office of MacBundy, **Rossto**, and other people who were national security advisors. So they kind of filled that gap. They were crucial in sort of unleashing the pond of documents. It was great, I mean there was just enough in seventy-eight and nine to add a lot of new material and not enough to bog you down. Anybody who would seek to do what I did using primary sources another fifty years down the line is going to be

buried under stuff and won't be able to make, if they try to make since may not be able too.

**Ernst:** Are you surprised about the enduring popularity of your book and the Vietnam War; the hold it has on the United States?

**Herring:** Yeah, I guess so. I don't know what I expected. When I wrote the first edition nobody was willing; we weren't talking openly about the subject. It was kinda being put under the table and so I don't think I had any great expectations. I don't know if I really had any expectations at all once you get into something like that it's ceases; what's going to come of it ceases to worry you. All you are concerned about, as you all know, is getting through. And trying to get your self out from under the burden that it places on you. So I don't think I had any great expectations, but certainly I was stunned when it really took off. It was kind of interesting because I had come to ah. When I finished it I guess I was going through mid-life crisis number 3 or 4 whatever and you start to think am I going to be teaching these same classes to these same students the rest of my life. All of the sudden, when it took off then there were opportunities to travel and give talks all over the country and indeed the world and to participate in programs of various kind with people like the **Bundy** brothers and ultimately this summer Robert McNamara. Its led to a lot of things, which has made for a very exciting life over the last twenty years, in that coming at a time when your wondering what's life going to be like for the next twenty or thirty years. So yeah it came as a great surprise. Of course then you come to take it for granted; now I resent all these people, I am saying this with a smile on my face.

*Laughter.* You never know how it's going to come out on tape. You resent all of these people who pretend to do the same thing and compete with you and try to take away. For years I kinda had a corner on the market and then three or four competitors came out in ninety-one and two or three since that time. Its been very exciting and I've never had any notion that I would still be involved with this twenty some odd years down the line. Even now when I am trying to kinda break away from it a little bit and finish a much larger and more challenging project and in many ways more difficult. But it's impossible to break away completely and nor do I really want to I guess in my heart of hearts.

**Baldwin:** It's interesting to me that your book has endured for so long and it has to me a remarkable balance especially to have been published when it was. How did that make you feel?

**Herring:** It pleases me that it has, I mean have done it over, but I really haven't changed the tone of it or the point of view. It's very gratify. I think the most gratifying thing is that every now and then to get a letter from somebody who's read it and learned something from it. I would like to sometime go back and pull all of these out and make a file of them, this includes students who have had it rammed down their throat, but who found something in it that interested them. Even more I think Veterans. I get the other kind of letters too, people say I am full of it and dead wrong on this or dead wrong on that. MacBundy caught me on one little thing where I was absolutely dead wrong. Tributed to something that John Kennedy that Walt Rostow said, and indeed if I had read it carefully I would of known cause it's vintage Rostow. Letters have been very very

gratifying. To have a veteran say something to the effect that, I can deal better with what I went through because I understand. All I could see was in the area of my foxhole and having read this I can understand little better that is very very satisfying and gratifying. To get that kind of feed back is very nice.

**Ernst:** Was it surprising when a bunch of graduate students, I guess in the mid to late eighties began to **Words Unknown**.

**Herring:** Yeah, although I have had a number working on Cold War stuff earlier. But, I guess the difference was that the earlier students, most of them, came to U. K. for one reason or the other and ended up working with me. Whereas the later ones came I guess because of me or because of their interest in the subject. A little surprising, yeah I guess I really hadn't counted on that, but it's been a great run. The stuff that has come out of it. I wish at times I had done it more systematically and had been a little bit more imperial or entrepreneurial in the sense of developing a program and trying to push the university to work with the department to hire somebody in Southeast Asia under Vietnamese history to formalize it a little bit more, but that's not really my style. It has been great and the work that has come out of it I think is going to have an enduring impact on the history of it. Your book and many others books, Bob **Brigahms** book will be out this fall, and a number of articles. So yeah it has been great. I don't look that far ahead. I guess none of this would I have really predicted. Yeah its been great fun.

**Ernst:** I know it's a personal note, but I can't help it. I remember when Nancy **Word Unknown** had me read the book. She taught a foreign policy class and I read your

book and John **Word Unknown** Strategies of Word Unknown and for me, it was an undergraduate who was partying quit a bit, the world opened up to me. I just never got it. It's not Apocalypse now. *Laughter* It was obviously something different. But, I remember that and I thought god that's what I want to do.

Why do you think America continues to become so fascinated with the Vietnam War?

**Herring:** Well that's what I am going to talk about this afternoon, so you are just going to have to get that on tape, that's the full version. Obviously I think the main reason was, of course it was a defining event for a whole generation. The baby boom generation the biggest population wise and for that reason it couldn't help, but endure. Also I think because of its' length and its' traumatic nature for so many people and it's not over I don't think. Everytime I think it's just about run its' course then something will happen. As I was giving a talk at Davidson college, three weeks ago tonight pretty I guess, pretty much along the lines of what I am going to say this afternoon. I was sitting back relaxing and I picked up a copy of the New York Times and there was a article by Johnny Apple who did a couple of tours in Vietnam. It was an old journalistic hand for the times, who was talking about the discussions that were going on in the Pentagon and the White House all about bombing Iraq. The whole focus of the article was how the ghost of the past, mainly Vietnam, kinda lingered over these discussions. In a whole lot of different ways Vietnam was still influencing the way. It was a big part of the baggage that these people who were making these decisions who were mostly baby boomers and Vietnam generation types were

bringing to this. It was so controversial, it lasted long, and it was so traumatic that it couldn't help, but endure. I really got challenged on this in Mexico a couple of years ago by somebody who said that it really wasn't all that unusual I mean every war produces like the civil war certainly did, and WW II did, but I didn't really have to defend myself because most of the people in the audience were baby boomers themselves and as far as the faculty was concerned I was absolutely right that it is different and it has had an impact. Presumably sooner or later there will be some other traumatic event that will replace it and of course once this generation passes from political power and prominence, arts, and letters and that sort of thing. I mean even in literature its' had a huge impact on the popular culture. Korea there is virtually none and it would be hard to find except for a hand full of bad movies. The influence in popular culture is still very much around.

**Ernst:** I do get the sense that you keep thinking that you are ever going to wane...

**Herring:** Well it is and I mean it has. When I compare for example, the reaction to the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon with the reaction of the twentieth anniversary, which happened to coincide with the last stages of Clintons normalization. Even though we were going through the normalization process, I think still the interest in second anniversary it had obviously waned a great deal. Of course though it was competing with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WW II. So I think when you get again up to the fiftieth anniversary, which if you picked up this mornings Lexington's Herald Leader there on the front page is an article about Hue Thompson and Mai Lai. Hue whom I know a little bit

finally getting the medal that he has deserved for all of these years for trying to put an end to the slaughter of Mai Lai. I guess there is going to be an event at Mai Lai itself next week and Hue and some of the other are going to go back. It's going to be with us for a while yet. Not in sort of the dominant way I think it was, say eighty-five and the early nineties, but still very much with us.

**Ernst:** I have to admit though, at least with us, teaching a class on the Vietnam War the students are there. It's one of the most popular class.

**Herring:** How many students do you all have in the class?

**Ernst:** Well, we started with sixty or so and it has trimmed down a bit because of the...

**Herring:** They found out that they are going to have to work and it wasn't going to be all blood and guts and fun. Yeah and that is still true all over the country. Now how long is that going to last? I don't know. These kids were born, I am shocked to find out seventy-eight seventy-nine. So we have to reach the point sooner or later. We're re reaching the point already I expect where they don't have family involvement. Although a couple of them in my class last year had parents and one had a father who was killed there. Yes, I know the interest is still keen. Why? We were talking about this in Washington the other night. I was talking to other people about this and I don't have any real good explanation. Except that, they see enough around them, in terms of popular culture and parents talking or not talking about it, that they know something big, exciting, and traumatic happened and they don't have a clue what. So it arouses curiosity.

**Ernst:** Have your views of Vietnam changed over the years?

**Herring:** Yeah, I guess so, but I'm not sure, it's another question that people ask. I'm not cock sure, on a lot of things when I guess I knew less and when we knew less probably not as sure about things. Basically no, I would stand by the statements I put indifference to Walt Rostow, but probably a little more nuisances, a little more complicated, even this summer when we were in Hanio, and McNamara and the Vietnamese were agreeing maybe not meaning to, that the communist monolith was holy, that sort of thing, and I would say "Stop, wait a minute!" We know a lot more than we knew then. From Chinese and Soviet sources that at certain times, and certain circumstances, for ideological reasons they were working very closely together and so let's back off and we know that Stalin was assuming that the Korean War was **kim** unknown word **sum**. We now know that Stalin; I don't want to sound like John Gates here because I don't go down the line with him on these things, by a long shot. It is clear that more of a monolith was there then. We have argued for years and years and while that doesn't change the basic argument, that Nationalism is the key to it all. It does mean that you do have to look at this with a little more nuance, and complexity, so of course you learn more and more things. You think that went one way you find out in time either through your work or other people's work that is not really true. So, yeah, a little more remorse. I expect, basically, I would stick to the main thesis that I developed some years ago.

**Ernst:** How do you feel about Robert McNamara book in retrospect?

**Herring:** There is a lot of different ways to look at it, and I know that I bring to it the same sort of baggage that somebody who fought under him or work with him would bring. And therefore, I didn't react emotionally, as many people understandably did. If I had been somebody out there fighting and he had sent me there, and he couldn't do it. But, working under Lynden Johnson, if he had sent me there, and I had read the things he said, I would have been irate and furious, and indeed it was hard for me to understand. The things I hit him hardest for in the review I did, in foreign affairs, and in fact, if he had concluded as he said he did, and the evidence suggested that he did, then in sometime between July and December of 1965. If the war was winnable then why in God's name, did he continue to stay where he was, and run the war, and fight it, and leave ground people out there for almost 2 ½ to 3 years? And why did he place loyalty to his presidency over loyalty to the truth and his country and that sort of thing. Why did he not speak out for twenty years, I mean all of this is incomprehensible. I also looked at it another way, I looked at it as a historian, I looked at the memoirs, what can I learn from it, and there I was disappointed, as I told him. True to form, he did not reveal a lot of himself. There weren't a lot of personal, although there were some and they were very revealing. There wasn't a lot there that I didn't already know. And, I really don't think he was as insightful into what was happening around him or perceptive as Clifford's, which I thought was admirable to a stand-point of his **unknown word** on was a very admirable memoir. I don't think he got to the heart like Clifford's was trying to exercise, some of his demons, and after holding on to them for twenty-some odd years, and this is

what it is all about. Which, is what is remarkable most people write memoirs to defend themselves from other people's charges. He is writing one, in the effect to say I was wrong. And in saying that he is absolutely convinced, and that he is as cock sure, now about being wrong, thirty years ago, as he was cock sure, he was right when he was there thirty years ago. It is a very weird situation, but vintage McNamara.

**Ernst:** What was his response to you when you told him he did not seem to put enough personal...?

**Herring:** Nothing he really didn't respond. It is in his character, I think he is a very emotional sort of person. He is a person who has never been disposed to reveal much of himself to those around him and maybe even to himself. Very much in character, he would shrug and go on. That wasn't what I was trying to do.

**Ernst:** What was it like visiting Vietnam for the first time?

**Herring:** It was fascinating and a great trip. Very exciting, my great regret was I didn't get to see more, and travel more. I was hoping to go back this month, but that didn't work out, and use the time to travel. We were pretty much confined to Hanoi, and got to see quite a bit there and that was fascinating, but it only wetted my appetite. To see more of that was the great regret, but it was very exciting, and quite exciting to do it in that context. Sitting around the table with people like McNamara, Chester Cooper, and Nick Kasinback. Turn on the other side, Warren **unknown word** who is the American expert

on foreign ministry in the 60's and 70's. Foreign minister himself, Vietnamese historian, Lu Won Win, he was a fascinating fellow, and I wouldn't trade it for anything.

**Ernst:** What he still pretty.....**unknown did not let you finish.**

**Herring:** He was interesting, but he was also feeble, very interesting to be in his presence. He has great magnetism and charisma about him even now, but quite feebly and rambled on. Didn't have much to say, but quite a presence.

**Ernst:** Do you believe that scholars and **unknown word** have drawn the right lessons from the Vietnam War?

**Herring:** They have drawn a lot of lessons, let's put it that way. On all sides and about all things. Many of them conflicting and contradicting. I'm not much into the process of lessons, most of what I have written on this subject is really sort of a conveyed against seeking this sort of lessons from history that we tend to seek. I think we need to be a lot more courteous about doing that. It has been fascinating to watch as a historian over the last twenty years the way in which the Vietnam War has been used as a sort of lesson, on growing exercise, but I am kind of dubious about the process and most of what I have read. It has to be treated very skeptically. I think there is a lot to be learned from history. I am not sure that lessons, if you do it, kind of as I would say the military could do down on a tactical level. Examining more specifically, things like the twelve months tour and whether or not it was a good idea, some of the more specifics, and nuts and bolts

type things. Maybe that is useful, but in terms in broad lessons, like whether we should intervene in Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti and if we do, how are we going to fight them. We probably sort of misdirect or misguide ourselves, as much as we learn from it. My point on that sort of thing all along has been the real value of history, and looking at prophecies or places or situations where intervention might be called for, is that whether than trying to draw lessons from the last experiment where history can really come in, if we look at that situation itself and say what has it's history been, and what does that tell us about this place, and what does that tell us, then what we can or cannot do, and what we might do. I was looking the other night at a tape, that was sent from CNN, which was part of our conference, and I was intrigued. I didn't get it down, it was late and I didn't have time to write it down, but **unknown word** in his discussion in some of these things, it was saying the same thing. He was saying that perhaps if we American's had known a little bit more about the history of Vietnam as a country and a little bit more about the people, we might have acted differently.

**Baldwin:** To what extent do you think the egotism of the "baby-boom" generation has influenced our understanding of the war, and our need to find some final answer, if we can?

**Herring:** I don't know, I am not very good at that sort of thing. I guess my friend, Arnold Isaacs has just written a book, in which he talks at some length about POW's and MIA business. And he talks about that in this context by saying that it's the sort of spoiled nature of American's of that generation. Maybe of all generations who demand

answers for everything, and aren't satisfied that simply some things aren't accounted for or beyond our reach, or beyond our control that it's an interesting explanation of, and maybe fits into what we're talking about. But certainly, this perception you will have to fight a lot of people in that generation and the notion that this was the only war ever fought. It's worse than any other war you get the sense that you look at the number people killed compared to the civil war it pales into relative insignificance. If you look at the brutality of the combat of the Pacific Islands, of World War II, it makes Vietnam seemed much more civilized, and so you have to fight that with perspective, but very definitely, it was their war, and the defiance of it. There is a tendency to sort of lose perspective and that way it is something I really thought about or come to explain or understand, but it may have accounted for why it has lingered.