INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 1, 1982

INTERVIEWEE: PETER BRAESTRUP

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Braestrup's office at the ***Wilson Quarterly***, Smithsonian Institution Building, Washington , D.C.

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G: Let's talk about your background a little bit in Southeast Asia before you went to Saigon.

B: I started out in May 1966 as the ***New York Times*** Bangkok bureau chief, which essentially in theory kept me in Laos, Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia outside Vietnam. But within a week of my arrival, I was happily in Vietnam helping my colleagues on the ***New York Times*** cover a story for which they needed all the manpower they could get. And I spent at least a third to a half of my time thereafter in 1966 and 1967 in Vietnam covering politics and combat operations in Vietnam for the ***New York Times***.

G: What story was that, that you referred to, the one [for which] they needed all the manpower they could get?

B: All the stories. They were covering visits from Secretary [Robert] McNamara, they were covering all kinds of pacification, political, and military stories--the Buddhists; the labor unions. The country was big. They only had three full-time staff reporters at the ***Times***, and they were plainly shorthanded and they were always glad when I showed up to help. And the New York office was glad when I showed up to help. Since I had briefly

covered the Algerian war and had been in the Marine Corps in the Korean War, I had a certain expertise which they found useful. So I behaved really as if I were a member of the Saigon bureau of the ***New York Times***.

G: Who was bureau chief at that time?

B: In 1966 the bureau chief was Charles Mohr, M-O-H-R, who was probably the best single newspaper correspondent in the Vietnam affair. He had been there off and on, first for ***Time***, since 1962, did cover the White House under Lyndon in 1964, and went back to Southeast Asia in 1965 when the ***New York Times***, like every other bureau, began to beef up its manpower there as the United States sent in combat troops for the first time.

G: What were the bureau's operations like? You've said they were shorthanded and yet I have the impression that the ***New York Times*** far and away had the best staff, the best operation in Saigon.

B: In 1966, the ***Times*** did not compare in its accommodations, its manpower, its facilities, to ***Time*** magazine, which had a big house of its own and ample supporting staff, drivers, its own Telex operation and so on. The ***New York Times*** had only three staff reporters in 1966-1967. ***The New York Times***, like most other newspapers, seemed to regard the Vietnam War as kind of a temporary exercise and therefore did not make the logistical commitment--of an office, secretary, and so on--until 1967. If you look in the 1977 edition of ***Big Story*** you can see the detail.

G: Of course the government had been saying pretty much the same thing all along.

B: The U.S. government never gave any public indication as to how long they expected the war to last. Particularly in 1965-1966 there was a lot of optimism even among the

military in South Vietnam about how long this was going to take. No one expected it to take only a couple of more years, but there was definitely a good deal of optimism, in part because the low point militarily before the American troop commitment in mid-1965 had been so low the South Vietnamese army was getting hacked apart. Our troops restored the balance and things were always better if you compared the situation back to early 1965. So there was that kind of optimism on the official side. But there was a kind of unwillingness on the newspaper side to really think this thing about Vietnam coverage in the long term. Reporters seldom stayed more than a year or so.

G: Right. Can you give us just a brief idea of what it was like to operate as a journalist in Saigon? What was the ambience? What did you do during the day, where did you go?

B: Vietnam was probably the easiest war to cover, in some ways, of any war American journalists have ever been in, because we had remarkable access to both the military and civilian folk, particularly if you worked for a major news organization, remarkable access to senior officials, to junior officials in Saigon. If you wanted to work hard, you could find out a lot. The great mass of the reporters, the great majority of the reporters in Vietnam, stayed pretty close to Saigon or to the other major cities. There was only a small handful--I estimated the number in late 1967 as about sixty--out of the several hundred of people accredited, who spent one-fourth to one-third of their time in the field.

G: Was this because of communication problems?

B: No, it wasn't communications problems, although they were always severe. It's just that it required taking some risk to go into combat situations, even though it was usually not as dangerous in 1965-1967 as it was to become later, in some ways. Mortars, ambushes,

and mines were always a threat, but the enemy, except around the DMZ, did not have artillery. When operating with American troops, which was what most newsmen did, you did not have to worry about being cut off and taken prisoner; very rarely did the other side overrun even as small a unit as a company of two hundred men. U.S. medevacs were terrific.

So there was a kind of security, going with American troops. At the same time it was unpredictable; you never knew, and neither did the company commander know, as he pushed across the rice paddies, whether he was going to take fire and run into something big. It was not a high-intensity conventional war. For the most part, it was lots of relatively small units moving around in the countryside, and rarely did a fight last more than a day. [There] might be a succession of contacts over three or four days, but in 1965-1967 rarely did the same unit stay in contact for days at a time, in contrast to Korea and World War II, except at some of the border battles like Dak To, or Con Thien, or the hill battles near Khe Sanh. So there was seldom, prior to Tet 1968, a predictable continuous story in one place.

But it was often easy to get around, relatively speaking, because you had helicopters, not jeeps. On a space-available basis, we got rides on helicopters. As the war went on into 1968, we had the situation, particularly in the army units--not the Marine Corps, which never had enough helicopters--where we almost had helicopters devoted to us. TV crews with three people could go get in and out fast. That had a drawback, however, which was that it made it almost too easy to get in and out fast, and you didn't stay long enough to learn the context of the action that you were reporting,

particularly if you were television.

G: If transport was easy and the risk while there was relatively slight compared with other wars, how do you account for the relatively small number of reporters who got out into the field?

B: Partly it was because there were so many other stories one could do. The war was different in every one of the forty-four provinces. Each of the major news organizations had people who got out in the field. There was the large fringe group, visiting firemen and so on, who stayed in Saigon or made the token visit to the Delta or whatever. I don't want to leave a misimpression there, because sixty people was still a lot of people. And the wire services and the TV people would get out there as close to the action as they could get, and very seldom did they get action footage broadcast, partly because when there's an infantry fire fight, everybody gets down and you can't see much. The enemy attacked at night; the allies did their sweeps in daylight. As Professor Lawrence Lichty of Northwestern [University] has found, most of the combat footage was aftermath footage, where you saw the troops moving around, their wounded being taken to the helicopters, and the reporter telling you that there had been a fight and this is what happened in the fight. The wire service reporters and some other print boys would get real up close; the combat photographers for the AP and the UPI would get right in there and some of them got killed or wounded. It's just that the numbers of people who were actually involved in covering the combat part of the war in 1965-1967 were fairly small, considering the several hundred reporters assigned to get accredited to MACV.

G: When did you become ***Washington Post*** bureau chief?

B: I became bureau chief on January 15, 1968.

G: Just in time for the big one.

B: Two weeks before Tet. In fact, that day I was in Vientiane, Laos and in the morning I filed my last story to the ***New York Times***. In the afternoon--I was figuring the time difference and so on, at noon or whatever it was, midnight back home--I filed another story to the ***Washington Post*** from the same place, and then moved quickly to Saigon to take over there.

G: Is there anything that we should know that's relevant or interesting about that transfer?

B: The ***Post*** was beefing up; it had had only one American and one Vietnamese in its bureau. Before Christmas, executive editor Benjamin Bradlee was looking around for a second fellow to put in there, an older fellow. Lee Lescaze, who is now the White House correspondent for the ***Washington Post***, was then in place. He had just come in country six months earlier, a very bright guy. This was his first overseas assignment; he was in his late twenties. Joe Alsop, the columnist, kept complaining to Bradlee that nobody was writing the right stuff in the ***Washington Post***. Now, that meant that nobody who disagreed with Joe Alsop was writing the right stuff. Joe Alsop I had known. My father-in-law had been a classmate of his at Harvard.

I didn't go to Harvard, but he had been reading my stuff in the ***Times*** and he thought I would be more sympathetic to his hawkish point of view, or more knowledgeable about the military than the younger reporters.

G: Did you know that at the time?

B: I kind of guessed it.

G: Do you think he was right?

B: No, he was later a little disappointed with me, but he was very gracious about it and very generous in helping Lescaze and me whenever he came to Saigon. He always got me in to see Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker and others whom I would have had difficulty seeing.

G: I have the impression that Alsop got to see pretty much whatever he wanted to see.

B: Yes. He stayed at Ambassador Bunker's house or the Majestic Hotel when he came to Saigon in 1966-1968. He used to lecture the colonels on how to win the war. He got VIP treatment. He came twice a year for a month or so. But he also did a lot of good legwork. For example, Alsop was the first reporter to discover that the North Vietnamese had to supply so many replacements for the Viet Cong units after Tet.

G: The fillers for Tet.

B: The fillers. Alsop was the first journalist to report that, and he did it by going around the country and asking questions. This--I think I'm correct--I don't think [William] Westmoreland and company quite realized at that point how pervasive this was. It had kind of been coming in, in the intelligence, but no one wrapped it up until Joe Alsop did. So he was a good reporter. He went by helicopter to Khe Sanh, for example, in the waning days of the siege. At night in the field he took sleeping pills to drown out the noise of the artillery. He didn't sit back, like many visiting journalistic notables, in Saigon and suck his thumb; he went out and saw a lot. So I had no problems having him as kind of my sponsor, and [he] was an honorable man and I always liked him personally, even though he exasperated lots of people and I didn't always agree with him.

But in 1967 he apparently--I'm not quite sure how this worked, but I suspect it's how it worked--he suggested that I would supply some experience to the story, and Bradlee told me to fly in from Bangkok at ***Post*** expense. And I did so, to talk to him. I stayed at Alsop's house before I saw Bradlee. Bradlee said, "I just want somebody who will play it straight, [and] call it as you see it." There was no ideological guidance other than that, and the foreign editor, Philip Foisie, said the same thing. And there was a refreshing lack of bureaucratic niggling and piggling with the ***Post***; the ***Times*** at that time tended to have desk men who were very--we all thought in the ***Times***--extremely difficult to deal with, and cut stories badly and so on and so forth. This was not a problem with the ***Post***.

G: When you say they cut stories--

B: They cut, trimmed them down badly. We had many difficulties with the lower-echelon desk men, not with the foreign editor, Seymour Topping, who was an old Asia hand himself.

G: Well, did this result in your stories being distorted?

B: No, not politically. It wasn't ideological; it was just bureaucratic. We knew what the dovish ***Times*** editorial page said, but the notion of a consistent bias in the treatment of the stories is not correct. Any bias that was in those stories was usually the reporter's own. Now as I say in ***Big Story***, you can't prove this, but I think in the selection of stories for page one, some stories related to Vietnam got unusual play, particularly diplomatic stories dealing with peace feelers and that kind of thing. I have never been able to get either Topping or anybody else to really focus on this. They can't remember

whether that was influenced by the Northeast environment, you know, where a negotiated peace was always a big topic in the circles in which the people at the ***Times*** moved, or whether the ***Times'*** traditional interest in "diplomacy" stories was the influence. You must remember how stories were picked for page one. The foreign editor proposed page-one stories from his department to the news editors, who in turn made their picks from all departments and showed them to the managing editor. The news editors are, or were, key players. I know at least one who was personally a "dove" in 1967.

G: When you took over as bureau chief--and you'll forgive my ignorance of newspaper procedure--how does that affect you as a journalist? Do you become a manager of other journalists then?

B: In Saigon it was not like Washington, where the ***Times*** had thirty-odd reports and a mini-bureaucracy. Newspapermen hate management, hate management chores. Most newspapermen would just like to go out and run around. Overseas, the ***Times*** bureau chief became the number-one reporter and everybody else kind of looked around for their own stories. It was not an organized process. ***Time*** magazine works it a little [differently], because it's group journalism. [At] ***Time*** magazine, the bureau chief is assigning people, often on the basis or requests from the home office. In these little newspaper bureaus in Saigon, there weren't enough people around to do that; just three or four, including Vietnamese. In the wire services, with six or eight people, the bureau chief was a manager. He may never write a story or report a story; he's a desk man. He'll kind of parcel people around where they ought to go and so on.

The real point here is that in Saigon in 1965-1968, the newspaper bureaus were

severely undermanned, given the scope and complexity of the story. Essentially what I was for the ***Washington Post*** when Tet came was the senior partner, and I had a junior partner, Lee Lescaze, and then I had later temporary reinforcements who came in; George Wilson, Pentagon man for the ***Washington Post***, a very able reporter who got right out onto the front lines, and Stanley Karnow, a ***Washington Post*** Hong Kong man who came in and did a couple of good quick tours. He wasn't a combat-reporter type, but he did a couple of quick tours with Robert Komer, head of the pacification program, and produced very good stories for us, and stories which kind of put that problem in perspective as it was not put into perspective elsewhere.

So being bureau chief for the ***Post*** was not much of a managerial job. We had a wonderful secretary, Joyce Bolo, wife of the Agence France Presse bureau chief, Felix Bolo, and mother of two young sons, who kept the books and the office running. You kind of say to Lescaze, "Well, I'll go up north, and you stay down here for a few days and then I'll come back." I would ask our Vietnamese reporters to translate or check out certain angles. In theory I would have the final word, I suppose, but it never came to that. Lescaze and I kind of talked it out, who was the most tired, that kind of thing. So we had Lee Lescaze as my junior partner, and his wife, Becky Lescaze, served in the office at night as our unpaid helper, took dictation over the phone [inaudible]. That was the worst part of the whole exercise, getting the story in from the field.

G: Getting you story filed?

B: That used to wear you out. You've been out getting shot at during the day and then you'd hitchhike your way back to the Danang press center and then you'd switch gears and

write your story, and then try to get Becky on the army telephone system: not easy. In some ways it was harder on the psyche than being a rifle platoon leader, which I was in Korea.

(Interruption)

You were with the First Air Cav?

G: Yes.

B: The son of [John] Tolson is working for me.

G: Oh, really? Well, he was one of the boys.

B: Big Daddy.

G: Yes indeed. Good man, I thought.

B: Good man, good man.

G: If you could go back now to January 15 and set the ***Post*** up the way you wanted to set it up, would it look like the ***Times*** operation more than it did then?

B: No, it would look like what the ***Post*** had in 1972. I was at the ***Washington Post*** at that time, and in 1972 all the old-timers were sent back for the l972 Easter offensive. And we set it up the way it should have been set up in the beginning. We had enough bodies. We had five, I think, at the ***Post***, and the ***New York Times*** had seven or eight. And even the U.S. Army people agree we gave that particular campaign extremely good coverage, even though the home office started cutting our stories by June, when it seemed disaster no longer loomed. As in 1968, it was an election year and space was tight. It was a different kind of campaign. It was a conventional war, not Tet, but even allowing for that, there was enough manpower. At Tet, everybody got so tired running around that it was hard to

think beyond the day's story. Only ***Time*** really made an effort to do a country-wide analysis of Tet's impact. And after Tet the military in Saigon didn't know exactly what was going on for sure for a month or so, and everything got very difficult. In the more routine pre-Tet period, that is the 1965-67 period, three guys were probably enough, or four, for a newspaper, but you were still stretching it. During Tet and after Tet you needed to have more guys, and one of the problems was there weren't enough. For lack of evidence, we couldn't have seen Tet as a military defeat for Hanoi right away. I mean, nobody except Bunker was calling it that until Westy did later, in an AP interview about February 27; he said they had taken a beating, like the Germans in the 1944 Battle of the Ardennes.

So for the first month as a journalist you couldn't call it either way, but you *shouldn't* have called it either way. And what many journalists in effect were doing was calling it a disaster somehow for us. I mean that was the general tilt of the news coverage, through sins of omission and commission, and the TV was much worse. TV was always worse. The emotive demands of the medium and the commercial demands of holding an audience just worked against calm, dispassionate reporting. I shared a house in Saigon with Murray Fromson of CBS, a very able guy who'd been in ***Stars and Stripes*** in Korea, and a print guy originally. He was an old Asia hand. But his experience didn't matter a bit, all they wanted was good dramatic film and a good dramatic voice-over. He was even told he was not good on camera because his eye sockets were too deep and caused shadows. There were very few television guys who qualified, in my book, as serious journalists. There were a few, but damn few. It was show business. I got a bias

in Vietnam that has only grown deeper as I have watched TV news ever since. And they know it inside the business; it's Hollywood. Stars, big salaries, agents, new sets in the studio, that whole thing. Well, that was all starting back then and it's gotten worse since. And some of the TV alumni still regard themselves as the prime purveyors of truth about Vietnam.

G: Is there a prejudice among print journalists against TV reporters?

B: Oh, yes, to put it politely. I think I'm one of the more extreme cases. I don't think the other print chaps think about it that much. I think of that wonderful quote from Michael Arlen, the ***New Yorker*** TV critic. He said, "Propaganda is now the way television people have come to think of as the vocabulary for dealing with real events. What is important," Arlen said, "is not just what's happening, but how the audience can be brought to feel about it." Well, that's something else, that ain't serious journalism.

G: It's perhaps advocacy journalism. . . .

B: No. It's basically Hollywood. A Hollywood film tries to make people feel about the characters and the action a certain way. That's what drama is all about. It's aimed at the emotions. It's not an information service.

G: Was this the origin of the rather critical note that your book on the Tet coverage [***Big Story***] took?

B: Yes, I think at Tet basically television blew it far worse than the print people, although ***Newsweek*** I think was trying to keep up with television in terms of impact, so they kind of went overboard in March on the "Agony of Khe Sanh," and so on. ***Time*** magazine tended to deploy its greater resources better; they had a hawk [Otto Fuerbringer] as a

managing editor but lots of doves back home, and there was a big argument going on back home during the whole Tet thing between their Washington bureau and their home office and so on. And the boys in Saigon were essentially filing memoranda. That's the way it worked at ***Time*** and ***Newsweek***. They filed memos and then the memos were combined with memos and newspaper clippings from elsewhere to form the basis for a much briefer story. So there was constant challenging and back-and-forth, since ***Time*** had a Telex that linked the home office and Saigon. And it probably sharpened up ***Time*** coverage, smoothed out the extremes pretty well. I quote some of the memos that were sent from Saigon to the home office. One must never forget Washington was in turmoil, too.

But I have a theory on why the press kind of fell apart at Tet, which I'm going to put in the next [Yale University Press] version of my book in the introduction, which I didn't underline enough in the first [1977] edition. Essentially ***Big Story*** said, "This is what the news organizations did wrong. These were the knowable facts; this is what they did with the facts. This is what they should have known but didn't know; this is what we now know but could not have known then; this is what they didn't know but pretended they knew," et cetera. That's essentially what ***Big Story*** is. And then there's a chapter on public opinion and how that reacted. We don't know how it reacted to the press, but we know how it changed or did not change during this period.

I think I have now worked out an explanatory theory and it concerns Lyndon Baines Johnson. It starts out with 1965. In 1965 Lyndon Johnson in effect refused to agree to draw up a master plan for the war--political, economic, military. He backed into

the war, [first] a few marine and army battalions to guard air bases, and it's so characteristic of him. The marines go ashore to guard Danang air base. Other troops go ashore. Troops are ashore; there's still no master plan for winning the war. He kept hoping--I think, we don't know--that something would turn up, that Hanoi would get discouraged and back off. Then finally in June and July 1965, 175,000 men, a commitment. Still no master plan for the war, still no timetable.

(Interruption)

G: You were describing your theory about LBJ.

B: Yes, okay. The essence of it, as I gathered from the LBJ people and everything I read about LBJ, is that he never wanted to confront the full reality of what a war entailed. He wanted to keep control of as much as he could, you know, micro-managing the air strikes against the North and all that. He wanted to placate Congress and control public opinion, he always wanted to have a consensus, et cetera, and he didn't want to lose the Great Society. Guns and butter, and if you went too far with the war, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee Wilbur Mills might take the Great Society away, which Wilbur Mills in effect more or less told him.

So there's this kind of chronic ambiguity in Johnson's approach to the war, and no decisive strategy. After the troop buildup, Westmoreland privately proposes a decisive strategy in early 1967: Cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, hook through North Vietnam, get the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. No response from the Commander in Chief. Essentially Lyndon preferred to fight that war and talk about it as if Vietnam were an island. It was not an island. And I think that's where some of the public relations

contradictions started percolating down from the top. He felt he had to show progress. In 1967, before Tet, statistics were cranked up. And McNamara and LBJ kept [saying], "Things are better than they were. We're making progress, et cetera, et cetera." You say that to gain time instead of deciding how the hell you're going to win or at least end the war.

G: Some people say that [Clark] Clifford, when he became secretary, went around and asked the pertinent questions and couldn't get an answer.

B: Clifford turned from semi-hawk to dove. He said that in his 1969 ***Foreign Affairs*** piece; he's said it in interviews. If true, it's because I think he was not given the joint chiefs' plan. The plan to enlarge the war was taboo. You see that arise in the Pentagon Papers, you know. People were afraid when Westmoreland in mid-1967 asked for 200,000 more men, long before Tet. I was just reading it in the Pentagon Papers the other night; people were worried about what he wanted the men for. They were afraid he wanted to fight a real war. It would require mobilizing the reserves, political pain, the loss of the Great Society, money.

G: Yes. Westmoreland says in his memoirs that was the whole point of holding onto Khe Sanh, that Khe Sanh was the base to cross into Laos.

B: Of course, but he couldn't say that, or apparently didn't say that, to LBJ because LBJ would be horrified at the thought that they were going to crank up and go into Laos and block the Ho Chi Minh Trail. LBJ did not want to face the realities of the geography of Indochina. He wanted to compartmentalize the war: "Laos, you can do some bombing, but no horsing around--a little with Special Forces. Cambodia, no, I don't want to get

involved there; I'll have everybody in an uproar back here. Mine Haiphong? No, the Chinese will come in or the Soviets will get upset."

What this ambiguity did was make every incremental step--since LBJ had not declared a war emergency or mobilized the nation--make every incremental troop increase, every incremental addition to the list of bombing targets in North Vietnam, every marine incursion into the DMZ a major deal in the press. "I don't want to escalate," he kept saying, in effect, "I'm looking for peace. I'm not looking to win the war." So which way was he going? He was forced into a number of contradictions, and that's where the credibility gap came from, and where the bitterness of the military comes from. There's no credibility gap with Reagan and Reaganomics. He tells you exactly where he wants to go and you can take it or leave it, but there it is. He tells you exactly what he's doing in El Salvador, so far. Nobody's saying things are coming up roses. There it is. Johnson didn't do that. The Vietnam commitment had to look good; it always had to look good. And that set him up for the crisis at Tet.

G: To what extent do you think this is a reflection of his instinctive operating techniques?

B: Oh, I think it's all part of the old Senate style, but resentment built up in the press because our intellects aren't fantastic, but we've got a good sense of smell. And very often we'll smell something's false, or ambiguous, or contradictory, and we'll assign the wrong reasons to it. Johnson was repeatedly suspected of wanting to escalate more, where of course he really didn't; it was the last thing he sought. [He's] probably the most reluctant war president we've ever had. But he was constantly suspected of that because he was so ambiguous. He was talking peace and then there would be some more bombings, so they

figured, well, he really would like to do more, but if there weren't so many protests, he would do more. I think that mentality in particular gripped the press in Washington. Then, as I said, LBJ wanted to control the image of the war. It had to look good, and that percolated down through the military and they did their best to make it look good, even though privately they would tell you we've got a real problem here.

So there's this kind of contradiction between observable difficulties seen by newsmen and the official line, which existed under Lyndon Johnson from 1965 through early 1968, and then it ended. He took the pressure off the military. He never insisted on things looking so good again. It cleared the air, somewhat. But that's one reason why I think the press was in a sour mood when Tet came. Johnson didn't tell us this was coming. In his January 1968 State of the Union speech he talked about peace. But we now know that Johnson knew something was coming and still didn't tell the people. Wheeler and Westmoreland said publicly something big was coming, but it's not the President telling everybody what's coming.

G: That brings something up which has puzzled me. There is, of course, evidence that we knew something big was in the offing, although not very specifically what was in the offing.

B: Well, okay, there's an argument over that, too.

G: Did the press know that something big was coming? Did you know that something big was coming?

B: Not in the cities. We knew that Khe Sanh had already started on January 21, so everybody, including Westmoreland, was pointing north. That's where the troops were

being shifted to. LBJ had speeded up the troop reinforcement schedule from the U.S. and so on. So we were looking north at Khe Sanh and the DMZ; we were not looking for trouble around the cities, even though on the fifth of January JUSPAO issued the text, without comment, of a captured enemy document saying, "We're going to launch a new offensive and sweep into the lowlands and go into the cities." That's the famous document that no one paid any attention to.

G: I'd like to pause at that moment, because I've seen a lot of these documents and they all sound alike after a while.

B: That's why. That's why the newsmen didn't attach any special importance to it. It's one of the few captured documents JUSPAO did pass out. It's kind of ironic in retrospect that they did pass it out, and it didn't get much play in the papers.

G: Since you mentioned JUSPAO, that brings us to another question, and that is that JUSPAO has been described as the most gigantic PR juggernaut ever devised. And I'll tell you where that's from; it's from the ***Economist***, which is hardly a left-wing or antiwar journal. Does that strike you as an accurate description?

B: Perhaps, but I think Barry Zorthian, the head of it at that time, was an extremely useful character and extremely knowledgeable. He'd been in country since 1964, which was a long time by American standards. He was a former marine, he knew the way wars worked. He interested himself in the Vietnamese and so on. The juggernaut was there if you wanted it, and they had briefings every afternoon and the briefing officers usually didn't know very much because they were little bureaucrats, too. They couldn't get out in the country, and they delivered the communiques just as [Douglas] MacArthur's people

delivered communiques in Tokyo during the Korean War, and as Eisenhower's people issued communiques in World War II. So you had to have a communique, an official account of what happened on that day, to keep the wire services happy and the radio and the TV news happy. That's where most of the daily newspaper lead story came from. And the communique many days was like a police blotter, you know, incidents here and there: "We lost three. They lost four."

G: Didn't somebody say that one of the big newspapers had a police blotter mentality? Was that you?

B: Well, you had to have a police blotter mentality because that's the way the war was fought a lot of the time, a series of seemingly unrelated incidents. When I worked for the ***Washington Post*** we didn't even cover the briefing because we let the wire services do it.

G: You're talking about what they called the Five O'Clock Follies?

B: Five O'Clock Follies, right. And they'd have the main briefing, and then the South Vietnamese would have their briefing. It was very difficult for anybody to make much out of these incidents in the communiques, these anecdotes essentially. Neither side was gaining or losing terrain. There was no front line. The bombers would fly north, and we didn't know what the pattern of bombing meant. They didn't have much in the way of major targets up there. They'd go flying up, and unfortunately [they] didn't have smart bombs in those days so they lost a lot of people. The air war, remote from Saigon, was perhaps the most underreported and underanalyzed part of the conflict in terms of its contradictions.

But the Follies was a weak reed simply because of the fact that people assigned to

the Follies within the military and within the American civilian establishment were usually without prior field experience in Vietnam. I mean, we knew as much or more about what was going on in the boonies as they did, which wasn't always very much. All they could do was read these rehashed field reports and put it up there. And they would answer questions; they had a whole list of questions about nasty mishaps that had happened that they would comment on if you asked them, if you knew about them. They wouldn't volunteer them, most of the time. But this hodgepodge was the daily grist for the wire services, and hence for the evening radio and TV news shows. Most of us did not think of that as the place where the war should be covered. Most of the big organizations sent their own men out to the field, and the ***New York Times*** supplemented its use of the [Follies]. They wrote their own war story, war wrap-up, and that was always page one. But they usually put in some more time on it or added background or called sources and so on. But it was still an unsatisfactory mechanism for all concerned, partly because of the nature of the war. Then the weekly casualty reports would come out, and that would be a story. That was a kind of macabre scorekeeping.

G: Was JUSPAO of any use to you in other ways?

B: Oh, yes. Foreign journalists were amazed. We were very spoiled. JUSPAO booked us on the military planes, individual news organizations, either through JUSPAO or directly through the services. They arranged interviews and so on and so forth. I mean, there is no question that they were helpful. It was just that aside from Zorthian the individual folks in JUSPAO were just not very knowledgeable. They weren't a source of good background information, but they could set you up with people who were. They couldn't

censor anything.

G: How about Zorthian himself?

B: Oh, I think he was a very able guy.

G: Did you talk to him--?

B: A lot, yes. And he got a silver tray from the correspondents when he left in mid-1968. That's kind of unusual. There was a dinner held for him at Ambassador Bunker's house, and he was given a silver tray by the senior bureau chiefs in Saigon. No one else got a silver tray from the correspondents when they left Saigon.

G: Ward Just called him "the Heifetz of the handout" in a piece that he did one time.

B: Oh, yes, but Just was just having fun with Zorthian. Of course, Zorro played games, his games. But he always told you, "Don't take it here. Go out and see for yourself." He didn't volunteer disaster news, but on the other hand, he didn't try to oversell the American position. He did what official policy dictated. And again, he was hurt by the pressure from on high, from the Pentagon, from the White House, from Lyndon, who wanted good news.

G: Did a lot of people feel that Zorthian was between a rock and a hard place?

B: No, he handled it very well. We didn't feel that he was between a rock and a hard place, because he never complained. He was like Bunker, who was a loyal civil servant, and Bunker had deep differences with the White House on the strategy. He and Westmoreland both wanted a decisive strategy, and they argued for it. But like loyal civil servants, both Westmoreland and Bunker did not leak their discontent to the press. They upheld the policy.

G: How important were leaks?

B: It depends on how you define leaks. I mean--

G: Let me put it this way. The popular picture is a bunch of overoptimistic senior officials who were putting out optimistic reports, and a bunch of disgruntled second- and third-echelon bureaucrats who are leaking their discomfiture to the press and providing David Halberstam with all his stuff.

B: Halberstam didn't get it from the leak in 1962-1963. He was down in the Delta talking to U.S. Army advisers like John Vann, and they had their view of the war down there, and no one ever prevented reporters from talking to people in the field. I think there were a couple of cases where the brass--the military--got upset. They got upset with an anonymous major during Tet who said it became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it. He was talking about the provincial capital of Ben Tre down in the Delta, and apparently--so it was claimed--they sent down a helicopter load of' colonels to find out who said that. But [Peter] Arnett protected his source. I mean, there wasn't any problem with getting the truth, or a viewpoint, at battalion level, or in a district capital. Robert Komer, the pacification chief, encouraged you to go out there, and his people allowed me, at least, to look at the reports they were getting from the field before I went out to a given province. Especially after Tet, they were pretty candid. A lot of your success with sources depended on the relationship and the amount of homework you did. Major General John Tolson, the commander of the First Air Cav, was most accommodating to me and to ***Time's*** [H. D. S.] Greenway. At Camp Evans, north of Hué, in the middle of Tet we sat in on the morning briefing and so on and so forth. The understanding was that

we wouldn't write about it at a time of great difficulty for the division. Other division commanders, unlike Tolson, were variously self-promoters or simply hostile. But if you were a ***Post*** or ***Times*** or ***Time*** reporter, not a free-lance or a young TV guy, and spoke the language, you were usually well received. As an ex-marine, I always felt at home in I Corps. It varied a great deal.

But the point is there was no problem in finding out what in general was going on, if you had the time and the smarts and the willingness to do it. Not many important things about the U.S. ground war went totally uncovered. There have been few revelations since 1975 about U.S. ground actions--as opposed to strategic decisions and disagreements.

Now, episodes like the March 16, 1968 My Lai massacre, which occurred in the Americal Division sector in the middle of Tet, because they covered it up inside the division or even inside the battalion and the brigade, it would have been impossible for us to find out about unless we had been at My Lai. And in that case we took the Five O'Clock Follies version which was not a cover-up, that was simply what they got from division, and what division got from brigade, and what brigade may or may not have known, or wanted to know. I covered several of the ensuing courts-martial in 1970-1971 and I certainly wouldn't have let off any of those officers.

But anyway, the point is that there was no difficulty, no inherent difficulty, in finding out what the Americans were doing. The language, culture, and the Oriental aversion to discussing painful matters with strangers, let alone superiors, were terrific barriers in going out with the South Vietnamese. But once you got out there, you were a

brother. Halberstam, and Peter Arnett of the AP, and the wire service people did it quite a lot through early 1965. Then the Vietnamese were no longer the story and nobody went out very much with the South Vietnamese again, I think this is fair to say. There were some exceptions, but thereafter the press focus was on the Americans--our people. You'd do an occasional feature on a division that was so bad, you know, there was kind of some folklore about it. But few went out on battalion sweeps with the ARVN in 1966-1968. For one thing, they didn't want you out there, they didn't want foreigners around. And you'd have to go through the American advisory structure and that was a lot of trouble. There were some stories done about the South Vietnamese, but not many. Then Tet came along and it was a lot easier. You'd just go into the city, and there's the ARVN and there's an American adviser, and you'd just latch onto him. There was no red tape.

G: Was that a serious gap in our reporting?

B: I think so. In my book I kind of do a little quantitative analysis. The press made it seem as if the war were entirely American. But this is true of coverage of any of our wars. The coverage of the Korean War, where we had forces from eighteen other countries, it was pretty much an American presence and American war as depicted in the press. So it was in World War II. But in Vietnam it seemed to me we were particularly remiss. And it was only a handful of people, including my junior partner, Lee Lescaze, and Peter Kann of the ***Wall Street Journal***, who paid much attention to the Vietnamese, even in the pacification effort where you had a built-in dual chain of command down to every regional, district, provincial office. You had a little dual shadow government, and you could find hospitality and welcome anywhere you went. I did a number of stories on it.

G: How about [Don] Oberdorfer?

B: Oberdorfer, terrific reporter, and he did it. For the Knight newspapers, he was a visiting fly-in and fly-out guy. He'd come in for a month or two months. But he did better reporting in many of those visits than some of the people who were there all the time. Definitely one of the best. He and Charles Mohr and Peter Kann I would class as the three great newspaper reporters of the 1965-1968 period of the Vietnam War. Peter Arnett was working for a wire service so he's different. Simply because he covered more combat closer up and stayed longer than anyone else, he would be on the list of top ten print reporters. But those three guys were the best in their line of work.

G: Now, you've already touched on the fact that there was no detectable editorial bias.

B: No, and there really wasn't, not in 1965-1968 in the news columns.

G: In the ***Post***?

B: Not in the mainstream--not in the ***Post*** and not in the ***Times***. The biases were journalistic, and there's a big difference, and a lot of people haven't understood that. On ***Newsweek*** there was definitely an editorial bias back home. It changed from time to time.

G: That's detectable if you compare ***Newsweek*** and ***Time*** in any given week of the war, practically.

B: Right. Well, ***Newsweek*** kind of fudged it. They were in the middle of the road for a while and then they swung way over during Tet, mostly because they thought that's the way the news was going and they wanted to be ahead of the story.

G: Did you know Francois Sully?

B: Yes. He was a Frenchman, very French.

G: There's some controversy about him. I think he'd been expelled once.

B: Oh, he was expelled for getting in trouble--I believe with the [Ngo Dinh] Diem regime. He was a bit of a--I knew French journalists, that type of journalism, pretty well because I had been in Algeria with the French for three years and in Paris and so on. And essentially the reporter starts out with--it's very Cartesian, you see. He starts out with the notion that he has a hypothesis. Not "What's the lead?" it's "I have a hypothesis." And then he writes the story to fit the hypothesis. It's kind of a very esoteric brand of journalism; takes a lot of imagination and does not require much interviewing. On the other hand, the Agence France Presse people, starting with a fellow named Francois Pelou, P-E-L-O-U, and then Felix Bolo, were extremely good because they had extremely good sources. They had all the French priests, and the kind of stay-behinds in the French rubber plantations, and so on and so forth. They stayed three years in Vietnam. I would say they got a pretty good grip on Tet. Agence France Presse put out a book of Tet dispatches, and they got the hang of it pretty fast. They saw a setback for Hanoi. The AFP book just did the first fourteen or fifteen or sixteen days, I think, not the whole two-month period that I define as Tet, and Oberdorfer defined as Tet, through LBJ's March 31 speech.

So I would say the AFP did pretty well. They had a certain amount of discipline. But Sully was more like their newspaper people, who tended to write very imaginative, interpretive pieces. Sometimes they added up two plus two and got ninety-eight, just like American television. And that was kind of his style. But he was very brave and had very

good sources among the South Vietnamese. He was killed while on a helicopter with General [Do Cao] Tri, I believe, kind of the General [George] Patton of III Corps, in 1971 or 1970.

G: It was pretty late, I'm not sure.

B: So he paid a lot of attention to the South Vietnamese and he had written some nasty things about them. Everett Martin of ***Newsweek*** wrote a piece, "Their Lions, Our Rabbits," or whatever it was, about the South Vietnamese in late 1967. I cite that piece in my book. But Sully, he'd come up with some wild stories, there's no question about it, too. He had a lot of imagination. He was a very brave guy, and I think most of us respected him for that. Bravery does count for much in any war, and he was brave.

G: Was he a French Algerian?

B: I don't know where it all began. All I knew was he was a Frenchman and I think he'd been in the French army as a correspondent at the time of Dien Bien Phu. And during Tet he was interviewed on American television, describing his flight over Khe Sanh at the time of the siege and saying, "My God, it's Dien Bien Phu all over again!" as a kind of emotional reaction, which looked good on television but really, you know, there was a lot of difference between the two places. They looked alike but they weren't alike. Lyndon Johnson, so the story goes, thought they might be alike and was real worried about it. "I don't want any damn Dien Bien Phu," is what he was supposed to have said in late January, 1968.

But we could go down the list of all the correspondents. If you're going to do that kind of rundown, I think one of the people who had a lot of longevity out there--two

people you ought to talk to would be Charlie Mohr of the ***New York Times***, here in Washington, and Peter Arnett, who I believe is now in Atlanta for Cable News [Network]. When you talk to him use my name. He's a New Zealander, but he knows all the characters.

G: He married a Vietnamese girl.

B: Yes, he did. He was one of several newsmen who married Vietnamese girls. He had a lot of guts, Arnett did. I always told him that he had more guts than brains, but that's a lot of guts. He had some very, very good combat stories. Most of the sins of commission in the print media came when we, Arnett included, tried analysis, the big picture. Our knowledge as individuals was so patchy and we were so preoccupied during most of our time in Vietnam with events and individual stories, that we simply didn't have the time, the necessary knowledge, or even the intellectual habit, of taking a lot of material and analyzing it. We lived for the moment. You find few really good analysis pieces done in South Vietnam. My own few attempts were narrow or half-baked. You find some very good Washington analysis of administration policies and high-level dilemmas concerning Vietnam, written particularly in the ***New York Times*** by such as Hanson Baldwin, Max Frankel, Hedrick Smith. I have all the Pentagon clips for the whole war. I was just looking through some of it the other day, and it's amazing how little of importance was not touched upon, partly because there were so many leaks on Capitol Hill and in the Johnson Administration. It's amazing how few issues that we now consider important were not noted at some time or another by the press on the Washington end; the big arguments over troops, how many troops to send, the arguments over strategy--not in

depth or in full detail, but the ***Pentagon Papers*** mostly documented matters already published in the press.

The one odd thing is that the debate at home, as it shaped up in the press particularly in 1967, made it seem as if Lyndon Johnson and the administration were the hawks, versus the doves in Congress, [William] Fulbright, et cetera, et cetera; whereas what we now know far better than we knew then, or what we would emphasize far more now than was emphasized then, was that Johnson was balancing hawks and doves and that the hawks were largely silent because they got a very small hearing in the press, partly because their people on the Hill did not want to embarrass the President of the United States. [John] Stennis and [Richard] Russell and those people, if you consider Russell a hawk, which is debatable, but certainly Stennis and Strom Thurmond and those people, and old Mendel Rivers, they didn't talk very much about the war. They didn't say we ought to bomb whatever the air force wanted to bomb; they didn't often say we ought to cut the [Ho Chi Minh] Trail. There was no audible clamor from the hawk side. It was all being done through channels within the military, and they were being stymied at every turn by McNamara.

I've read that the joint chiefs hardly ever had a session with Lyndon, a real session--I think one in the course of the whole war, or certainly in the course of 1965, at the beginning of the war. They had one session, I think in April of 1965, with Lyndon Johnson. I'm told he didn't want to deal with them, because they would get into fights with each other. He did not want that face-to-face contact, the kind that Roosevelt and Truman had with the uniformed military. He met with "Bus" Wheeler and McNamara. If

true, I think that was another key indicator and a good reporter now should be thinking about the contact Reagan has with the uniformed military on El Salvador, or whatever else we've got on our plates--it's very important. As I read it, Lyndon cut them off; he didn't want to have to deal with them directly, he wanted to broker that one.

G: Through Wheeler.

B: Through Wheeler. And McNamara. And it seemed to me that was LBJ's way of avoiding making big decisions about a strategy to win the war, or get out of the war, either way. And that leads me, if I may digress a little bit, to Lyndon's conduct when the Tet offensive hit. Lyndon Johnson held a press conference two or three days after the attack on the Embassy; he waited two or three days. He did not go on national TV and say, "They are coming and I give you blood, sweat and tears, and we're going to go get them." Instead he had this quick press conference and kind of palmed off responsibility for describing the situation, "from what Westmoreland tells me, from what McNamara tells me," et cetera. He did not stand up and issue a call to arms of any kind, even though the polls--he didn't know this, but the polls showed people ready to go--briefly--and rallying behind him personally. [There were] two upward hawkish curves in the polls at that time, the first week in February. He did not hold another press conference, and I don't think it was televised either, until late February, maybe February 16, when he knocked down the notion that we were going to use nukes in Vietnam. I think that was right about that time; I'd have to check my dates. But the general point is this: From a press point of view, when there's a crisis overseas, or a crisis anywhere, the press is like the public, they expect the president to stand up and take charge. If the president does

not stand up and grab the stage, which Lyndon did not do until the thirty-first of March when he announced he was getting off the stage, there's a vacuum created.

Let's just talk about Washington after Tet. There's a big situation going on over there in Vietnam. It's dramatic. The question always is, what is the president going to do about it? Lyndon Johnson in effect did nothing about it for two months. Into the vacuum rush all his critics. The press doesn't have a frame of reference; they need an action-reaction story: "The President today did so-and-so." They need a sense of movement in the story. What was happening essentially was that Lyndon Johnson--and I would suspect it was psychological in cause--even though he'd been warned that something big and bad was coming, this came on top of the ***Pueblo*** crisis, and he was having other problems, economic problems. It was all too much for him. He was overwhelmed. He didn't want to make the choice between guns or butter.

The hawks and the doves were trying to exploit that. Wheeler [was] trying to exploit it to call up the reserves and build up the armed services to meet worldwide contingencies, going to Saigon with a number in his pocket before he got there, or a number that he knew Westy had already--the 200,000 more troops. It's the same old number that Westy had wanted the year before. This time, Wheeler comes back painting everything in the darkest hues, exploiting the crisis to get Lyndon to decide. Lyndon didn't want to decide. The doves are coming in and saying, "Negotiate, fall on your sword, do something. Woe is us. Look what we see on television." He had Democratic challengers--Eugene McCarthy, then Bobby [Kennedy], the whole thing was falling in on him, and I think it was largely self-created. I think he would have had a big problem in

any case, but what he did was leave the field to the other side, to his critics, because he did not respond as his supporters in Congress would have hoped he would have responded. He didn't give his own people courage and optimism and hope in the middle of a tough time, and by his inaction he gave hope and encouragement to all his political foes and critics. And they grabbed the media attention.

G: Now, in Saigon, and this is interesting, there are cables asking Bunker and Westmoreland to please get up in front of the press.

B: That's right. He was leaving the response to others. He sent McNamara and Rusk to do their number on "Meet the Press." *He* didn't go on "Meet the Press." *He* didn't go on national television. He sent those two people to go. They were handling the chores. Then they cabled poor old Bunker and Westmoreland to get up and do the job for the administration over there. Where was the President? It seems to me somebody has got to figure out either from the Tuesday lunches, which are still, as you know, under wraps, or from something, what was his state of mind. My suspicions are that his state of mind was not very good, because in effect he was not doing what a president is expected to do in a moment of crisis. And that leads to pandemonium in the press; the press doesn't have a frame of reference to tell its story, and I emphasize the word "story." Johnson's behavior leaves a vacuum which the press fills with all kinds of speculation, opposition analysis, and every other damn thing. He's not behaving in a way the media (or Congress) expect a leader to behave in crisis. So they turn elsewhere. Somebody else is going to tell the story if the President isn't. His critics get a field day. He didn't grab the high ground.

Contrast that with Nixon, who was not a popular fellow in the press corps. But he

acted after the 1972 Easter offensive in Vietnam, a big crisis. He sent the bombers into North Vietnam. People can understand that; the President's reacting. He sends more ships, more fighter planes into South Vietnam. He's reacting to the enemy thrust by pounding them. Even if you disagree with that, and [George] McGovern did, the vast majority of Americans would still as soon have the president whack away at the bad guys when they whack at us. And the press had a scenario. Nixon mined Haiphong. That was five weeks after the attacks. He gave that order, "Mine Haiphong." That was all understandable. It made sense, and it was decisive. It was also illusory, because Nixon was still talking about peace with honor and all that, and he gave this big speech about further troop reductions. But from a newspaper point of view in mid-1972 that didn't matter. What mattered was that the President had acted decisively, and it soon became clear that the other side wasn't going to just roll down to Saigon either. That helped. There was no political crisis in 1972 in Washington, and no media malfunction in Vietnam.

So that contrast between Nixon's behavior in the summer of 1972 and Johnson's behavior at Tet is striking to me, in retrospect. I didn't think about in 1972. But it seems to me that any historian has to investigate what happened to Johnson in February 1968. Were the chickens simply coming home to roost and he couldn't face that? To announce his own "resignation" on March 31 then seemed to me an extraordinarily selfish thing to do, or a self-centered thing to do--dictated by party politics. And to announce the bombing halt and your own resignation together psychologically just sounded like Hanoi had won, [and] "I've thrown in the towel." Seemed to me an extraordinarily unfortunate

thing for him to have done.

G: Where were you?

B: I was in Hong Kong that day. I had given my all for two months after Tet and things were kind of quieting down. I was going to Hong Kong to rest in the Mandarin Hotel in great luxury paid for by the ***Post***, because I knew the First Air Cav was going out to Khe Sanh; we'd gotten pretty good indications that they were. And I went up and got a little R&R and then went back down to Saigon. Meanwhile George Wilson, who had come in to spell us, actually went with the First Air Cav into Khe Sanh.

G: Were you with anybody when you saw that speech, or did you see the speech on TV?

B: No, we just heard it on the radio. I was with Stanley Karnow of the ***Post*** in his office when--we didn't hear the whole speech, just heard part of it, the resignation part and the bombing halt part. Then I rushed down and saw the various Vietnam watchers in the Hong Kong consulate, and wrote a cockamamie reaction story which the home office wanted and which I shouldn't have written. I don't remember what I wrote.

G: Everybody remembers where they were, I think, much like Pearl Harbor on that speech.

B: Well, you don't hear that kind of speech every day. I thought it was, in retrospect--well, my immediate reaction was "That's the ball game. That's the ball game."

G: You took it as an admission of failure and--?

B: Yes, even though he was trying to read the speech carefully, he was trying to keep his options open even then. I mean, there's no question about that. It was not a turnaround. I agree with John Henry who wrote that brilliant Harvard senior thesis--I think it was called "March, 1968"--in which he interviewed all the major players except the President.

And LBJ was trying to keep his options open as always; a little bombing halt, a few more troops. The resignation made it sound like it was a lot different than it was. Again, we do not know what North Vietnam was intending to do those same days. They had invited Walter Cronkite and they got Charles Collingwood and had other people there. As Oberdorfer has written in his ***Tet!***, they wanted to announce something. Maybe if LBJ had waited three days, things would have been very different. They would have said something.

G: A lot of people think they were about to because of the almost unseemly haste with which they replied.

B: That's right, that's right. They were briefly thrown into confusion by all this. Then they surprised us by agreeing to talk about peace talks. Smart. I think the LBJ speech was very unfortunate. There are all kinds of lessons to be learned out of that. But in retrospect it seems to me there was some kind of psychological--not collapse, but look at his face in the pictures of the time, and the way he was talking about Tet, as if he was arguing with himself in public when he gave these little sermons around the country in February and March 1968. My guess is that he was overwhelmed by the situation, just all these chickens coming home to roost; the decisions people were trying to make him make that he had avoided making in the interest of buying time, and now it seems that there was politics, the economy, and election year, and every other damn thing was ganging up on him and forcing him to make decisions that he didn't want to make, and in fact did not make. The only decision he really made was not to run again, and that's the only big firm thing he did in that March 31 speech. Everything else was ambiguous as always.

Clifford took it from there and nailed it down in September, as [Herbert] Schandler makes clear, but in retrospect it was a terrible, demoralizing exercise that Lyndon helped put the country through, I think. I'm not kindly disposed toward him for that performance.

G: How long did you stay in Hong Kong after that?

B: In Vietnam, you mean?

G: No, you said--

B: Oh, I was just up there four or five days, and my reaction was "Wow, that's the ball game. Somehow we're going to get out of there."

G: Was that reflected among your other colleagues in Saigon?

B: I don't think many of them thought about it that much. I didn't think about it much again. You know, what newspapermen do is, they wait for the next thing to happen. What's Hanoi going to say? And then they fuss about that. Back in Washington there was more long-term stuff written, but not much cold, clear analysis.

G: How did the American community of officials and soldiers react?

B: Well, it depends at what point you're talking. I mean, the word had come down that Lyndon was trying to make up his mind about something. Westmoreland didn't go out and chat about all this. I don't think there was a sudden--I never got the feeling--other people who were in the community, Komer and those people, obviously had some sense of it, but you've got to remember newsmen were preoccupied with the relief of Khe Sanh, that was our story. Not the retaking--God, my marine friends would kill me--the little excursion by the First Air Cav out to visit Khe Sanh, as opposed to the relief of Khe

Sanh, which the Marine Corps regards as improper language.

G: I have some Marine Corps friends who I've never let forget--

B: Right. Actually, though, it was largely a punch that landed on air, but I imagine the marines were glad to see them.

But no, again the thing is that newspapermen just don't think that far in advance. I mean, their professional preoccupation has to be with--there were a lot of thumb-sucking stories in Washington about a coalition government and they kept recycling that every once in a while. But the Saigon guys pretty much did it day by day. We hadn't divided up the war into Tet and post-Tet then--we just kept on going. Then the bad guys came down again in May, the second wave or mini-Tet came against Saigon. We were pretty preoccupied with that by the time the Paris truce talks started. Then we got into flurries over the bombing halt in October and November. We didn't know what was going on, and we were getting all kinds of leaks and the South Vietnamese were playing games with that, and [Nguyen Van] Thieu was seeing Bunker every day, but we didn't know what was going on. And the South Vietnamese leaked it all to both the ***Times*** and me; that was after it happened. And both papers at home were so preoccupied with what had happened that they didn't even want to know what the South Vietnamese version of the story was.

G: What do you know about the Madame [Anna] Chennault business?

B: No, never heard about that. You never heard about that. You have to remember that, again, for lack of manpower as much as anything else, and to some degree for lack of demand back home, nobody had a reporter whose job it was to kind of sit in, or try to sit

or monitor in some fashion, the crucial relationship between Saigon and Washington. We left that to the Washington people to the extent we thought about it at all. When they'd come whipping in from Washington, Wheeler or McNamara, we'd kind of follow them around, but we didn't know much about what they were really talking about since it was very closely held. And these guys back in Washington were getting more leaks on that than we ever would, simply because when the VIPs came over here they didn't talk to a lot of American officials. The principals would talk; there wasn't a big forty-five man meeting where you'd get leaks. It would just be a very small group.

So we were just cut out of that. We didn't try very hard. I don't even think if we had had a lot of manpower we could have done it, because Bunker was a very honorable man. I have great respect for him, and he never saw the press if he could avoid it. He kept out of the limelight. Westmoreland did not leak; he acted as--on too many occasions--kind of the de facto loyal spokesman for the administration, and he regrets that in his memoirs, and he's right. He's still paying the price for that, for saying one thing in public and another thing in private to the President. And to that extent he hurt the military, and I don't think the gains to the administration were all that terrific, particularly his April, 1967 appearance back here. November was less painful, but the April, 1967 one, Lyndon wanted him to do that. He should have said, "No, Mr. President, I can't do that, I shouldn't do that." But he didn't.

G: Of course, Johnson was a very difficult man to say that to.

B: Oh yes, and he took Westmoreland into the White House, you know, and was very careful to keep Westmoreland on a tight leash, yes, a tight leash, which he didn't do with

[Creighton] Abrams. He got Abrams to sign on, in effect, on the current policy, but did not ask him to serve as spokesman. I think Lyndon may have realized that he had exposed Westy to a lot of unnecessary flak.

G: Why did he relieve Westmoreland when he did, do you think?

B: I think he did it for two reasons. One is to appease the doves. At the same time he promoted Westy to chief of staff to keep the military happy. And there's a classic LBJ ploy. He then got Abrams to sign on for the new policy, "If you want to be COMUSMACV, you sign on; be a good boy and you'll be COMUSMACV."

G: A number of military men say that one of the reasons Abrams was so much better received by critical observers was that he reaped what Westmoreland had sowed, that the Vietnamization program--

B: All that, yes. There are two schools of thought, as you know, about Abrams. I liked him very much when I was there. He was terribly hard on people who worked for him, great temper tantrums and so on and so forth, which he did not exhibit to us. But on the other hand I have to hand it to him, he stuck it out for four years, almost five years, over there with Bunker. He made some big mistakes, possibly. The Lam Son 719 operation in 1971 into Laos, if that was his baby, that was a disaster. On the other hand, he certainly orchestrated the 1972 counterattacks against the Easter offensive in a fantastic way in using the B-52s, using air power as a tactical bludgeon--that was a very spectacular piece of work by Abrams and company.

But Abrams benefited in terms of press relations by low visibility. I don't think he appeared or held a press conference as such. Westmoreland was always holding them,

or often holding them. I don't think Abrams did that; maybe he did, but I don't remember him doing it in 1972 or in the rest of 1968 or early 1969. He would see individuals, saw me once a month. If you had done your homework and he trusted you not to blabber anything, he would talk fairly frankly to you, nuances here and there that you had to kind of chase down. But he was very careful about all that and stayed properly, I think, in the shadows. [He] did not get out front and become a salesman, because he didn't want to be. He saw what had happened to Westy [and] said, "I don't need that." And Westy was far too eager to go out and talk in public, boost the public line that he was fighting, or at least offering alternatives in private to the President. That's what got him in trouble in this Westmoreland CBS show, because they could show Westmoreland saying, "Everything is wonderful," and there's nothing in there that says Westmoreland was asking for 200,000 more men or telling the President, "We've got to change our game plan." So, anyway--

Tape 2 of 2

G: --get you to talk about your book just for a little bit. What kind of feedback did you get from your colleagues?

B: There are a number of people, including Robert Elegant who wrote a piece in the August 1981 ***Encounter*** magazine, who alleged that ***Big Story*** never got much attention in the press, that I got mauled and ignored, and that's not true. I was deliberately ignored only by a ***Time*** editor, a graduate of University of Pennsylvania, 1968--a little generation gap there. His editors kept asking whether he shouldn't review the book. He was doing the press section, and he "stalled them off," he later wrote.

G: You don't care to identify this--?

B: I can't remember his name.

G: Okay.

B: But anyway, he claimed that I'd been after him all the time. Well, I was not after him all of the time. I asked him if he wanted advance galleys of the book, and if he needed any more information I'd be glad to give it to him. That's all I did, one call.

So in the two major newspapers, the ***Times*** and the ***Post***, it got a fair shake, and then Peter Arnett of the AP reviewed it in the ***Columbia Journalism Review***, the chief trade publication for reporters; [he] gave it a long review and said, in essence, he agreed with my facts but not my conclusions. And they gave me space back in the following issue to write a whole page, in effect telling Arnett he hadn't read the book carefully enough. But Arnett had pointed out some inconsistencies which I corrected in later editions.

Then in the other journalism publication, ***More***, M-O-R-E, which went out of business in 1978, the review was in the last issue of that publication so I was unable to get printed a witty rebuttal. They assigned Noam Chomsky to review it, and he attacked it and said that in fact the ***Times*** and the ***Post*** and the media had unfailingly echoed the government line on Vietnam and they were like ***Pravda*** and ***Izvestia***, and that they failed and I failed to understand the revolutionary aspirations of the South Vietnamese people, et cetera. And he really gave it to me. He actually gave speeches on ***Big Story*** for months. My reaction was that if Noam Chomsky's against it, I'm going to have a lot of people automatically for it.

Other than that, it got reviewed in ***Commentary***, favorably reviewed. I think that reviewer, Paul Weaver, was the only one who read it thoroughly. It was a two-volume book. He disagreed with my general notion that ideological bias was not the problem; he didn't quite agree with that. Homer Bigart reviewed it benignly in the ***New Republic***. Well, I could go on. It was reviewed in all the scholarly journals one way or the other, up or down; it was reviewed by a number of columnists. William Buckley had me on "Firing Line" with it. I was invited to lecture on it at Harvard and lots of other places.

G: What about informal feedback? Do you get--?

B: Well, people who've read it kind of liked it, you know, people who've read it. Charlie Mohr liked it. Donald Oberdorfer, who wrote his own book on Tet [***Tet!***], disagreed with some of my notions, but by and large I would say that among the people who read it and who were there at Tet in Vietnam, I don't get much of an argument. I've never had much of a rebuttal even from TV people who were there.

G: That was my next question.

B: Yes. I mean, Ron Nessen of NBC and the Kalb brothers of CBS, they don't agree with everything I said, but they've always been very friendly. I've had no problems from that group, whereas some of the younger reporters who went over later, who apparently didn't read the book or didn't read it carefully, have kind of heard that it was antipress, or they translate that to mean it's proadministration, which it is not. And there are others who think that because the Johnson policy as they see it was wrong, the press was right. Well, that's not true either, even if you accept the first assumption, which for different reasons I accept. I don't think the Johnson policy was a good policy; I don't think anybody does

anymore. It's easier to say now than it was in 1967.

But on the whole I would say I've gotten rather a good reception, except from the far left--the far left sees the world very differently than does most of the rest of the country--and the far right. AIM, Accuracy in Media, which is Reed Irvine's Washington-based organization, embraced the book because it showed CBS to be doing bad things, and so on. But they rebuked me because I didn't attribute the problem to an ideological bias. My response was that if there was an ideological bias, how come it didn't show up in 1972, where even the head of Army Information, and the head of JUSPAO in fact--it wasn't called JUSPAO anymore, but whatever it was called--in Saigon told me he really didn't have too much of a complaint about the Easter offensive coverage.

G: With the knowledge that the administration was more bothered, I think, by CBS coverage than any of the other coverage they got--

B: Yes, that's because CBS is very aggressive and has a style which they think, or say, is the Edward R. Murrow style, of coming up with what they call a hard closer, a conclusion. This is acknowledged inside the organization. It's much truer of them than it is of the other two networks. They tell the viewer a, b, c; this is what you've seen on the screen, and then d; this is what it means, whether the correspondent knows what it means or not.

G: Maybe the most famous example in this context is Cronkite's trip out there, do you think?

B: Actually I go a little easy on Cronkite in the book, because he did some radio talks comparing, in a very muddled way, the battle of Hué City to World War II, Bastogne in reverse or whatever he was saying. And he said the city was devastated, totally devastated, Stalingrad. I don't think he used those terms, but I mean he made it sound

like the whole city was flat and all is ruin and wrack and ruin. He kind of wavered as he went through his visit. He was kind of moderate in the first couple of days when he talked to the MACV people and so on. And then he got out to Hué, and then he visited General Abrams, and it seemed to me that Walter Cronkite, who is an extremely nice man personally to everybody, never quite understood what was going on out there. He came back and they had a special show, the famous special show at the end of February, twenty-seventh of February perhaps--

G: I think that's right.

8: --in which he concluded that the only honorable way out for us was to negotiate. Actually, if you make the argument Westmoreland was making or did make, now was the time to put the squeeze on Hanoi. In any case, it wouldn't be a very good idea to say that now is the time to negotiate, if you're going to plan to negotiate. But in any case Walter went through this exercise and I'm sure would now say, "Yes, I was farseeing," and so on and so forth. But in effect he said Tet was a disaster, we've got no place to go. Supposedly this had an enormous impact on Lyndon Johnson. I mean, that's the myth or the cliche; it may not be a myth, but it's certainly a cliche within CBS, and to some extent fostered by people on the White House staff who said, "My God, if Cronkite's turned against us, now what?" I think if that in fact occurred, which I doubt, Lyndon Johnson was again being excessively sensitive to what he saw on TV and imagining that it had an impact which no one has ever been able to prove. Public support for the war did not suddenly take a nose dive after Tet. What was taking a nose dive was the rating of Lyndon Johnson as president and/or war leader.

G: Is there a poll that you know of taken right after Cronkite's famous special?

B: I would have to refresh my memory, but in the hardcover version of my book there is a chapter by [Burns W.] Roper which goes through the chronology. There's another source on all this stuff: Lawrence Lichty, L-I-C-H-T-Y, who was at the University of Maryland Journalism School or Communications School, who was a Wilson fellow doing a history of the television coverage of the war--he is a friend of the fellow [David Culbert], who is also a fellow here, who did the chapter in ***Exploring the Johnson Years*** on Lyndon and the media; both [are] fellows here at the Woodrow Wilson Center. He [Lichty] has done all the synchronization of polls and various TV shows. In general, he says, there is no correlation, no established correlation, between what appeared on television and mass public opinion. What we all have seen enough documentary anecdotal evidence of is, there's considerable effect of repeated television images on political Washington, at least political Washington and certain other what they call "attentive elites" around the country; you know, people who were already very excited about the war one way or the other were paying a lot of attention during Tet, and reflecting the news message in their statements about Tet. That's where you got the impression that there was a kind of tidal wave sweeping the country, but it was really up at the top. There was a gap between the top and the mass. The polls show that it was only after the President kind of certified the dove position for negotiations, or apparently did, that you got another decline in support for the war. That is, was the war a mistake? Well, the President in effect said it was, in his March 31 speech. So he certified, legitimized part of the dove position.

G: Do you think that official Washington attached so much weight to the TV reporting

because of the reporting, or because what they thought the impact of the reporting would be?

B: That's what it was. Everybody thinks TV has enormous impact, even though no one has ever proved that it has any impact. Now, it would be interesting for whoever studies this subject, besides Lawrence Lichty, to look at the TV audience for evening news. He did a study for us, the ***Wilson Quarterly***, in which we cite, in the winter 1981 issue, Arbitron ratings and Nielsen ratings and all these statistics that the marketers use. And the bottom line there is, in 1980 half of the TV households in this country did not watch the evening news shows on any major network at all in the course of a given month. Of the remainder, only 6 per cent watched any of the evening news shows as often as four nights a week.

G: Which is 3 per cent of the total--

B: That is correct. That's an incredible statistic, but Lichty says it's well known. People watch TV news because they happen to be watching TV.

G: You mean you need a lead-in to a news show, like anything else.

B: That affects the audience enormously. And in the summertime it drops off as much as 25 per cent, the gross audience, no matter what's going on. But everybody is hypnotized by television news, every politician and so on and so forth. And I think that's why it's a kind of myth--or at least an unprovable assumption--that everybody's living with. They assume that people come to the news with the same kind of receptivity that they come to the commercials. What they forget is that people who put commercials on, put the commercials on over and over and over and over again. That's how they sell goods. But

the message on television news is very fragmented; it's mixed up with other things. It's one and a half minutes, two minutes. The President gives a speech and there's a fragment of it on; if it's not broadcast, it's a minute and a half. Everything is a jumble. People can't remember what they saw on television news ten minutes after it's over, unless they happen to be part of the attentive elite caring about that one subject that comes up; they remember that. That's all we know.

But that whole area I think is fascinating, because it would appear that Lyndon Johnson did and said, and did not say and did not appear on television, because he was afraid of what he would look like, or he didn't do it well, or he was afraid of what they would say. He was very nervous about the whole thing and maybe he need not have been; he need not have been so worried about television or the media. The print media are more serious. There, if everybody is sounding the same note every day, then there's something you are doing wrong. Johnson's basic mistake with the media was that on a whole multitude of things they never knew what he really meant or where he was really going. On the credibility gap, you remember he switched on and off on the budget, the great numbers game, early on. I think it was the 1965 budget or the 1966 budget. He said, "I'm going to keep it below a hundred billion," and there was all this flimflam. He felt compelled to do these things. Well, you do that long enough and no one quite takes anything you do at its face value, even when you have no mixed motives or you're not flimflamming. And that was Johnson's big problem very early in the game. Everybody admired his power. I remember how everybody was impressed by this elemental force. I was when I covered him as vice president. But people began to not trust him. If he said

he was going one way, they figured he was going to go the other.

G: Would you say he was too good a poker player, then?

B: Well, you can't play poker with the American people or the press. Nixon had lots of problems with the press, to put it politely, but in 1972 on the Easter offensive he did not because it was all coherent and consistent. The other thing in 1968 was that Johnson had advance warning of the Tet attack, some form of major enemy effort or radical change in enemy strategy, that's pretty clear from the record. He did not get up and warn people about it, and he did not get McNamara to warn people about it.

In other words, there was no telling them that bad news was coming. It would have been nice if Johnson had gotten in the State of the Union Message saying, "There are dark days ahead," instead of talking about seeking peace. It would have been very smart at least to have done what Nixon did in 1972 and [Melvin] Laird did, [which] was to kind of spread the word, "We think there's going to come a big one, and they're massing." There were a lot of little leaky stories in 1972, and I was given alert orders at least a couple of weeks before the 1972 offensive. I didn't get there until after it started, but that's one thing newspapermen hate, is surprise. Everybody hates surprise. If you know something's coming, you kind of tell them that something bad is coming. You don't have to lay out exactly what you know. General Wheeler gave this now-famous speech in Detroit before the Economic Club, saying, "The Battle of the Bulge offensive is coming, maybe." Why didn't the President of the United States get up and say, "We may be getting a Battle of the Bulge offensive. We're getting ready for it; I'm sending more troops over there." The problem was he couldn't face that because that would force

him--that's my theory--he would have to make big decisions about that. If they're coming with a Battle of the Bulge offensive, Mr. President, what are you going to do about the war? And he gets back into the old box again. That's why I think he didn't say anything about it, subconsciously or otherwise.

G: And of course they had just finished a big progress offensive.

B: Of course. The press could say, "You were telling us everything's marvelous, and now you turn around and say, 'Well, we've been doing so well, the enemy is being pushed into making a last-gasp offensive. [He's] going to throw everything he can throw against us, because he can't take it the way things are going.'" He wouldn't have to say all that, but he could certainly say, "These guys are trying the Battle of the Bulge offensive," [as] General Wheeler said. "They're not at the end of their rope," he should say that.

G: Yes.

B: He could have laid it out more honestly. I mean he had enough time, but he didn't do it. As [Walt] Rostow says, it was one of the great mistakes of his career, probably [one of the] great mistakes in the country's history.

G: He told the Australian cabinet in December of 1967.

B: That's right, December 21. I've just been reading about all that.

0: That brings us into the final question, and that concerns the Mike Wallace special, with General Westmoreland and a number of his military intelligence people.

B: Right. That show appeared on the twenty-third of January, 1982.

G: Saturday night.

B: Saturday night, ninety minutes, "The Vietnam Deception: The Uncounted Enemy." It

was preceded by full-page ads in the ***Times*** and the ***Washington Post***, and a smaller ad in the ***Boston Globe*** the previous Friday, the previous day, with a big headline saying "Conspiracy." And what happened with that show was that it was essentially the recycling and slight enrichment of a 1975 minicontroversy on Capitol Hill over the question of our intelligence prior to Tet from Vietnam. There was testimony before Otis Pike's special committee on intelligence, it was at the time of all the uproar over CIA and intelligence failures and so on; it was part of that season's melodrama. But it kind of collapsed.

Now the prime instigator in that was a fellow named Sam Adams, who is now a gentleman farmer near Leesburg, Virginia, a Harvard graduate. He had joined the CIA in 1966, and had what CBS called a magnificent obsession with numbers. He sat in his office and went through captured documents, which was a game a lot of people played. Then [he] drew from them, or extrapolated from them, numbers that were very different from those [existing], particularly of enemy nonregular troops, irregulars, part-time guerrillas, village militia and the like. He argued that Westmoreland and MACV were systematically cutting down or arbitrarily putting a ceiling on the intelligence estimates of total enemy strength. Westmoreland's argument was, "These do not belong on the order of battle list because they have no offensive capability, even though they do cause American casualties when they put mines and booby traps and maybe occasionally snipe."

So there was a big bureaucratic argument over the bookkeeping. And it's fairly clear that before he left on 1 June 1967 that Major General McChristian, Joseph

McChristian I believe, his J-2, said as a result of Operations Junction City and Cedar Falls, we're picking up a lot of documents which do indicate that there are more of these people out there, these part-timers and irregulars and everybody, than we had thought. And then Westy said, "Well, I'm not just going to throw all of them on [the order of battle], two hundred thousand more of those people on, because people back in Washington will never get it straight. And since the numbers are generally made public every week by MACV, everybody will make a big hue and cry on this." And I suspect that what Westmoreland also meant was that he would get all kinds of requests for more information, et cetera, et cetera, and arguments from the systems analysts at the Pentagon who loved all these numbers. Any look at the Pentagon Papers shows how much McNamara's men loved numbers, quantification of the war of attrition. Their excuse was since you're not taking ground, you've got to keep track of how you're doing. Let's count up battalion-days in the field and American casualties per battalion-day in the field, and so on. It's incredible.

It's another indication to me that again the White House--and I don't know whose fault this was--was eager to have--or at least while they may not have believed the numbers, they liked to have a lot of numbers around. One of the things historians have to discover is how really interested Lyndon was in numbers. There's not much indication in his speeches about Vietnam that he used them very much to cite progress or for whatever reason. Walt Rostow has been on the record--we talked about this--[he] says, of course the President was not all that interested in high or low estimates of the enemy. He was too sophisticated about the numbers; he was fully aware of the ensuing controversy over

bookkeeping between CIA and MACV, so there was no conspiracy, as alleged by CBS, to keep bad news from the President. But that's the central thrust of that show, that he was kept in the dark and hence we all were, and Westmoreland was either condoning it, or behind it, or whatever, and was keeping the President in the dark on how big the enemy really was. Essentially what CBS did was add up two plus two and get ninety-eight. It's kind of a French-style documentary. I thought it was way off the mark, and it cast Lyndon Johnson in the unaccustomed role as victim, rather than in part perpetrator since he got Westmoreland to come out in public, and pressured Bunker and everybody else to come out in public during the progress offensive of late 1967. And they used all these slippery statistics, inherently slippery statistics, to show that things were getting better and better. And that was, as I understand it, Johnson's idea.

G: I thought it was also interesting that the CIA for the first time in a long time came out as the good guys.

B: Well, they liked to think that in Vietnam they were the good guys. George Carver is fairly proud of the CIA record, and I don't think--I don't know enough about it, I mean I haven't seen enough of the internal documents--but I do not think, and nobody I have read thinks, that Lyndon Johnson was badly informed. What all these people who accepted the thesis of the CBS show, including the ***New York Times*** editorial page--

G: And William Buckley.

B: And William Buckley. [What they] forget--they don't know their Lyndon Johnson. Lyndon Johnson was probably the best informed president, through his own efforts, of any president. I mean, you have to say that for Lyndon, he was always looking for where

the trouble was so he could control it, if he could possibly control it. We've all heard how he took great piles of reports and stuff into bed with him at night. I don't think anybody would accuse Lyndon of being ill informed. Rostow, whose word I trust on this and a lot of other things, a much abused man, says he was well informed, says he was aware of this. And Rostow would know and remember.

So I think the show was essentially aimed at making Westmoreland--I think that maybe as they got into it they saw that they had a little fresh dissension in the--they recycled an old story, which is a favorite CBS approach, and in order to make it come out as a show, it had to be a scandal, and in order to have a scandal, they had to take a bureaucratic argument which was quite passionate and make it look as if somebody big were behind it. And make it important to the President, otherwise there's no show. The real show that could have been done was the story of the progress offensive and what fallout that had. I mean, that's the lesson of that thing, and it's not a conspiracy against the President of the United States.

G: To what do you attribute the thrust of the CBS show as it came out?

B: Well, you remember who's involved and how CBS is set up. This is not "CBS Evening News," this is "CBS Reports," which is a separate organizational entity. There's Mike Wallace, who jumps around from show to show. I mean, he didn't do any legwork on this; he kind of just shows up for the interviews. He's an actor, not a fact-finder anymore. George Crile, the producer, used to be one of Drew Pearson's legmen, that's how he got started. He graduated in 1968, Trinity College.

G: I wish I could get that smile on tape.

B: Well, I think that class has a certain amount of scar tissue on it, and I probably would have had some myself had I been '68. In any case, they were in college during, not the worst necessarily, but a lot of the Vietnam uproar. And I appeared with George Crile on a panel down at a Marine Corps school at the Amphibious Warfare Center in Quantico, Virginia, which is a school for young captains, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, post-Vietnam. George Crile was there. He's a very bright fellow and we had a very amiable discussion. I said, "You found an interesting footnote," which was this dissension inside MACV over intelligence. "It's an interesting footnote to the progress campaign, because if what these intelligence officers were saying was, somebody, not necessarily Westmoreland, but somebody was reacting in part to the progress campaign." At least part of the argument was political, it had political overtones, no question about it. A lot of things in MACV were very heavily flavored by what the political repercussions would be, partly because there was so much obvious heat coming down the chain of command, from the White House on, making things look good. So undoubtedly that bred a lot of cynicism and resentment within MACV, just as it did when they had the body counts out in the field, which McNamara liked so much. I mean, who was more cynical about body counts than the poor buggers who were supposed to submit them?

So again I would have to say that Lyndon Johnson, by his emphasis on short-term political gain, did the military a lot of harm internally. I don't think he meant to, but inadvertently he created a very intellectually corrupt situation within the military and to some degree within the State Department. And I think that's where a lot of these leaks started to come; people just couldn't live with this pressure for good news that was

coming down from the White House, knowing at the same time we had a policy that was leading nowhere. That's very hard for troops or civil servants to live with, day in and day out. And there's an obvious lesson for presidents in that.

G: There's a book by--he was a lieutenant colonel at the time--on the strategy, or lack of it, in Vietnam.

B: [Harry] Summers?

G: I think so. He's a--

B: Army War College?

G: He taught military history at West Point, I believe, or history at West Point.

B: That's the famous David [Palmer]--the trumpet book ***[Summons of the Trumpet]***?

G: Oh, you're thinking about the--yes, I know the book you're [referring to]. No.

B: Presidio Press book?

G: The quote I'm thinking of is that he said, "The point is that when you have a strategy of attrition, you're admitting you don't really have a strategy."

B: Was this the one? Is this Summer's recent book?

G: It could be. He's very critical of the whole thing, saying a strategy of attrition--

B: Palmer.

G: Palmer is right.

B: Was he the one who said it was the worst thing since Pearl Harbor, Tet? That I would really argue with.

G: That I don't remember.

B: David Palmer. ***Summons of the Trumpet***.

G: ***Summons of the Trumpet***.

B: Yes, he expresses the view of every lieutenant colonel I've ever talked to. You know, there's an anecdote--

G: I might interject it's very serious when all the lieutenant colonels feel that way.

B: Oh, yes. Yes, yes.

G: They're the guys who are supposed to make things work.

B: That's right. They were very bitter at Army War College afterwards. There's an anecdote that somebody's going to have to check out the timing and so on. General Westmoreland went to speak at the Army War College in either 1974 or maybe later, 1976, somewhere, 1976-77, because it was the year before I went up there on my first trip. He was addressing a group of lieutenant colonels and colonels, I guess, and he discussed his differences with the administration, and why we didn't have a strategy, and going into this whole question. Westy is in that main auditorium, the student body in front of him. The man who introduced him then took over and said, "Are there any questions for General Westmoreland?" A hand went up in the back and he said, "Yes, General, I was a company commander in Vietnam. I've just one question. After all you've told us, my one question is why didn't you resign?" Which immediately brought to mind Westmoreland's own anecdote with Lyndon Johnson, I believe at the Guam conference or one of the early conferences, where Lyndon Johnson says to Westmoreland, "You're not going to pull a General MacArthur on me, are you?" It hadn't occurred to Westy to think in those terms.

G: I hope that class was large enough to preserve anonymity for the--

B: Apparently, yes. It took Westy twenty minutes to talk about that. And I've asked that

question to many--because the question's been raised by so many of these guys. And the one person who needs to be drawn out on his whole behavior--and I'm told he has regrets that he didn't kind of resign, or certainly put it to the President--was General Harold K. Johnson, chief of staff of the army in 1965, and we've not heard very much from General Johnson. He needs to be interrogated--

G: He's on my list.

B: --closely. His papers are at the Army War College. I saw them in their list and I wanted to look at them, but I didn't have time when I was up there. But he is the most intriguing unheard-from character in that whole early group.

G: You get the impression that he may have been just sort of cut out.

B: Well, Wheeler and McNamara tried to cut out all the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but that doesn't mean Johnson or any one of the chiefs couldn't have said, "Well, I'm cut out, but I know what's going on. I'd like an audience with the President." That would have taken a lot of guts, [and] in personal terms it might have given him some heat. He might have had to take some heat for a while, because the President would not have been very happy with this. And the President might have said, "Well, just wait a month and we'll get things sorted out." It seems to me there could have come a time, particularly sometime before March 8, 1965 if possible, when the marines landed, for one of the Joint Chiefs, and best of all Harold K. Johnson to say, "We've got no plans for this war, and I do not want to send ashore a lot of eighteen-, nineteen-, twenty-, twenty-one-year-olds, who are going to get killed, without a plan to win the war." Certainly there'd been enough contingency plans floating around on what the Joint Chiefs wanted. They told Hanson

Baldwin in February, 1965 before the marines went ashore--Hanson Baldwin wrote in the ***New York Times Magazine*** a whole scenario which was essentially, or at least in large measure, the Joint Chiefs' scenario of what would be required to win a war in Indochina: Upwards of a million men all over Indochina, and a willingness to hit the North and invade the North and do all those things that the Joint Chiefs recommended for a number of years.

But it's also been pointed out by some people in the know that Wheeler never presented a coherent plan to the President that early. That's an unresolved question. In other words, was there a coherent--the Pentagon Papers don't make it clear--plan submitted to the President that said, to win, this is what we ought to do and this is how long it will take, and this is what it will cost in terms of men, and this is what we think it will need in terms of national mobilization, et cetera? It never got to that, because there was always the buffer and the President for his part never asked for such a plan directly. So I've heard.

Now, that's a big question in the historiography of this presidency, and I think an essential one, and we don't have much information on it. We have very little with Lyndon Johnson's fingerprints on it. The Tuesday lunches looks like one of those things, if there's a transcription, as Tom Johnson says there is, that he prepared. Until that is released, we don't have very much to work with as far as Lyndon Johnson's direct, coherent decisions or nondecisions. And also we do not have much on what was directly conveyed to Lyndon Johnson or his reactions to what was conveyed to him. It seems to me that's critical. Again, all this ambiguity and failure, on his part, to make hard

decisions on Vietnam, trying to keep the pain down, just kind of keep going along hoping something would turn up; no illusions, apparently, about how easy it would be, but at the same time no willingness to confront the long-term reality, playing it day by day, short-term political gain.

That, way down deep, is what made the press go bananas when something went wrong in Vietnam. And there's almost an expectation or a rebuke, particularly among the military, but not just the military, that the press somehow should be steadier, objective, and responsible, when the press is essentially a dependent institution. It has its biases; selling papers, telling stories, "Man Bites Dog," that kind of thing. But the president sets the agenda, and if the agenda he sets is confused, they smell it pretty soon and they usually get wrong exactly what the smell means, but they smell it. And that smell pervades the coverage throughout the Johnson Administration's ordeal with the Vietnam War. And that's where you get the crossover between the President's behavior and the press' behavior. As Sam Lubell once told me, if you have an incoherent policy, you get an incoherent press. And we had an incoherent policy. And it affected other institutions; the military, the draft, all those things.

We didn't have an incoherent policy in Korea: We didn't declare war but [we] mobilized the reserves, had some price controls, bingo, bingo. America was drawing a line, at the very least. So my generation didn't have any problems going to Korea, in terms of coherence. Now, people got tired of the war real fast, faster than they got tired of the Vietnam War. Eisenhower got elected in part to end the Korean War. But there was at least a concept coming out of the President's office most of the time. When the

Chinese came in, there was a big flap, but it kind of steadied down. There was a kind of coherence to the policy, the containment policy, the limited-war policy.

G: If the press had so much difficulty--and the public--interpreting what was going on and what should be done about it, what should policy be, what do you make of all of the talk about sending signals to Hanoi that the administration--?

B: That all stemmed from esoteric game theory done by people like [Thomas] Schelling up at Harvard. I remember that from the 1950s. Any president must know that you don't throw your cards away; you deal from strength. You have to play for keeps. Maybe he didn't know that about war, maybe his own war experience was too peripheral to know how serious war is, that you can't play war the way you play politics.

That's another question for historians: We don't know what LBJ's attitude toward war was, his image of it. Somehow Roosevelt knew what war was all about: you had to make decisions. He was much better actually than Churchill in terms of decisions. Churchill was always monkeying around with divisions and corps and second-guessing his generals on how to fight. Roosevelt didn't do that. He made big decisions. He had all the uniformed military chiefs in and talked about them. George Catlett Marshall, no small asset. Got it done. [William] Leahy, no small asset. Johnson didn't do that; he was brokering the war the way he brokered everything else. Wheeler and [Dean] Rusk and McNamara, those were the guys, and he didn't want to talk to all these uniformed men over there. And McNarnara was getting influenced by all his whiz kids, who had no understanding of war. There were a lot of people without any understanding of war. Rusk had some understanding of war. He was so influenced by Korea, when he had been

assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs; he thought you could kind of do this like Korea, only he forgot there wasn't water on three sides of Vietnam.

There was no unified military command in Southeast Asia--what a peculiar command structure; again, I suspect, to avoid a MacArthur. You had CINCPAC and you had Thailand and you had Laos, with an ambassador who was also, in effect, an air marshal, and you had another headquarters in the Philippines, Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force or whatever it was. And [there was the] Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force, Thailand. They had a Seventh Air Force in Saigon. I mean, how do you operate that way? You're doing that for a reason; you keep control and they can't gang up on you. That's not the way you do a war. LBJ was dividing and conquering his own military establishment, it seems to me, because he was nervous about control. This was not a war lover; he was probably the most reluctant war president we've ever had. And at the time he was pictured by protesters as--"How many babies have you killed today?" I mean, all those contradictions well up all the time because he did not grasp the nettle, in my view. Historians will probably get a much more sophisticated picture of this, but I think there are some very big questions they have to ask.

G: Should he have wrapped himself in the flag then and--?

B: Well, he had to make a decision. Why did he go into Vietnam? One theory is he went in because the Kennedys had established our presence there, and he wasn't going to be the guy who got accused of losing Vietnam. Who'd lost China? Everybody had all these phobias, and I'm sure he thought about Munich. At the same time he was unable to act against North Vietnam because he kept thinking of Korea. "If I go in there then it will be

like Korea and the Chinese will come in and I'll have a little disaster." I mean he had all these phobias. Yet the CIA was telling him that the Chinese were too screwed up by the Cultural Revolution, at least in 1966, so that you don't need to worry about China. China's not going to do anything unless you push them to it, right? You know, you'd have to take Hanoi and go right up to the border with China. . . . The Chinese were certainly not the most generous allies the North Vietnamese ever had, even during the war. And the Russians, what could the Russians do all the way over there?

It seems to me that Johnson was ruled by too many fears. He first did things in Vietnam because he was afraid of not doing them. He went into Vietnam because he was afraid that otherwise people would think that he was going to let down the Free World. But that isn't the way you go to war. You go in and you say this is going to cost this much, require this effort, and present these risks. Then you say, is it worth it and can I get the political support for it and what am I going to have to pay for it? I don't think he ever had any illusions that he was not going to have to pay a lot. But I think he avoided long-term decisions, as you do in domestic politics. He was at first afraid of rousing the right, and then afraid of the left. He kept trying to please both sides and went bankrupt.

I don't know, I get the feeling that the man was pretty courageous on things he knew a lot about. There's no question on civil rights; he took advantage of the opportunity that came along, and pushed it through. But he was sure afraid of [affairs] beyond the three-mile limit. I think maybe [he was] uneasy about this foreign stuff. He couldn't control it, he couldn't get a grip on it.

G: Let me cut us off here.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I

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