Mike Mansfield: ...the service acted very quickly to make all amends and payments possible.

Don Oberdorfer: Did you read the story this morning about the soldier on Okinawa? The latest thing?

MM: No, I haven’t. My wife reads the papers in the morning.

DO: Well, typical. I forget if it was a Marine or Army soldier, drunk going down the road at four o’clock in the morning in a car and he hit some Okinawan woman on a motorbike or motorcycle from the back and runs off. The guy at the gate, at whatever post he was on, noticed that his car had a dent in it and the windshield had been banged up and stopped him for questioning. Hours later they figured out who it was. The Japanese, naturally, are making a thing of it.

MM: What happened to the lady?

DO: I think she’s alive. I’m not sure. She’s badly, badly injured and [Ambassador] Tom Foley has apologized.

MM: He has what?

DO: Apologized.

MM: Yeah. Bam (?), and he thought he went down there.

DO: I don’t know if he went there, I don’t remember that from the story.

MM: I wonder at times about the forces we have in Japan, to the extent we have them, and to the extent that Okinawa is a persistent and continuing problem and will be. Here we have Anderson Air Force Base on Guam from which we used to ship B-32s, the big ones.

DO: 52s.

MM: They’d come from some place called Barksdale, Louisiana, stop in Guam and refuel and go on to Vietnam. It is a huge field. When I left, and I don’t think it the conditions have changed much, all they had was a squadron of Navy helicopters and maintenance personnel, few in number, to refuel these ships as they came through. I wonder why we can’t transfer some of our people there, because I don’t think the entire Third Division is on Okinawa at any one time.
because—you would recollect this more than I—there’s a third in the states, a third in Hawaii and a third in Okinawa?

DO: I’m not sure exactly how it breaks down, but I know they are not all there. Well, it’s a serious problem.

MM: Every time we say that we’ll give up something, there’s a caveat that we must get something in return. Well, I don’t know.* It’s a tough one.

DO: I want to ask you today something about your relations, personal relations and political relations with these different presidents that you have dealt with in one way or another. We talked last time about Roosevelt and your going over to the report for him. Then there was Truman and we talked about when Truman asked you and Senator Thomas for your opinion about the Emperor of Japan. Did you have much else relationship with Truman when he was president or at any time?

MM: I was a delegate to the seventh United Nations meeting in Paris. That’s about it. Eisenhower—almost no connection at all. Kennedy—close. Johnson—close, but we each understood there were limits that couldn’t be crossed. Ford—close, excellent. Nixon—kind of close, based on the breakfast meetings.

DO: And there was—we’ll go back on this in a second—but then there was Carter and Reagan in a different capacity, of course.

MM: Uh, yeah. Relationship with Carter; an excellent relationship with Reagan. My last day in the State Department was January 20, 1989. A half-day. Bush was sworn in at 12 noon. I was employed until midnight that day so I served a half-day under him. Relationship: nil. When I was in the Senate I served with Presidents. When I was in the State Department I served under Presidents.

DO: Let me go back to Kennedy and Johnson. Kennedy, you came to the Senate with Kennedy. You were seat mates for a time.

MM: That’s right.

DO: You indicated to me one time that though you came from totally different backgrounds—Jack was the son of a rich guy and a very wealthy person and went to Harvard and all this stuff and is a very different kind of character—that somehow there was some kind of sympathetic bond or something between you two as people.

MM: Well, we were seat mates in the back row. We’re both of Irish descent. We’re Catholics. I never thought of it in this sense before. We had a chance to get together because of the
proximity of our seats. We came in together along with [Henry] Jackson, [Stuart] Symington, Albert Gore, Bush’s father. Prescott Bush, I think his name was.

DO: That’s right.

MM: I don’t know if Barry Goldwater came in the same time or not.

DO: I don’t know. I could look it up.


DO: Yes you did.

MM: About seven Democrats, three or four Republicans, if that many. Once he complained about his back—Kennedy—he had to enter Georgetown, I think it was Gerogetown or George Washington University Hospital. You can check that. When he got out he was complaining about the cost of things. He said something like, $5 or $6 for an aspirin pill. He was disturbed about the tremendous costs and the prices paid. [Gap in tape.] He made his first speech on the French in Indochina. The name Pau, P-a-u, sticks out in my mind. I don’t know what the connection was, but it was used in the speech. That was the beginning of the Indochina—Indochina, not Vietnam—aspect of the relationship.

DO: Did you talk to him about the speech before he made it?

MM: No. Didn’t even know about it. Heard it. Approved it. Agreed with it. And then the next Indochina contact was when he became president, and asked me to go.

DO: You had Laos. You started with Laos and other things came along that we talked about. Did you find it easy to talk to him? Even when he was President were you relaxed with each other and that sort of thing?

MM: Yeah. Easily but, on my part, respectful. He was the President.

DO: Did you call him Jack or Mr. President?

MM: No. Mr. President, always. There’s a line that I didn’t want him to cross and that I wouldn’t cross in his direction. He was the President, and that was it.

DO: I thought initially that it was Lyndon Johnson who particularly wanted you to be majority leader, but I’ve come to the conclusion, at least initially, that it was really Kennedy, probably more than Johnson, who wanted you to be the Majority Leader. They both did, but there’s this episode which O’Donnell tells in his book—Kenny O’Donnell—that when Kennedy was
considering who he wanted for his vice president—and he picked Lyndon Johnson—he told Kenny that one of the reasons he picked him was he did not want Johnson to be his majority leader. He thought this was going to be a lot of trouble. He was particularly interested in having Mansfield, who—of course, you were already in the number 2 as being the Democratic whip—be the majority leader because he thought he could work well.

MM: I’ve heard the story but I couldn’t verify it. I don’t know.

DO: Both candidates—according to your papers—called you right after the election and asked you take on the job, on the same day. Kennedy called you first and then Johnson said, “I guess you’ve already heard from Kennedy and we both want you to do it,” and so forth. And you said well, I’m not sure I want to do it. But, finally, you agreed.

MM: That’s true. Kennedy thought it was natural. I think he was under the impression we could get along together. I had told Johnson no. I wasn’t certain how much Johnson wanted me to have the job because when I was the whip I had no work to do. He kept control even when he went to Texas, and his conduit was Bobby Baker. I was sort of, just, had a title, and took a seat.

DO: Why do you think he—it was Johnson really who selected you to be the whip two years earlier? Did he ever explain or do you have any idea why he particularly wanted you to do that?

MM: I think Johnson wanted [George] Smathers, and he went to Russell, with whom he was on good terms, intimate terms, sort of a mentor, and Russell advised against it because it would be too much of a Southern complex with Smathers and Johnson. He was the one, I think, who suggested me. Johnson carried that suggestion over and I said no. This is for the whip job. [He] kept after me and finally I said all right. He was very pernicious, very stubborn, tenacious. So I took the position and got a title of sorts, but nothing to do.

DO: What were your relations with Dick Russell, that he had suggested you for this?

MM: Very good, and also with Walter George. We got along very well. Close with neither of them, but George took a sort of paternal interest in me, and Dick just was a good friend.

DO: I got along real well with Russell. I didn’t know George, but Russell knew my grandfather. I’m from Georgia. That may have helped. He and I got along quite well, as a young reporter with a distinguished senator. When Johnson became president, of course the relationship [Mansfield’s] with LBJ changed, even while he was vice president. There was that moment when you tried to bring him into the caucus and give him some special responsibility for the Democratic caucus.

MM: At his suggestion. Sort of a pro forma position.

DO: Your colleagues didn’t care for it much.
MM: No. We took a vote. He won, but he lost. There were too many against him.

DO: Did he still, as President, want to run the Senate as he used to do?

MM: Oh no. Oh no. No, no. After that, he knew where the line was and I knew where the line was. I tried not to overstep. So far as I know he didn’t overstep. That’s about it. That’s about it.

[In this interview, clear indications of Mansfield’s great sense of propriety and restraint; those invisible but, to him, very important lines that should not be crossed between the Senate and the executive branch. On a related idea, it was very important to him that on nearly all of his overseas trips (except maybe the early 50s?) he arranged to have the president formally request that he travel, though in virtually every case it was his own idea. In some cases – a proposed Ford trip near the end in Vietnam – he declined presidential invitations or at least feelers to go. D.O.]

DO: You must have had a pretty complex relationship. Well, he was a very complex man, more than people, I think, recognized on the outside. But in the sense that you were responsible in many ways for getting his programs passed, for bringing people together to move them ahead, for [accomplishing] things he was very interested in. At the same time you were pretty persistent in your views about Vietnam and about Indochina generally, in telling him that you didn’t agree with this, and you thought it was going in the wrong direction. How did one thing work with the other? Just on two separate tracks? How did you keep this relationship from running off the rails?

MM: Just by being civil. Kennedy asked me to go; he didn’t like the report in the beginning. Johnson asked me to go. Took me upstairs, sort of a breakfast. Didn’t like the report.

DO: This was now the, ‘60... It was the first time you went out after Johnson became president?

MM: Yes. At his request. And then I don’t think he ever liked the report. It’s a public document. And then as I told you, I think, I made my views known when he met with the leadership, which often included the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the McGeorge Bundys, the McNamaras, and on occasions I was the only one.

DO: When you came back from the trip, you went up to the residence and talked to him about your report?

MM: Yes. He was very cool, very cool. It was sort of a formal meeting.

DO: Was it just the two of you or did he have someone else? Do you remember?
MM: I don’t know whether Lady Bird was there or not. [He doubts this, but isn’t sure; clearly nobody else. D.O.] Don, I’m not certain. All I know is he was there.

DO: It wasn’t a governmental type thing where he had a bunch or aides and all that stuff.

MM: Oh, no, just the two of us, or three of us if Lady Bird was there, which I doubt. I can’t say for sure.

DO: And then, with Nixon you told me last time that when he came in he asked you to have a meeting with him—breakfast at least once a month—and you did for the majority of his period as president. I read somewhere this had been suggested to Nixon by John Sherman Cooper. I don’t know if you know that story.

MM: I had heard that somewhere, and only in recent years. I had thought it was Nixon’s idea. We had served together in the House and in a sense in the Senate when he was vice president. But I wouldn’t be surprised if it wasn’t John Sherman Cooper.

DO: To me, there were two or three major turning points in your relations with Nixon, particularly with respect to Indochina. One was the Guam Doctrine or so-called Nixon Doctrine. I happen to have been on that trip as the Washington Post White House reporter and I was at Guam, the sole reporter for the Washington Post, when he, at an officer’s club on Guam, made these statements which were totally unexpected by us because we weren’t prepared for this at all.

MM: You mean he was shifting responsibility.

DO: Yes, but we had no inkling that this was going to be anything important that he was going to say until he came out with it. But all of us immediately recognized—at least I did, and I think most of the journalists did—that this was a major sort of shift in U.S. policy.

MM: Yeah. At least on paper.

DO: Yes, at least on paper. Rhetorically, at any case. You seem to have picked it up very quickly and I gather wanted to make sure to nail it down that this was a change in policy and try to hold him to it to some degree.

MM: That’s right. And Melvin Laird appeared before the Foreign Relations Committee once, and I took the opportunity to emphasize my support of the policy, and to state that it was based on my understanding that it meant that we would do less and the people in the countries of Indochina, especially Vietnam, would do more. Well, Nixon kept slightly withdrawing troops but thinking up new plans too, like the invasion of Cambodia. Either I misinterpreted him or he had other reasons that I’m not aware of for making the statement he did.

Mike Mansfield Interview, OH 391-005, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
DO: I have to look into this, but I’ve come to believe that the proximate author of this may have been Marshall Green.

MM: Marshall Green?

DO: At the State Department.

MM: You can’t confirm that. He’s dead now.

DO: I know, but Marshall wrote a wonderful memoir before he died. It was published only a few months ago. Apparently, the State Department and Marshall, who was, I think at that time the assistant secretary for East Asia at State . . . was sending over to the White House this concept that the people within the region should do more, that there should be a shift of emphasis. And if Nixon like the idea—of course, he was in a hell of a spot politically because he had promised the American people he was going to end the war and he had to find some way to continue their support. At any rate, the history of that Guam Doctrine or Nixon Doctrine is very interesting I think, and I’m going to look into it some.

MM: Good.

DO: I remember that so well. It was an officer’s club there on Guam. The New York Times—this is the kind of thing I remember—had two reporters, Max Frankel and Bob Semple, who was covering the White House. The Post had one, it was me. I thought it was a hell of a story that suddenly the President’s coming in—this is almost the first thing we heard from him on the subject of Vietnam—and he says that the United States is going to keep its obligations, but the Asians have got to do more, and the clear implication was we’re going to do a little bit less.

MM: That was my interpretation.

DO: Did he tell you about it in advance or did you talk about it after he delivered it?

MM: No, I knew nothing about it until it was announced. We spent most of our talks on normalizing relations with the Peoples Republic.

DO: Very shortly after that—that Guam Doctrine was July of 1969—and you went to Indochina, to Laos and Cambodia, in August, the following month. Nixon wanted you to assess the reaction to the Nixon Doctrine or the Guam Doctrine. You didn’t go to Vietnam. I don’t know quite why and I don’t know if you remember quite why, but you did go to see Sihanouk. This was the time when he treated you like you were a state guest or something like that. Just before that, you went to Laos where there was a big American build up because of the military’s actives. There were lots of people around.

MM: CIA, to a large extent.
DO: Yes, to a large extent.

MM: I visited the king in Laos. He had a small museum, including three or four silver dollars, which I had given him previously. A showcase, not much in it. I remember getting off at the airfield and seeing quite a few Americans in civilian clothes. I didn’t ask. I thought they were CIA. I just wondered what so many of them were doing there. Had a nice visit with the king. I think Valeo can tell you more about it than I can remember. We discussed his children. Souvanna Pouma was in control in Vientiane. His brother, Souvannavong, was head of the—

DO: Pathet Lao.

MM: Pathet Lao. Went to Cambodia. We had, in a certain sense, resumed relations. The red carpet was out. The soldiers were there. Maureen and I were treated extremely well.

DO: You say the soldiers. These were Cambodian soldiers who were—?

MM: Cambodian soldiers, yeah. Not too many of them, but enough with rifles.

DO: Honor guard type of thing.

MM: Yes. I think we stayed at the Palace. It wasn’t too big a joint. The king put on a special performance of the dance for us. He knew I was his friend; I knew he was my friend. I supported his policies on Cambodia, which was to keep out of the struggle as much as possible—entirely if possible, but it wasn’t. I think I wrote a report on it.

DO: I think you did.

MM: He was a very patriotic person. When I think of Sihanouk, I think of Cambodia. When I think of Cambodia, I think of Sihanouk. They are just inseparable. He was the people’s favorite, maybe he is still is. I don’t know. But he has no power.

DO: Something happened on that trip that later became an item of great controversy. Jim Lowenstein from the staff of the Foreign Relations Committee sat in on your meeting with Sihanouk, as did the U.S. chargé [d'affaires], a guy named Lloyd Rives, at the time.

MM: Yeah, he was from New Jersey. Lowenstein later became ambassador to Luxembourg?

DO: I don’t know. He later was a Washington lawyer. He may have been an ambassador too.

MM: Maybe I got him mixed up with someone.
DO: Lowenstein wrote the memorandum of conversation-type-thing, which was later used by the Nixon administration. The notes say—these are Lowenstein’s notes, “Sihanouk said he had protested to Ambassador Bowles”—this is Chester Bowles, who had gone out there earlier—“against American bombing in Cambodia, but not against bombing sanctuaries in areas of Cambodia not inhabited by Cambodians. American intelligence people know where these sanctuaries are. They have been bombed many times. “I never protest against such bombings,” the Prince said. He added that he learned of such bombing when he read Time or Newsweek, but he never protested. It’s in one’s interest sometimes to be bombed. In this case, the United States kills foreigners—meaning Vietnamese—who occupy Cambodian territory and does not kill Cambodians. But the Prince continued, he did protest the bombings of Cambodian peasants. Sometimes the United States has false information and bombs places where there are not Vietcong. That was then taken by the Administration and cited later—much later**—as justification for U.S. bombing in Cambodia on the grounds that Sihanouk knew all about it and he didn’t protest such bombings.” And this got into a back and forth as to whether he had really given you the idea that the U.S. had carte blanche to bomb uninhabited areas of Cambodia.

MM: As I recall—don’t depend on my memory too much, it’s not infallible—he did not encourage such bombings. He didn’t encourage any kind of bombings within Cambodia itself. What he tried to do was to keep Cambodia separate and apart from Vietnam. While he failed to do so on several occasions, it was his central point of interest and concern—always, always.

DO: Did you come away from that meeting with the idea he didn’t particularly care whether they bombed in the eastern part of the country or not?

MM: No I did not come away with that idea. Quite the contrary. Anything Cambodian as far as Sihanouk was concerned was in essence, sacred.

DO: What was your idea about what his reaction was to the Vietnamese? There were using the eastern part of the country quit a bit for their transit and doing other things there.

MM: I think he felt helpless in that if he became involved he wouldn’t come out on top, and that the least he did the more possible it was to reduce trouble and to keep Cambodia as a whole out of the conflict.

DO: The next big turning point, it seems to me, in your thoughts about Indochina in that period—in the early Nixon administration—was when Nixon made his famous Silent Majority speech, November 3, 1969. I remember it well. I was covering the White House at the time. He made a big thing out of going up Camp David and closeting himself in the remote spaces of Camp David to write this big speech. You sent him a memorandum of your own thoughts. I guess he must have told or you found out from the press that he was thinking about making some new big statement with regard to Vietnam. Your memorandum said in effect, the war is tearing the country apart; you gotta do something to curb it. He took just the opposite tack in
the November 3rd speech, saying the Great Silent Majority of Americans are behind this war, even though the protesters in the streets are not.

MM: That’s when he found out the Great Silent Majority were not behind the war. That was the time he went to the Lincoln Memorial, I think to talk to Abe, or so he said or indicated. He was 180-degrees wrong. The people showed what the great majority thought, which was not what he said it was.

DO: After he did something like that, did you discuss it with him, or you just—?

MM: No, not that I recall. Not that I recall.

DO: Then in March of 1970, a few months after that—the speech was in November—the following March Sihanouk was deposed.

MM: Lon Nol came in.

MM: That’s right. Sihanouk had gone to Paris for, I don’t know what, vacation, medical treatment or something, and he wasn’t there. Lon Nol, who had been his prime minister, in whom he posed a good deal or trust and confidence took over and Sihanouk was in effect, ousted.

MM: Sihanouk, instead of returning home and recovering his power, went on to Moscow as I recall and stayed away.

DO: That’s right.

MM: I was disturbed by that fact because to me it seemed to be the wrong move. I was surprised that Lon Nol had taken over. I heard—can’t confirm it or prove it—much later that we were helpful to him in doing so. Don’t know whether it is true or not, but that’s what I heard.

DO: It wasn’t too long after that when Nixon—Nixon at first didn’t say anything about Sihanouk having been deposed, but after a few months the administration supported it. And then Nixon began to operate in Cambodia, send American forces more explicitly. Attacked the sanctuaries in Cambodia in April. Called in the congressional leaders to tell them that that was what he was doing, he was going to attack these sanctuaries being used by the Vietnamese. Somebody has written [in] one of the books that he called in the Congressional leaders, including you, [William] Fulbright, [George] Aiken, [Robert] Kennedy—of course that would have been Bob—and said what he going to do. Well, Nixon wrote [in his memoirs], “As I left the room, everyone stood and applauded.” This version said, Mansfield’s recollection of the meeting was that it was strained, but he said, “When Nixon left the room I stood up with the others as a matter of courtesy and respect for the presidency, but I don’t recall under any circumstances applauding.”
MM: None. None.

DO: But then, shortly thereafter, you wrote a memorandum for your files—which are now in your archives in Montana—in which you said, “For the first time I am giving the most serious consideration to a termination date after which no more funds would be appropriated for military operations in Indochina. The American people feel let down, disappointed and concerned. They have appealed to the White House, they have appealed to the Congress. Their only hope, I think, is in the Senate.” Up to that point, you had never voted against an appropriation, you had never set a real date or tried to get the Congress to set a real date for withdrawal—but then your thinking shifted.

MM: And I voted against the Defense Appropriations Bill for the first time.

DO: That’s right. Was it the Cambodian incursion, as it’s called, that really was the last straw for you, that brought you around to this decision that Congress, the Senate, just had to act?

MM: One of the last straws, yes. What the others were, I don’t know. But it was one of the major factors, which caused me for the first time to vote against the Defense Appropriations Bill.

DO: Even beyond that, then you started putting in Mansfield amendments containing dates for six months or nine months from now, or whatever, for withdrawal of American troops under conditions. Return the POWs and so on.

MM: Didn’t get anywhere.

DO: Up to then, you’d never done those things.

MM: No, no.

DO: Did you feel they were going to be effective, or just a way to voice your opposition?

MM: Really the latter. The continuing of my opposition to the war.

DO: It wasn’t too long after that that you did the first big Mansfield amendment on withdrawing troops from Europe. How did that tie in to your thinking about Asia?

MM: I never advocated complete withdrawal. What I advocated, in effect, was a halving on the troops and the withdrawal of dependents, really. Because the dependents were beginning to outnumber the troops, and if the showdown ever occurred, we wouldn’t have had, in my opinion, the lean, ready type of soldiery, which would be able to suffer and repulse an attack. We had somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 troops and more than that in dependents. If
the then-present exaggerated policy continued in case of a showdown, what would happen to the soldier-family dependent relationship, how effective would they be? Lots of questions. I recognized the need for some forces there. I also realized they were way beyond what [Dean] Acheson and Eisenhower had established. I believe he or Acheson said they would not be there permanently. It was placing too much dependence on us. It was taking away from Europe a responsibility which it was in a position to assume. The longer it lasted, the more enamored it seemed we became of NATO. The Europeans were not at all averse to having an American as Commander and Chief, which would tie this country to NATO. Now we have finally gotten down to somewhere around 100,000 or so. It was like pulling teeth to do it. We are spreading those forces everywhere – into Yugoslavia, parts of Yugoslavia, as far away as Macedonia, and in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, which I would have voted against. It’s still alive and functioning.

DO: They brought in the big guns to oppose the Mansfield amendment on Europe. Just about every former Secretary of State.


DO: Yes, right. The Wise Men, Dean Acheson and all the rest of them.

MM: They did. It passed first, once, but they were successful. I wasn’t surprised. Disappointed is the word. Don’t know how it would have fared in the House.

DO: Did you feel in your own mind any connection between that and the situation in Asia, or not?

MM: Two separate issues. Two separate issues. No connection with Asia.

DO: Of course what really killed it was Leonid Brezhnev.

MM: Was what?

DO: Leonid Brezhnev saying, “Let’s negotiate mutual withdrawals.” So, the idea of a unilateral U.S. reduction was knocked in the head.


DO: That and the Wise Men, exactly. But that is one of the main arguments that they made of course.

MM: Most people seemed to have the idea I was calling for complete withdrawal. I was really calling for reduction, drastic reduction, a more capable force remaining, and a better chance for survival because it wouldn’t be discomfited by other problems, like dependents and the like.
DO: That was May 1971—the Mansfield amendment on Europe. Then in June the same year, you introduced Mansfield amendment number 1 on Vietnam. I say number 1 because after that there were a whole series of such amendments, as you say, gestures. They were non-binding resolutions and non-binding legislation calling for—the first one called for withdrawal of American forces within nine months if the American prisoners of war from Vietnam were returned or released. It passed the Senate, I think, and was killed in the House. There was another one three months later in September 1971, which called for American withdrawal within six months if the POWs were returned. This was on a bill that actually Nixon signed, though he said this [provision] has no effect, because it was not binding. He signed it all right, but he signed the bill, but he said this particular provision has no effect—language.

MM: I know. The purpose was to keep the personal pressure on the White House anyway and I’m certain that my views had not changed.

DO: Then the following January, January of 1972, there was a third Mansfield amendment, a similar one, but that was the time also that you voted, for the first time, against the Defense Appropriations bill. What was amazing was that on January 25 that year, ’72, suddenly Nixon revealed his negotiations with the North Vietnamese in which the same offer, basically the same terms were being discussed—withdrawal after six months if the POWs are released, almost exactly what you had said in your amendment. But of course this all depended on an agreement which was never, at least as that stage, was not made. All during this period you were talking to Nixon about China and other stuff. How did you keep from arguing with him about the war when you had these one-on-one conversations?

MM: The opportunity never really arose. He was in charge of the conversation. I was his guest. At larger meetings, as with Kennedy and Johnson, with his chief advisors and the Joint Chiefs of Staff there, and others, members of both houses quite often, I had no hesitation in expressing my views. I realized I was going up against a stone wall but I felt the effort had to continue. It did continue, right down to and including that three hours-plus conversation I had with Johnson, from six to nine something. I made the speech on China at the University. It continued after that to the very end.

DO: With Nixon [in office] in late April and early May 1972, you and Scott made your first trip to China. To remind you, it was July ’71 that the Kissinger secret trip was announced and Nixon announced that he was going to go to China. He went there in, I believe it was February of 1972—the big famous trip. You and Scott went in late April and early May of the same year—went to China on the first trip. The day after you got back, or within a day or two after you got back, you were called down to the White House along with other congressional leaders and Nixon announced he was going to bomb the rail lines—

Unidentified Speaker: I’m sorry, excuse me. John’s going to go get Chally (?) and then he’ll come back and get you.

Mike Mansfield Interview, OH 391-005, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
DO: He was going to bomb the rail lines from China. He was going to mine the Haiphong harbor, and he was basically enlarging the war. He called people in and told the people that, and then said I’m going to leave to make the speech, leaving you and the other leaders with Bill Rogers and I guess Mel Laird, whoever was at the Pentagon at the time, to discuss it. You objected that this was an enlargement of the war, as it clearly was. You had just got back from China, now he’s bombing the rail lines up to the Chinese border. It must have been—

MM: China was furnishing assistance. How enthusiastically actually, I don’t know. The Soviet Union was furnishing assistance over Chinese rail lines. There was a railroad running from Hanoi up to Kunming. Couldn’t see the sense of it.

DO: The very next day after this announcement, you and Scott went down to the White House to brief the President on your trip to China. You’ve got these two things going—China affairs and then Vietnam affairs going in the opposite direction, in a sense.

MM: Yeah. [inaudible] Recollection of that meeting.

DO: Apparently, it happened. Probably given the past record you all stayed clear from taking him up too much on the Vietnam side. Finally, several months after that, the 4th Mansfield amendment, the 4th one in the series, passed and shortly thereafter, the Senate for the first time put binding legislation on a Defense Procurement Bill, legislation that wasn’t just a sense of the Senate or sense of the Congress, but putting a time limit—

MM: Was it the Cooper-Church Amendment?

DO: I think it was, or it was shortly followed by the Cooper-Church Amendment. Finally, the Senate and the Congress just acted to say this is the end of it. Of course Kissinger takes—

MM: But it really didn’t end until Ford came in.

DO: That’s right. Kissinger takes the position, I’ve heard him say it, that if Congress just hadn’t done this, the U.S. could have continued on and eventually the war would have turned out okay; the reason for the collapse in the South was that Congress had cut off the money so there was no chance.

MM: Wrong.

DO: What do you think would have happened if Congress had not insisted?
MM: It would have come to an end, because it would just be a step up in the withdrawals that were inaugurated by Nixon. However it did come to an end. But as I recollect it was during Ford’s term.

DO: That’s correct.

MM: They helicoptered them [out] . . . ended the war, ended.

DO: There was an effort to get you to take some role with Sihanouk in the early 1970s. He, by that time, of course, was out of power. He had joined the Khmer Rogue. They wanted you to intervene somehow with Prince Sihanouk, but you didn’t do it. I don’t know if you recall anything about that.

MM: I was never formally approached, if I remember the situation correctly. Wasn’t [Ambassador Chester] Bowles sent over from India?

DO: He had been earlier.

MM: It had been my understanding—I couldn’t prove it—that Sihanouk had wanted me to come. How true that was, I don’t know.

DO: You saw Sihanouk twice when you were Ambassador to Japan. He showed up in Tokyo.

MM: Yes, indeed. We called on him and Monique.

DO: You went to see them?

MM: Yep.

DO: And was this a kind of very warm, friendly conversation?

MM: Very warm, very friendly, very understanding, and it was a pleasure for Maureen and me to see them both.

DO: We haven’t talked any about Ford. Of course, you must have known Ford when he was the minority leader for quite long time. I got the impression that the two of you weren’t particularly friendly at the beginning.

MM: Ford? No. Always friendly. Scott and I met with him while he was vice president from time to time. No publicity. [inaudible] . . . impeachment with him. We did among ourselves. Unfortunately Scott is not alive to verify it. And believe it or not, we discussed it with no one else.
DO: What did you discuss with Ford when you all went to see him?

MM: That we’d have to—not with Ford. We didn’t discuss it with Ford at all. Ford was completely out. Just Scott and me.

DO: But when you and Scott went to see Ford what did you talk about?


DO: When he became president did you worked with him easily?

MM: Very easily.

DO: He’s a very down-to-earth person.

MM: Yep. Didn’t change him. He was the same Ford in the White House that he was in the House of Representatives. But he did send an expedition into one of our ships.

DO: Mayaguez.

MM: Yeah—we sent in some Marines. I read in the paper where the Khmer Rogue—I believe at that time—was allowing the Mayaguez to leave. I got on the phone—this was in the evening. I called Ford—he was at some dinner—I kept calling and kept on calling, and I said, “The ship is leaving. You don’t need the Marines there.” He said something to the effect that it was too late, they were on the way. We lost more Marines than there were members of the crew.

DO: That’s right. At the end in Vietnam, as Vietnam was collapsing, they had one final request for appropriations, a considerable sum of millions of dollars to pump into the Vietnamese. I thought it was done more for effect than anything. I was in Saigon and knew the whole thing was collapsing. But you and Congress refused to give these additional funds, some hundreds of millions of dollars, to shore up the Vietnamese government at that stage.

MM: I don’t recall.

DO: One big decision—I don’t know if it was your decision alone—was a decision to make Sam Ervin the head of the committee to investigate, to do the impeachment and investigation of the whole Watergate-type thing. Otherwise, it probably would have gone to Jim Eastland as head of the Judiciary Committee. Do you recall how was this decision made that Ervin should do this?

MM: Yes. I was concerned when Jackson and Humphrey were being attacked unfairly in their presidential bids. I made a speech in Missoula to some group and told them that I intended to ask for a committee to look into these campaign practices. Got back to Washington and found out about this other thing.

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DO: You mean Watergate?

MM: Yeah. And I knew that we had to have a special committee. Went to Teddy Kennedy, who was looking into something related to it. Asked him if he would withdraw his committee if we could get a special committee. He said yes. Went to Jim Eastland and said I’d like to have a special committee created to look into this matter. “Have you talked to Teddy Kennedy?” I said yes, he’s okay. “Okay with me.” With that cigar. I said, “What about Sam Ervin as chairman?” He said that would be fine. So I went to Sam. I talked it over with him. He was reluctant, but he said he would take the responsibility. He was the best constitutionalist we had. Drew up a resolution. Think it passed 77 to nothing or something like that. For a special committee. Looked for members on the Democratic side who had no presidential ambitions. [inaudible] . . . Montoya, Inoyue.

DO: Yes, Inoyue was on it, I’m sure.

MM: None of them had presidential ambitions. I didn’t want it used as a sounding board.

DO: What was your thinking in deciding that Ervin should lead it?

MM: He was a constitutionalist, and I wanted to stick to the Constitution pretty closely. I knew he’d be fair-minded. Didn’t realize he’d become so popular, so old-countryish. But it was a success. The committee conducted itself on a fairly excellent bipartisan basis: [Lowell] Weicker, a fellow from Florida, [Howard] Baker.

DO: Did you have to consult with—in your thinking, I’m sure you probably talked it over with Maureen, but beyond that did you go to somebody and say give me your thoughts, or you just were thinking about it and decided this was the course to take [about Ervin and the committee]?

MM: No, I discussed it with Dirksen, I believe. Yes, 77 to nothing. Look into it. That’s about it.

DO: Well thanks for your help.

MM: I better go now.

[End of Interview]

* Information in brackets is the observations and/or comments of Oberdorfer.
** This denotes difficulty in distinguishing the comments of Oberdorfer from his quoting of books.

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