

INTERVIEW III

DATE: September 27, 1984
INTERVIEWEE: FREDERICK W. FLOTT
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: The Cosmos Club, Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Mr. Flott, what was the nature of your responsibility for the Free World Assistance side of our operation?

F: This was a program that went into very high gear in about May or June of 1964, and it was a program in which President Johnson himself was personally very interested. We literally got three telegrams a day from the White House giving his latest advice on areas in which he could bring support to bear to help our efforts. The program was originally called Third Country Aid, and it was basically aid from other countries, other than the United States, to help the government of Vietnam. It was very open-ended. The more aid we could get the more we liked it. I changed the name of the program from Third Country Aid to Free World Assistance because of the obvious favorable political connotation. The U.S. government welcomed it and the Johnson Administration welcomed it, because it was a way to show that what we were trying to do in Vietnam was not just an American idea, or an American problem, but also it was a concern of the whole free world, and that in some measure--and taking into account their different resources or levels of involvement--just about all of the free world countries were trying to do something to help Vietnam.

Flott -- III -- 2

My job on the Saigon end of it was what we call generating requests for aid--to get the government of Vietnam, which was spread very thin, to request aid from countries that we were in a position to know would be willing to help them if they received requests for aid. Then we would make representations to these friendly governments that had embassies in Saigon or if not Saigon, at least in Bangkok, telling them that the U.S. government very much hoped they would see fit to do something to help Vietnam. I made a few trips not only to Bangkok to see embassies for countries that didn't have embassies in Saigon, but also went out to Iran and Paris, Israel, trying to get aid for Vietnam.

And as I say, President Johnson was personally very much interested in the program, and if he had a visiting head of state from a potential donor country coming in to see him in the Oval Office, he'd ask us, "Just what should I ask this fellow for?" He was trying very hard to help.

G: You mentioned Israel. Were there any special problems associated with getting Israel to contribute something to the effort?

F: Yes, with every country there was a special problem of one sort or another; either the political forces at home didn't like it or something. In the case of Israel, the biggest problem was that the government of Israel did not want to be seen as doing something that would antagonize the Russians unnecessarily and therefore compromise even further the position of Soviet Jewry. The main concern of the government of Israel, of course, was to get their people out of the Soviet Union.

G: Right. So did they eventually give some aid to South Vietnam?

F: Almost nothing. Rather than adopt a posture of totally saying no, they offered at one point--just to show how far this was from being useful or

Flott -- III -- 3

supportive--to teach agricultural subjects that the Israelis of course are first-rate in, very knowledgeable on. They offered to teach desert or dry soil agriculture to trainees who would have to take their training in Israel. Of course, that posed problems of how do you get draft-age young men out of Vietnam to go to Israel anyway, especially if it's to learn something that's not really relevant to most of Vietnam. But even that limited offer we were willing to talk about at least, hoping we could get more from them. And they took the position that with two or three million Jews sort of hostage in the Soviet Union they couldn't do much more than that. I pointed out that the Federal Republic of Germany might be excused for thinking that there were seventeen million Germans hostage in the German Democratic Republic, and nonetheless the West Germans sent us all kinds of hospital ships and hospitals and civic programs and everything else. But the Israelis just made the minimum of a token offer just to avoid saying no categorically.

G: Right. How about the Filipinos?

F: The Filipinos put in a large program. They sent a lot of people there. Mind you, the people they sent were on per diem and there were perhaps other incentives than fighting the fight for freedom. But the Filipinos did have a large program and of course the Filipinos had many very skilled people and people who worked well in the English language and interfaced well with our own people.

G: Was there a problem with Asian countries not being particularly interested in helping?

F: Yes.

G: What was their position?

Flott -- III -- 4

F: They just didn't quite see the urgency of it in the same terms that we did. I think a lot of them probably had the feeling that the Viet Cong did after all have a popular base of a sort and that they just didn't want their country in the long run to be associated with having fought against the Viet Cong.

G: I see. What was the attitude of the Thais on this question?

F: The Thais sent a lot of people, but of course we were able to make very direct representations to the Thais and ensure that we got delivery of quite a bit of aid from them because they wanted things from us. So our leverage with the Thais was pretty good.

The Japanese of course always begged off from anything with military implications, but they sent some aid and hospitals and things like that.

The French, who would never say that they were doing this in response to the Free World Assistance Program, nonetheless sent an awful lot of aid to Vietnam. They had four hundred high school teachers or whatever the number was there.

G: And the Koreans, were you involved in that?

F: Yes, the Koreans were big in that, too.

G: Of course, they also had a lot of troops there.

F: Yes, and there was also lots of reimbursement for what the Koreans did, and Koreans are very willing to do things if they are reimbursed for them.

G: The Australians, the Anzacs [Australian-New Zealand Army Corps]?

F: Yes, the Australians and New Zealanders both had first-rate medical programs and did very good things, and of course they also had troops there.

Flott -- III -- 5

G: Right. Were you also responsible for handling any problems that might arise in the course of the aid being given?

F: Yes.

G: Can you think of anything in particular which posed a problem for you in this regard?

F: Well, we were, for purely political and image-building reasons, so glad to get any aid that we could point to as broadening the base of our effort there, that almost anything they gave us was welcome. But even though we were very inclined to be thankful for small favors, some people were worse than others about not wanting hands showing. The Greeks, for example, offered to give us what I think was an acquisition value of a hundred dollars worth of surgical equipment that was rusted and they would give it to us as long as we didn't say that they had done so. Well, that was I guess the lowest point of those who said reluctantly yes to joining the effort.

There were problems of that sort. There was also the problem that once these people arrived, foreigners like Spaniards, Iranians, it was a problem to support them, but it was usually solved. It was something we had the resources to do. We'd fix them up with housing and all. I suppose one of the worst problems was that the government of Vietnam itself, which obviously should have been interested in getting all the aid it could, both for material reasons and also for image reasons, didn't push the program as much as we did.

G: Why was that?

F: It was just simpler, they thought probably, to get everything from the Americans than it was to be nice to a wide group of foreigners. And

Flott -- III -- 6

again, saying that, you have to take into account that their government was stretched very thin and already had very much on its plate.

G: Yes. Is it possible to describe a typical or prototypical sequence in which a decision was made to ask a country for a certain kind of aid and then I suppose he would go to the Vietnamese government and say, "Why don't you ask for this?" Is that the way it went?

F: Yes. First of all, we limited ourselves to that which appeared to be positive, or possible I should say, and secondly, we looked, quite frankly, for those things that had the most psychological and political impact. But typically a country like Iran, for a variety of reasons, did not see fit to send armed troops there. On the other hand, the Iranians, as part of their close relation with the United States, were willing to send a group. So we said, "Okay, supposing you send a medical team or a small hospital team and we'll put it out in one of the provinces," and they did. The Iranian equivalent of the Red Cross Society is called the Red Lion and Crescent. They sent a good group commanded by a retired colonel and did medical work. The Spaniards did the same thing. For their own domestic reasons, they didn't want to get too involved with sending troops or anything, but they sent a military medical team and they'd be put out in a province.

Anyway, when we determined that they were--see, President Johnson was leaning on all our embassies around the world to be supportive of this program and to try to find donors. When we learned for example that Iran would be willing to send a team, we'd generate a request, that is, stimulate the bureaucratic and paper process of getting the government of Vietnam to request the aid. Then I'd follow up on the

Flott -- III -- 7

project with the intended donor country's ambassador in Saigon, to ensure that it moved forward.

G: Was there any problem with providing security for such teams?

F: Yes, but not unmanageable. They'd have two or three Vietnamese bodyguards living around their house, maybe.

G: I think some Germans at Hué were scooped up at Tet.

F: Yes, they got caught up in the Tet offensive, but that was an extreme case.

G: Was the Filipino--what was it called?--Operation Brotherhood, was that still extant at this time, or had that been terminated before your time?

F: I think the specific Operation Brotherhood was over by then, but the Filipinos sent stuff in response to this request for free world assistance. And of course the minute they were doing something useful and the minute the Filipinos themselves saw that the U.S. government wanted something from them, there were a number of enterprising individual Filipinos that arrived at my office in Saigon saying, well, if you can make such and such a contract for barges or floating cranes or something from my firm, or if you can buy so much San Miguel beer for sale on the PX or whatever the line was that they were touting and the special interests that they were representing, they'd say, "We, of course, can be very influential and we'll certainly see to it that you get the free world assistance." But that happened. I remember particularly the Filipinos in that connection. On the other hand, the Filipinos did send some very able people there. They had a good counterinsurgency sense; they'd had relevant experience in their own country. And, you know, because of our close ties between the two countries, a Filipino medical

Flott -- III -- 8

team would proceed very much like an American one would, so it was much easier to integrate them into our effort.

G: I see. How did you deal with these offers of assistance involving the purchase of San Miguel beer or a floating crane or whatever?

F: I would tell them that from my dealings with their government it was not my impression that their government would wish to proceed that way and while I was certainly going to look into their remarks and share them with their government, that I could not promise them anything.

G: That would end it?

F: But that if their country knew what was good for them in view of President Johnson's strong interest in this program, they'd be well advised to cooperate on sending aid. That usually worked. It was very simple. We had a clear charter to lean on them hard and twist arms hard, and with LBJ behind you on this thing, it was very easy to be persistent and get tough with people.

G: Right. Any instances of initial refusals followed by acquiescence as a result of pressure?

F: Yes.

G: Your pressure? LBJ's pressure?

F: Ultimately certainly LBJ's. I could occasionally select targets for his wrath, but I couldn't apply any pressure myself in the same way that he could. It's not even entirely fair to describe it as putting pressure on them. It takes more than one conversation and one go-around to make a case on what's obviously a complicated and difficult and sometimes expensive effort.

G: Right. How about the British? Did they send--?

Flott -- III -- 9

F: They did a lot of very good things.

G: Did they? But the war was not popular in England.

F: No, but the British were of course committed to their special relationship with the United States and they were always willing to send medical aid and surgical teams and that kind of stuff.

G: You mentioned last time--I don't want to leave Third World Assistance until you're satisfied that--

F: I can't think of anything more I have on it.

G: When the Pleiku incident took place in February of 1965, you said that you had lunch with [John] McNaughton at that time. Do you recall that?

F: Yes.

G: Was McGeorge Bundy there or was he out of the country?

F: No, Mac Bundy had actually gone up to Pleiku, and I had lunch with McNaughton and with Chet Cooper. They were the two on the Mac Bundy party who for various reasons stayed in Saigon. I think McNaughton had business at MACV headquarters and Chet Cooper was doing something. Chet, whom I'd known for a number of years, said, "Look, I'm free for lunch with McNaughton. Let's go together." We just went over to one of the officers' clubs or BOQs and had lunch and talked. That was at noon that fateful Sunday and then Mac Bundy came back from Pleiku and didn't even leave the airport. He landed from Pleiku at Tan Son Nhut. McNaughton and Cooper and I were out at the airport and McNaughton and Cooper flew back to the States with Bundy.

That was the point at which Mac Bundy said, "In view of these shellings of American installations, we'd better get the dependents out." Then LBJ made a very categorical order that all dependents were

Flott -- III -- 10

going to be out within a week. The biggest no-no in that theater of operations would be for wives or other dependents to come back into Vietnam once they were evacuated.

G: They'd been discussing whether they should evacuate the dependents, hadn't they?

F: Yes, but the straw that broke the camel's back, I suppose, was the Pleiku thing.

G: Yes. I know some of the arguments pro and con were what impression this would make on both the South Vietnamese and their enemies.

F: We were conscious of that and we figured that we could represent it as being battening down the hatches and clearing the decks for action. It was done in that context.

G: Is that the way the South Vietnamese interpreted it, do you think?

F: Yes, I think it was pretty much, yes.

G: Okay. Did you talk to McGeorge Bundy about his conversation back to Washington during the Pleiku incident or immediately after? Because it's known now that at that time he also recommended that we begin the bombing.

F: Yes. I think out at the airport on the tarmac just talking with Mac Bundy and McNaughton and Chet Cooper, Mac Bundy took the position that we clearly could not take attacks of that Pleiku sort or of the earlier Bien Hoa sort lying down, and we had to study ways of reprisal in kind.

G: Well, how do you interpret his later and rather cynical remark that's been cited in a number of cases when he was asked about what it was that triggered his recommendation. He said, "Pleikus are like streetcars," meaning there's one by every ten minutes; you just pick the one you want

Flott -- III -- 11

to use as your excuse and you go ahead and do what you want to do. That was not the way he seemed, though, at the time, is that right?

F: I wouldn't claim to have any really valid insight into what was going on inside his mind. It might well be that he meant to say he would not allow one incident to rush him into premature or unwise action, timing-wise.

G: But that was not the impression that you got, I gather.

F: My impression was that he quite lucidly and correctly figured that if the Viet Cong were going to bring American installations under attack that we would have to make reprisals in some suitable form.

G: Right. When you came back, you were given duties involving trying to explain our Vietnam policy; is that right?

F: Yes.

G: What sorts of places did you go to in this effort?

F: The most basic underlying guideline and square one of the whole effort was that this was done in the context of the Department of State supplying a spokesman in those situations where a sponsoring group had requested a State Department spokesman.

G: I see.

F: Now, just about anyone could request it. Any university could request it, and I went to many universities. Also, public service groups like the Louisville, Kentucky Rotary Club would request it, and I'd go out for that. The State Department made it very clear that the sponsoring organization paid the bills. For example, my plane fares were always paid by the sponsoring organization. My travel expenses were kept to the modest level covered by government per diem, but the host

Flott -- III -- 12

organizations were always billed and had agreed in advance to pay for the per diem of travel as well. Admittedly, they did not pay for my time. But the State Department feels it has a public policy obligation of a sort to make speakers available where it's something they're willing to do. As a practical matter, most of my work seemed to be on Saturdays and Sundays anyway when it was my own time and not the department's.

G: I see. Do we conclude that most of your audiences were at least neutral on the subject, or--?

F: They varied widely. I had some audiences in California right at the time of the Cambodian incursion that were very hostile, and where literally there was some concern about my physical security, I mean making at least contingency plans for what you do if you get a mob scene. Other audiences would be more friendly to our policy in Vietnam.

G: Did you ever feel that you were in danger, or apprehensive?

F: I think if I had played it very stupidly and had angered a big crowd of antiwar people and if I had added to normal differences of opinion by making them want to take it out on me personally, I could probably have gotten kicked around, yes. But I avoided that. I had occasion to speak at the student union at Berkeley.

G: Well, that doesn't sound like a very friendly place to me.

F: No, but after Berkeley I went out to California two weekends in a row at the time of the Cambodian incursion, which was 1970 or 1971, during the Nixon Administration. But first I went out to California once during the Johnson Administration because the State Department had a request for a speaker for Berkeley and the public affairs office--the bureau

Flott -- III -- 13

that more or less managed these speaking engagements--advised me not to go into this one, because it was a really violently hostile audience.

G: I can imagine.

F: I talked to Governor [Averell] Harriman and said, "Governor, it seems to me we ought to talk to the people who disagree with us on this thing." And he said, "Well, I see no reason why not to do it. If you're willing to do it, it's your neck." So I went out. But even there, there were some positive situations. I mean there was the good thing that on an American campus there's still enough sense of fairness left, regardless of how high the passions ran, there was a feeling of, "Let this fellow be heard. Let's hear another viewpoint and see what he has to say." I had a couple of things helping me. The local regent at Berkeley was Tom Sorensen, the brother of Ted Sorensen, and Tom, whom I'd known from the East Coast and who had served in USIS, knew that I had been the escort officer and interpreter for Supreme Court Justice [William] Douglas and for Bob Kennedy in 1955 when they went to the Soviet Union. So I told Tom Sorensen that I would agree to come out to Berkeley and talk to their five thousand students in the student union at high noon, if it were made very clear to the audience that I'd come out there in response to their invitation. Tom picked it up from there and said, "Yes, and what's more, when I introduce you I'll tell them that you were Bob Kennedy's interpreter," and that of course was a big plus.

I think on the part of the real hard core of troublemakers, not just ordinary citizens who for their own reasons were angry with our policy but people who really deliberately wanted to make trouble, they tended to wait until--they were waiting for me to make some bad mistake,

Flott -- III -- 14

to slip or stumble on something, in which case they could pile on and have the audience with them. I said a lot of things they didn't like and a lot of things that they almost decided to lower the boom on, but they kept waiting for something a little bit better and more clear-cut. In time, of course, I got the audience to listen to what I had to say and addressed all kinds of difficult subjects and got away with it.

G: That's remarkable.

F: Things like napalm and that kind of thing they asked about.

G: What was the concern about napalm? We'd used it in World War II; we'd used it in Korea.

F: Well, we didn't use napalm in World War II until the very end against the Japanese, but if we'd had napalm in World War II for the Normandy landing, things would have gone much better on Omaha Beach. We didn't have it. In Korea of course we did. It just lent itself, I think, to almost symbolizing hellfire and damnation and big fire and of course the horrible wounds it inflicts. Rightly or wrongly, it was a big emotional issue. The troublemakers in the audience would figure they had a good enough case just saying, "What about napalm?" And I'd say, "Okay, let me tell you about napalm." I said, "Napalm is, first of all, a rather limited weapon. It burns up everything within a hundred-yard radius, but it doesn't do much beyond that. If you're attacking, advancing, and you're held down by a hostile machine gun nest, there are a number of ways to take out a machine gun nest. You can storm it frontally--in which case you'd lost twenty GIs dead on the ground--or you can maneuver around it and maybe lose time and two or three people trying to get a bangalore torpedo or a grenade into the thing. Or you can pull your

Flott -- III -- 15

company back three hundred yards and ask for an air strike with napalm, kill the crew inside and save all of your side's lives." Then I asked the audience, "Now, if your brother were to be in the rifle company in the attack, which approach would you prefer that his company commander took? All I'm doing is supporting the choice of weapons of these company commanders who knew what they were doing. Incidentally, whoever it kills, it doesn't kill them any deader than one bullet or one grenade would kill them anyway." With a basically objective audience, even an audience that was hostile to the war and all, they would reluctantly agree, "Well, this guy seems to make sense on that point."

G: What other kinds of questions did you tend to get from an audience like that?

F: Oh, arguing over just exactly what the historical record was, the agreement to hold elections one year after 1954. That would be hashed over a lot. Then the fact that it was their country; it was all one country. Oh, yes, the biggest thing other than napalm, I guess, was that we were supporting colonialism. You'd usually get a question from some black African exchange student from somewhere in subsaharan Africa drawing on his country's experience with their struggle for independence. And I said, "Well, my dear fellow, you overlook the fact that South Vietnam has had its independence since 1954. A communist government is invading them and trying to deprive them of that independence, which certainly hasn't been put to any vote, the communist incursion. So it has nothing to do with your country's glorious struggle for freedom and independence." That would usually settle the matter.

G: How long did you perform this duty? How long did that go on?

Flott -- III -- 16

F: Off and on for two years. Let's see, I got back from Vietnam from what had been three and a half years out there. I got back in the late fall of 1966. I was immediately put on the road with the program of the Federal Executive Service. There are around the United States twelve major centers, sort of Civil Service Commission branch offices, which are also regional headquarters for the U.S. government civil service. I believe Dallas was one, Denver was one, Kansas City was one, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle come to mind. LBJ had issued instructions that he wanted the top levels of the federal bureaucracy to know more about our effort, to be brought up to speed on the whys and wherefores, so he sent a team out, and I was the State Department man on the team. There was a man from the Pentagon, a man from the Agency for International Development, AID, and myself, and we went around and spent a couple of days at each of these places. Then after that I, oh, seven days a week, thirty-one days a month, I was accepting speaking invitations all over the country.

Then something happened. Hubert Humphrey, as vice president, was in Brussels, and he got booed because of the Vietnam War. Humphrey's friendly conclusion was, "Anyone who's booing me must just not know what the problem is, or doesn't know why we are doing this." So he said, "You people in the State Department should do more about telling our story abroad." Well, of course the State Department had been making herculean efforts for two years to tell our story and USIS had and everybody else. But when Humphrey said, "I want you to do something more," quite rightly the Department of State was responsive to command and sent me over to Europe on a roving mission of visiting European

Flott -- III -- 17

foreign offices and parliamentary foreign affairs committees and any student groups or interest groups that they suggested. I based myself in Geneva, partly because of the favorable image that city gave, and frequently visited the Paris peace talks and Embassy Saigon.

Say I'd get a request from the embassy in The Hague to come up there. I remember how the embassy in The Hague under Ambassador William Tyler, I thought, made particularly good use of my time. They all made good use of my time, because it made them all look good with the administration, after all. Any American embassy wanted to be responsive to the administration, to LBJ's guideline of "tell our story and tell it effectively." They'd set me up with programs and I found my time was fully scheduled and very well used, with good sense of priority. Then I did some of that in North Africa as well. I made a number of trips back and forth to Saigon, to keep up to speed on the subject.

G: How long did this go on?

F: About two years.

G: All of 1968?

F: Yes. Then after the Vietnam peace talks started, although I was not a member of the peace talks delegation as such, Governor Harriman asked that I be brought over to Europe again to resume that speaking mission. There I had the job of going around basically to people that Harriman wanted to inform about what his delegation to the peace talks was doing, but didn't have time obviously to do it himself; he couldn't be everywhere at once. So I was given the job of traveling around briefing these foreign affairs committees of the European parliaments and foreign offices.

Flott -- III -- 18

G: Did you have to work with Bill Jorden a little bit on that?

F: Yes.

G: Yes, I see.

F: And I would talk with Bill Jorden and tell him what kind of questions we were getting, and he'd give me any late juicy tidbits--information that might be of interest to these friendly governments.

G: I see. And you were doing that until when? Until the team changed over there?

F: Until about March of 1969 or so. Yes, until the change of administrations.

G: Well, on these missions of explication, if you will, were you booed like Humphrey was?

F: Oh, on occasion. I would say not when visiting friendly foreign offices and friendly parliamentary foreign affairs committees, no, there'd be no booing; there'd be maximum courtesy, understanding and decorum. With European students generally or political parties and things, I can't remember any outright booing. There was some very hostile questioning.

G: What was the source of the hostility? Who were the hostile groups?

F: Well, the hostile people were people who were otherwise perfectly normal people who disagreed with our policy and thought we were killing a lot of Vietnamese needlessly and that we should stop, and people who thought that they had the answers and that the United States government had it all wrong.

G: Did you go to Sweden?

F: Yes, and that was a very difficult situation. That was one case, for example, where the embassy did not schedule me to talk to students

Flott -- III -- 19

because they were afraid it would have been counterproductive and would have been a donnybrook. But I did talk to the foreign office and sometimes we did briefings in the embassy, too; they'd invite people into the Embassy to hear our story.

G: The Swedes were out of sympathy pretty solidly, weren't they?

F: Yes, yes.

G: Okay. Did this coincide with the instances where the deserters were given sanctuary in Sweden?

F: Yes, there were deserters there at the time I was doing this in some countries.

End of Tape 1 and Interview III

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of
FREDERICK W. FLOTT

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Frederick W. Flott of Washington, D.C., do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of personal interviews conducted on July 22, July 24, and September 27, 1984 in Washington, D.C., and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
- (2) The tape recordings shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.
- (4) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.
- (5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Frederick W. Flott
Donor

January 2, 1991
Date

[Signature]
Archivist of the United States

March 15 1991
Date