

Richard Barnett

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of the Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, D.C.,
formerly with the State Department.

Telephone interview by Joe Dolan, KGO.

(Phone connection very poor, with another party on the
same circuit.)

Transcribed from tape, edited slightly for readability.

Dolan: [First few words of introduction missed.] Could you amplify on that for us,
Mr. Barnett, please?

Barnett: Yes, I gave a talk to a group called Business Executives Move for Vietnam
Peace. This is a group of businessmen with which a number of retired
military, General Shoup and others, are associated. And I spoke to them of
my concern about the growing risks which I think are extremely serious, that
the President may use nuclear weapons in the war in Southeast Asia. Now I
base this on several things. One, of course, is the very large numbers of
weapons that are in the area. There are well over 5,000 tactical nuclear
weapons in the Southeast Asia area. Some of these are on the mainland,
many of them are close to the demarkation line, the 38th Parallel, in Korea.
I learned recently from a very reliable source that there are nuclear weapons
located on the ground in Thailand. There are of course thousands and
thousands of weapons, nuclear weapons, in the Seventh Fleet which operates in
the waters off Vietnam, so that weapons are clearly available. Second, the
basic strategy of the military -

Dolan: Mr. Barnett, this is not to include the Poseidon missiles that are on
submarines just off the coast?

Barnett: No, I'm talking about weapons for the area, not long-range weapons -

Dolan: Oh, I see, I see. Okay.

Barnett: - weapons that would be for battlefield use, even though these can be very
large weapons. Now the strategy of the military, up until 1965, was that if
there were to be any war in Vietnam or in Southeast Asia, it would have to be
a nuclear war. This was standard military thinking all through the late 50's
and early 1960's; in fact, up until the time the President decided to send
troops into Vietnam, the military command there did not have even the means to
fight a non-nuclear war. You remember it was some time before the B-52
bombers, the planes that carry the atomic bomb, were outfitted so that they
could be used to deliver conventional weapons.

Now the [garbled] military journals of the 1960's, an article for
example in the [Yale?] University Review in 1960 by General Smith, says we
cannot afford to lose friendly nations' territory under any circumstances.
The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that not only can the intelligent

use of nuclear firepower give us the greatest possible opportunity, but it is highly probable that without the use of such weapons our chances of winning in many areas are slim indeed. And Nixon himself, of course, subscribed to this view when he was Vice-President. I pointed out in the speech that I gave that Nixon had made a statement in 1955, when he was Vice-President. He said it's foolish to talk about the possibility that the weapons which might be used in the event war breaks out in the Pacific would be limited to conventional sources. "Tactical atomic explosives are now conventional and will be used against the military targets of any aggressive force."

Well now, against this background of the availability of weapons the use of these weapons under military doctrine is - that these weapons aren't considered anything but conventional to our military planners. Add to that the fact that on at least two occasions the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam was very seriously considered. In 1954 Admiral Radford and John Foster Dulles proposed to the French that atomic bombs might be used in what was known as Operation Vulture, a proposed air strike to relieve the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. And in 1968 President Johnson sounded out congressional opinions about the possible use of nuclear weapons to relieve the garrison at Khesanh which was then under siege, you remember.

Dolan: Yes.

Barnett: But I think the real - you know this is background - I think the real thing that you have to look at is what the President's options are. If he does what he says he's going to do, and that is continue to take men^{out}, but without really changing his war objectives, which is essentially to induce the other side to negotiate on our terms, he is exposing the troops there to a very, very great risk. What I think is likely to happen, and this is the great danger that I want to alert people to, is that [if] he reduces down to something like 200,000 men and the North Vietnamese attack the South Vietnamese army, which they are almost sure to do and which they have the clear capability of doing - they have thousands, more than 100,000 men in reserves which they have not committed to this fight, which I think they are prepared to do. Now in that situation the President will have his choice of either leaving the U.S. forces there in the enclaves or executing the most humiliating kind of evacuation, or doing what he has said he is going to do, five times in five speeches since November 3rd, that is, "take strong and effective measures." That's the phrase he uses over and over again. Now if you look at the measures that are available to him, the options are extremely limited. He can't bring the troops back - that would be tactically

and politically impossible after he's withdrawn them. He can bomb North Vietnam but it won't make any difference.

Dolan: He could not bring the troops back into Vietnam, you mean.

Barnett: That's right. I mean he certainly can't do it in time to avoid a major defeat on the battlefield.

Dolan: Yes, I see. That was a little ambiguous. Yes, go ahead.

Barnett: So that really the only possible kind of military [solution?] that could conceivably make a difference would be something dramatic. And I can see the military saying, Just you explode a nuclear weapon, a small nuclear weapon, this is a demonstration of American will, and it will generate the kind of psychological pressure to convince them that they've got to negotiate on our terms. In fact, I can even see - hear the military arguing that that would be a strategy that would ultimately save American lives.

Dolan: Seems to me I've heard that one before.

Barnett: We've heard that one before. In fact the only time of course nuclear weapons/in war - Hiroshima and Nagasaki - that was the biggest reason for it, to save lives. So I think that - oh, one other bit of historical background that I think you have to consider. I think Nixon is convinced that the Korean war was settled by Eisenhower threatening to use nuclear weapons against Korea. He communicated this threat through the Indians, and I think (whether it's true or not historically I don't know) [that] Nixon's absolutely convinced, as I know Eisenhower was because that's what he told his biographer, that the only way they got that war settled was by threatening.

Dolan: Threatening the Chinese, you mean? The Chinese?

Barnett: Threatening the Chinese.

Dolan: Yes, you said the Koreans.

Barnett: Yes.

Dolan: Well, Mr. Barnett - well, I'm glad you pin that down. Mr. Eisenhower told that to his biographer, you say.

Barnett: That's right. He told Arthur Larsen, his biographer. Arthur Larsen was a White House assistant.

Dolan: Could we take a momentary diversion?

Barnett: Sure.

Dolan: Do you think that the threat of atomic weapons against the Chinese actually did settle the war, or was it the fact that the Chinese had proved that they could drive American forces back to the 38th Parallel and stabilize the battle lines there and thus protect their Yalu flanks?

Barnett: I think that's the reason, yes. I think that - in fact [from] everything

I can find out - the threat, if it was made at all, was extremely veiled. And I doubt if that was the major thing at all, but Eisenhower was convinced and I'm quite sure that Nixon is convinced that that's what did it.

Dolan: Mr. Barnett, one last -

Barnett: Of course this is a theory which the Joint Chiefs of Staff like to promote and it would be the way of finally pulling this terrible disaster out of - of avoiding a military defeat and proving once and for all, finally, that American military power could do the job.

Dolan: Now, Mr. Barnett, another short detour which pertains to our present dilemma. The Chinese did, I understand - it's clearly on the record - the Chinese gave absolutely unequivocal warning to various neutral or allied nations that if we approached the Yalu River and their Manchurian infra-structure and so on, that they would come into the war. Is this not clear?

Barnett: That is true.

Dolan: Now, sir, have they not again and again said, no matter what humiliations North Vietnam may suffer, they will not permit it to be defeated as a state without coming into themselves. Havn't they said that?

Barnett: That is correct. And the Vietnamese told me that were nuclear weapons to be used [garbled] will not longer be a Vietnamese war.

Dolan: No longer be a Vietnamese war?

Barnett: That's right.

Dolan: Mr. Barnett, could you hold on for just a moment, please? I have a couple of commercial messages

[Commercials.]

Dolan: Mr. Barnett, can we go back now, please. We left off at the point about the Chinese ... coming in to North Vietnam if we threatened the extinction of that state.

Barnett: Right.

Dolan: Okay.

Barnett: Well, I think that they have made clear in a number of ways - and when I talked to leaders of North Vietnam they made it quite clear that if nuclear weapons are used against them there would be a much wider war and involvement of some other powers. They would not express it and they certainly weren't going to tell me what their agreements are but I think it's quite clear that they have them. I think the possibility that the Chinese have of course of extending the entire war all over Southeast Asia is pretty clear, but if this

war expands of course it will mean that other countries - the very countries that the State Department refers to as the dominoes - will be swept over by the Chinese. They certainly have the capability of doing that.

Dolan: Now, Mr. Barnett, I have two questions, one humanistic and one strategic. Do the generals, do our generals, does anyone in Washington ever talk about the human flesh, the innocent peasant flesh underneath these atomic flashes? Does anybody consider these people at all?

Barnett: I would say that the - we have been going over - we have been doing a study of these basic decisions on Vietnam. Going back to the early 60's [garbled] - how these questions are simply ignored, that the Vietnamese are looked upon as objects and are talked about in the most antiseptic kind of language. People talk about a "surgical strike," or "taking out a village," or "taking out a city," and the whole way the situation is discussed in the military bureaucracy is as almost as a game, as a contest in which the people there just happen to be in the way. I think - in fact in military writing they often talk about the problem about nuclear weapons. One of the reasons why I think the military are very anxious to use nuclear weapons is to break down this one last restraint against criminal conduct of warfare that now exists, that is, the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons. They would like to see one weapon dropped so that it can be said that that barrier no longer exists. And I remember when I was in the State Department hearing military people talk of the terrible problem, that there seems to be this strange revulsion that people have against nuclear weapons.

Dolan: Now, Mr. Barnett, I have - the other question was strategic and that relates to Cambodia. Incidentally, that use of semantic and comforting phrases, "surgical strike," "clean out sanctuaries," do this and do that, I suppose is to reassure the peasantry in our own country that somehow this does not involve frangible human flesh, screaming babies and burned people.

Barnett: They try to cut it all down and just screen people from the reality of what they're doing. The fact that when we destroy a rice crop, as we do systematically in Vietnam, that when we set fire to a village, we are murdering people - that is the only way to describe it - and this of course is something that no country can ever justify to its people. Hitler never talked about the fact he was murdering people, there was always -

Dolan: The Jewish question.

Barnett: - a good justification for it.

Dolan: The Jewish question, he called it.

Barnett: He called it the Jewish question, or the final solution.

Dolan: The final solution. Mr. Barnett --

Barnett: [garbled] ... words which mystified the people.

Dolan: The strategic question was, according to the very latest news, Cambodia -- despite our surgical removal of the sanctuaries and the capture of some boiled rice, they never did find any seven-storey enemy headquarters, to the best of my knowledge -- but according to the news Cambodia is now half taken over by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong and, according to Joseph Kraft writing from Pnom Penh this morning (or yesterday) the Sol Nol or Lon Sol government is on the verge of complete dissolution. Now according to the talk in D.C., does this mean now that American troops or our satrapies, Thieu and Ky and so on, are going to go pouring into this country -- in other words, do you think we're going to be more deeply enmeshed now in Cambodia?

Barnett: Oh, I think there's no doubt about it. I think the strategy is to do what -- is to carry out the classical operation of a distant imperial power, and that is to get the local people fighting each other, so that we're getting the Thais and the Vietnamese -- all of whom are ancient enemies -- to go in there and try to do the fighting for us, going back to Dulles's classic formula, "Let Asians fight Asians." But I don't think that's going to be successful, and of course what happens is that after you make a commitment of the nation's honor and prestige as it's called, as the President has done repeatedly, talking about his Cambodian adventure, you've got to send in more people to rescue the people that you've sent, and to keep the commitment. So I think that that's a very -- I don't think that the United States is going to be through with Cambodia at all by June 30th. Whether in fact we remove all the troops as the President has promised, I don't know, but my guess is that what we will do is follow the same strategy that we have followed in Laos, that is, try to get other people to do our fighting, outfit the Thais, the Vietnamese, and then greatly step up the aerial bombardment, which we're doing anyway. But I think that will greatly increase and we will see the kind of saturation bombing in Cambodia that has been going on for many years in Laos.

Dolan: Well, at least it doesn't have a border with China, whereas Laos does.

Barnett: That's right.

Dolan: Mr. Barnett, could you hold on for just a moment, please? I'd like to ask you next if I may about Mr. Galbraith's letter in The Washington Post. Most of us out here have never heard of it. Could you hold on just a moment?

[Commercials.]

Dolan: [To audience.] Several of you have called as to who the man is on the air. It is Mr. Richard Barnett, with the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., formerly with the State Department, and he's discussing statements made by Mr. Richard Nixon and others, our military, usually of course in more obscure journals, obscure to us the public, about the possible use of nuclear weapons.

Dolan: Mr. Barnett?

Barnett: Yes.

Dolan: Mr. Barnett. Now, according to The Nation Magazine this week, Kenneth Galbraith has written a long letter in The Washington Post, ticking off the various people who are not in favor of the war or whose support is tenuous at best, and he finally gets down to the fact - according to Galbraith - that the one powerful cohesive institution in this country that is propelling us forward into this abysmal, suicidal course of action, is what he calls the military bureaucracy. Did you read that letter?

Barnett: Yes, I did.

Dolan: Well now, Mr. Barnett, I'd like to have you amplify a little bit, as someone who's right in the eye of the hurricane there in D.C. Now most of us know the Pentagon is strong, but we had no idea that it was so far - according to Mr. Laird (this was in the news yesterday) Mr. Laird is trying to re-establish a leash on the generals. Now this sounds dangerous.

Barnett: I think there is no question about it, that we have over a generation consistently fed a growing military bureaucracy. You cannot spend a trillion and a half dollars, which is what we've spent on the military since 1945, and in the last few years about 70 cents out of the budget dollar, on military institutions, for past, present and future wars, and not have a tremendous imbalance of power in the government in favor of the military. I've done a study, which I published this year - you may have seen it, "The Economy of Death" -

Dolan: Oh, yes.

Barnett: - which outlines exactly how this happens, and I think what we see is that the military bureaucracy has a life of its own, that they are supposed to be protecting the country but in fact the view has grown up that what's good for the army - or what they think is good for the army - or good for the air force, they think is automatically good for the country. And now of course the Vietnam war situation shows that that is a complete absurdity. Today you're beginning to see those who have supported the war and been willing to simply defer to the, quote, "professional judgment of the military," men

like the chairman of the board of Bank of America, the president of Du Pont, Thomas Watson the president of International Business Machines, now saying publicly for the first time, that this war's a disaster, that it's destroying the economy, that it's tearing apart the fabric of our society. And the people are carrying it on because they don't know how to stop it and because they are unwilling to face the day of reckoning when they've got to say to the American people, We were wrong: having spent 50,000 lives, 150 billion dollars, we cannot force our will on this fourth-rate power. That's something the military don't want to do.

Dolan: I can remember well the photographs, the moving pictures, TV pictures, of General LeClerc or whatever his name was, when he finally had to leave in 1954 or 55. There were tears in his eyes, you could see his chin quivering. Did you ever see those films?

Barnett: Yes, I did.

Dolan: He was saluting with that peculiar little French pillbox hat. He was crying, not because of the deaths and the slaughter and the killing and the murder and the rapine and the pillage, he was crying because the French military had to get out of their little preserve in Indochina.

Mr. Barnett, the other night -

Barnett: I think it's a great mistake to lay the blame primarily on the uniformed military. My own view, and this is based really on studies that we've done, is that the [greatest?] militarists in this country wear three-button suits and they are the people from our best universities and from our greatest corporations who have come down to Washington and adopted a policy more militarist than the military. And it is they who ordered the military in and gave the military what in effect was an impossible job to do. I am not relieving the military of blame. The military are, I'm sorry to say, every day committing clear war crimes in Vietnam. But it is the civilian leaders, the McNamaras, the McGeorge Bundys and the Kissingers, people who should know better, who have decided that the United States must prove its greatness by trying to intimidate and destroy a small country. And I think that we have to see that those are the people that I would say are ^avery important, the most important part, of what Ken Galbraith calls the military bureaucracy.

Dolan: Mr. Barnett, one last question for you - we've only got about 60 seconds. Incidentally, if there are any publications from the Institute for Policy Studies I wish you'd give me some public relations releases on them, please. Just send them to me here at KGO, San Francisco. Would you do that?

Barnett: Yes, I will.

Dolan: Now, Mr. Barnett, my final question, and we only have about 60 seconds, is this: do you think that the military octopus or the Pentagon or the military-industrial complex - whatever you want to call it, using Eisenhower's phrase - do you think it can be brought back under civilian control, the control of the people of this country?

Barnett: I think it only can if there is a serious national citizens' resistance, to try to take back the power which is rightfully theirs, and that means not only attempting to elect people to congress, which I think we should do, but everybody where he is, where he works, in his own institution, working to see that that institution disengages from the war. If he's in a university, to see that the university gets out of war research. If he is in a corporation, to see that that corporation does not take contracts relating to this war or the military. If he is in the army, making very certain that what he does does not constitute a war crime. He is protected under our constitution and under the Manual for Courts Martial of the military services themselves, if he is ordered to do something which is a crime, such as the Mylai shootings, he not only can refuse, he must refuse, that kind of an order.

Now if people begin really to see the seriousness of the situation, that we are really on the brink of what I believe to be national suicide by pursuing this war for another year or more, then I think we can still generate the energy in this society to stop it and to make it possible to turn to constructive pursuits and to try to put this country back together again.

Dolan: Mr. Barnett, I'm going to have to close. I am going to turn you back to my producer, please. That "Economy of Death" you mentioned, or any other publications or lists or what have you - if you'd keep us posted on what's going on back there, I'd love to talk with you again. Could you hold the line, please?

Barnett: Sure. Thank you very much.

Dolan: Thank you so much for being with us. Hold on now, please.