INTERVIEW I

INTERVIEWEE: L. WADE LATHRAM

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

DATE: March 21, 1985

PLACE: Mr. Lathram's residence, Alexandria, Virginia

G: Mr. Lathram, can we begin with a little background? You were a Foreign Service officer, is that correct?

L: I was a Foreign Service officer, yes. I came into the Foreign Service rather late, because my early career was in the War Department, and then, after War, in the Interior Department. And I went to the Foreign Service primarily because I was leaving government, leaving Interior, wanted to go into private business. A friend of mine asked me to go to India to help open up the AID [Agency for International Development] mission. And while I was in India that was in 1952--for two years, Foreign Service kind of got in our blood. And the night I left, the Ambassador called me and asked me if I'd go into the State Department in the Foreign Service.

G: Who was ambassador at that point?

L: George Allen.

G: I see.

L: And one of the finest men I ever knew, despite the fact that he ended up as president of the American Tobacco Institute. (Laughter) But yes, I told him, "George, you've got me all wrong. My life had been in administration. I don't know anything about political and

economic, *et cetera*." He said, "Well, I've been watching you as acting AID director for the last three months. I think you do; I've already sent off the telegram, and I hope you have a good trip. My recommendation is you be political-economic advisor for the Middle East." Ooh!

Very shortly after that he came back to Washington as assistant secretary, and at that time I had decided to stay on with AID for a few months to help them out, because they had an appropriation before the Hill. So the first thing he did was call me and say, "Why aren't you over here?" I said, "Nobody's asked me." He said, "Well, I'm asking you now." And that's the way I went into the Foreign Service, at the top, which was a kind of a little bit resented at the time by some of the old-timers, because the Wriston Program wasn't too popular then.

But that was in 1955, and my first job was political-economic adviser for the Middle East, and then he asked me to set up what we called Regional Affairs for the Middle East, which I did. That was a combination of everything that cut across boundary lines.

After that I went to Turkey as economic counselor, and just stayed in the Foreign Service. I was detailed back to AID a couple of times. One time in 1963 I was detailed back as director of personnel, and you may have run across that from time to time, I don't know.

But anyway, I presume that since you want to talk about Vietnam, you want to know how I got there.

G: Yes.

L: Well, after I did my tour as director of personnel for AID, I got what I really wanted, which was a year's assignment to the Senior Seminar in the Foreign Service Institute. And that is the finest program that the State Department, I think, ever developed. It's a program in which they take the senior officers, and you take them a year out, study at the Foreign Service Institute, mostly about America. And with some topnotch speakers in, you have a full day to study, just like an academic year; you listen to the speakers, question them, and write a paper before you get through. It was a darn good year of study for a fellow in his forties; nothing could be better.

At the end of that time I was wondering what in the heck my assignment was going to be, and we were all kind of a little bit worried. And then one day Ray Hare, who had been my ambassador in Turkey, called and asked if I'd be his deputy assistant secretary for the Near East. I said, "Of course! Anytime." Because the next step after that, of course, was ambassador entirely aside from it being a topnotch job in itself.

And that was all set until just before graduation. I got a call to come see Alexis Johnson; he was deputy undersecretary for political affairs. And I had butterflies. Well, he said, "I want you to go to Vietnam as deputy AID director." And I said, "I was deputy director for a bigger program than that in Vietnam over ten years ago. And I've got a perfectly good career, and a perfectly good assignment in State. My career is State Department, Foreign Service, and that's where I want to stay." He said, "No, you haven't got an assignment. I called this morning and cancelled it. Dave Bell"--who was director

of AID--"went to Dean Rusk and said he wanted you, and Dean Rusk said he could have any Foreign Service officer he wanted. So he says he wants you."

Well, Dave had already offered me the job of director of Thailand, and I'd turned that down for the same reason: I wanted to stay in the State Department. And so Johnson said, "Well, if I give you the alternative, will you resign the Foreign Service?" And I said, "I didn't come into the Foreign Service to resign it, except on principle, and I don't feel that strongly about Vietnam." He said, "Okay, you're ordered." That's the way I went to Vietnam, kicking and screaming. I regretted it then, I've regretted it since, but I can honestly say that my personal integrity is such that I never undertook a job I didn't do my damnedest with it. And I never did a job yet that I thought when I finished I'd done as good as I could have done. But I threw everything into it I could.

But at the time that was 1966 we were just debating the issue, should we permit families? And the decision had been made: no, no families in Vietnam, it was getting too hairy. The next decision, of course, was safe haven, and we did set up three safe havens: one in Bangkok, one in Manila, and where was the third one [Taipei, according to Mrs. Mary Lathram]? Shows my memory. Anyway, that's not important. The important [thing] is, I didn't believe in the safe haven concept, either.

G: Would you explain that concept a little?

L: The concept was that the family, the wife and children, would stay in a safe haven. Put the kids in school, have housing, *et cetera*, and the husband would be able to visit from Vietnam once a month for a few days.

Well, I was scared of it for several reasons. One of them is that I could see that that was going to be very, very disruptive in terms of work schedule. But also I felt that the families being uprooted from the States, put in a strange community without husbands, and no jobs, would be a hotbed of problems. Well, the upshot was that my wife wanted to go to the safe haven with the kids. I'm afraid that I rather insisted, and she didn't. That meant extensive separation, which wasn't good for either one of us, but it did mean the kids stayed home and stayed in school; two of them in college and two of them in high school.

I did see my wife a couple of times during the two years. One of them I came back on consultation, just shortly after I'd been there. This was primarily on the OCO [Office of Civil Operations] problem. And another time Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker was to come out, and he had a great big plane. Jim Grant, who was a good friend of mine, and director of the Far East for Asia, called my wife. He said, "How would you like to go see your husband?" Well, she was then running what we called then the Wives' Seminar, now the Family Workshop, in the Foreign Service Institute; the Family Workshop to which I've been lecturing myself about once every six weeks for the last ten years. But she was running it, and had made something really terrific out of it. She jumped at the chance, and flew out with Bunker and spent a week out there with me. Of course unfortunately I was working full time. But she did see something of Vietnam; she saw something of what we were going through. That was our get-together in the two

years we were apart, which is not a very good way to live. But it did make it possible to spend what was necessary--that is, seven days a week--working. And we worked.

(Interruption)

G: Now, you arrived in Vietnam when, in 1966?

L: Yes, probably the dates kind of get away from me, but I think it was in June or July of 1966, as deputy director.

G: Who was director at the time?

L: The director at the time was Charlie Mann. Charlie Mann was a damned good man. He had a heavy, heavy German accent, strangely, and he also spoke French. His French wasn't as good as Charlie thought it was, but he was fluent. I've heard many Vietnamese laugh at his French, but nevertheless he could use it and use it effectively, and that was very important. As I recall, he had come as director from Laos, because of his French-speaking ability.

Unfortunately, Charlie was a very controversial figure, and he was very strong-minded. [Robert] McNamara [and] [General William] Westmoreland obviously didn't like him and wanted him replaced. Dave Hill called me in and told me when he sent me out there as deputy director he said, "One thing I want you to try to do is do your best to save Charlie Mann." I said, "Well, it's a little late for that, but I'll do my best. I'll do my damnedest to try to smooth things over between the military and the civilians, and give Charlie all the support I possibly can." Unfortunately, it wasn't enough, because the Pentagon was determined that Charlie Mann had to go, and [he] did.

G: Do you know what precisely was the bone of contention between the two sides?

L: The major bones of contention were Charlie's ideas, I think as I recall them; now this is--I have to try to dredge up from memory. As I recall them, Charlie's major bones of contention were [that] he wanted to get forward with the AID kinds of programs, and felt that we could move forward in doing the kinds of programs that AID was successful with in working with the people and be successful, provided the military provided security throughout the countryside. And if security wasn't provided, we couldn't do anything. So at every mission council meeting, he would raise the question of security. Well, General Westmoreland wasn't very happy about that, because he of course was responsible for security.

The second major bone of contention was that the Saigon port was developed primarily by the French for export. You remember the French industrialized the North, kept the South as the breadbasket, just as the Japanese did with North and South Korea. And the universities were all in the North. That was where the educated population was to be. The South was to be the breadbasket and feed. And their major foreign exchange earner was to be rubber and [inaudible], both of which required exports. So the port was built for export, not import. Furthermore, it was a small port, very small and very crowded.

The Americans came in, as usual, with all the men and all the equipment in the world, all to be imported. And the result was the port of Saigon was one horrendous mess. Charlie argued vehemently, meeting after meeting, that the military should get the

hell out of Saigon port, build their own new port further up the Saigon river. Which eventually was done, by the way, at great cost, but they built a beautiful port to do the job that needed doing. But in the meantime our goods weren't getting through and getting in with the rapidity which they should have been, and Westmoreland was blaming it on the civilians who were supposed to be advising the Saigonese on the port and other transportation facilities, and Charlie was blaming it on the military, who were using the port for purposes for which it was not intended.

Well, these are two issues, I recall distinctly, that they were always at swords' points on, and Charlie, being a very outspoken man, was not reluctant to speak his mind at any and every opportunity. At any rate, the upshot was that he was replaced. I had told Bill Gaud quite frankly, "Since I've had this kind of a job ten years ago, and I've been ordered in to it, if Charlie Mann is replaced--and I'm going to do my damnedest to help see that he isn't--if he is replaced I want his job," as director of the AID mission. And Bill said he would see what he could do about it Dave said he would see what he could do about it and Bill Gaud was sitting there; Bill said the same thing. We all three of us knew that Dave was going to leave very shortly and go to the Ford Foundation, and Bill Gaud was going to take over.

As far as I know, from what I've heard later, Bill Gaud did his damnedest to fulfill that commitment. But that wasn't what the White House wanted, particularly Bob Komer and others. They wanted to pick their own man. So when [Ambassador Henry Cabot]

Lodge recommended from Saigon that I replace Charlie Mann, and AID supported it, that meant the kiss of death. (Laughter) I wasn't going to be it.

So the White House picked Don McDonald, which was a very good idea. Don is a darned good man; I've known him for a long, long time. We're still very close friends. He was a darned good choice for the job. He's good-looking; he's tall; he's smart; he's energetic; he makes a very good presence, and he was picked for the job and sent out. I remained there as deputy director.

About that time, though, in the fall of 1966, McNamara, particularly, was getting more and more unhappy, as was Westmoreland, with the lack of progress on pacification. As best I could figure, they felt that we were not winning the hearts and minds, the civilians weren't. We felt that winning the hearts and minds--[inaudible] unless they can sleep in their beds safe at night it doesn't matter about their hearts and minds. We've got to do the security first, and within a security framework you can win hearts and minds. But they were convinced that the problem with pacification was not the philosophy but the organization, that we needed to pull things together; that here was JUSPAO [Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office], the public affairs organization, with its organization, and it had people out in the field all over the country reporting directly to it. There was CIA the same way, AID the same way. And the State Department, the same way. Four organizations, four independent structures throughout the country. And here was the military: well-organized, chain of command, one man in charge, *et cetera*. Of course, nobody ever said anything about the divisions between the marines and the navy and

others. But the military had handled that very well by having the marines take over I Corps, and had very little to say about I Corps. They just got reports from I Corps. And the rest of the country was the army. And the navy was brought in from time to time, but subject to the commands of the army. So anyway, from a military point of view, there was a unified chain of command, and from the civilian point of view there was not. So something had to be done.

(Interruption)

G: All right, sir. We were just coming up, I think, to the birth of OCO, if you want to put it that way.

L: Yes. That was the latter part of 1966, and again I don't have the exact dates, but as I recall it, it was [at] the Manila Conference that President Johnson told the Ambassador that the civilian stuff, the pacification stuff, just had to go better. And there was only one way for it to go better and that was to pull it together. And [he] designated Bill Porter, who was the deputy ambassador, to be in charge of the pacification program the civilian side, not the military.

But to digress, I would like to tell you a little anecdote about Bill Porter, if I may. Bill and I later didn't get along too well, but in Vietnam we got along fine; he was my boss. I was his deputy in Korea, and that's where we didn't get along quite so well. But he told me once that he was ambassador, I believe in Morocco, and [was] called to Washington and told he was wanted at the White House. So he went over to the White House and was ushered into the little room next to the oval room, a sofa and an easy

chair, and he said the chair was real low, way down. And he sat down in the easy chair and went clear to the floor. And very shortly the door opened and in strode great big Lyndon Johnson, and as Bill started to get up Lyndon put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Sit down, Bill." Porter said he'd never seen the President before in his life, but Lyndon said, "Sit down, Bill. Wanta ask ya a favor." Bill said, "Yes, sir?" "Wantcha to go to Veetnam as deputy ambassador." "Well, Mr. President, I'd like to think it over." "Don't wantcha to think it over, Bill; wantcha to say yes." That's the way Bill Porter went to Vietnam.

(Laughter)

G: It strikes a familiar chord.

L: In any case, he came back from Manila, and Bill immediately got Paul Hare and Frank Wisner, two young political officers on his staff, to get to work on how to pull them together. They did a fantastic job; I don't know how they did it. But they went to JUSPAO and to CIA and AID, and of course the political counsel then was Phil Calhoun, I believe; I don't think Phil Habib had arrived yet. But in any case, they drew up an organization chart: Public Safety, Refugees, and Revolutionary Development; well, two or three other things were to make up what they dreamed up the title, Office of Civil Operations, OCO. But they also recognized that it needed a boss. And so Bill Porter called me over--I was deputy director of AID--and asked me if I'd take over as director of OCO. And we took over what was then USAID-2, which was a separate building, took over the whole darned building and set the whole thing up. And converted all the people

in the provinces; we designated one of them, usually the AID guy, as the province chief, and the JUSPAO, CIA and State on his staff. Quite frequently it was the Foreign Service officer from State who was the province chief.

We quickly organized throughout the country this organization, which was responsible for all civil operations outside of Saigon, which was an incredible experiment, because they didn't transfer any money; they didn't transfer any authority; they just set it up. The program officer was to go back to each of the heads of each of the agencies and get the funds we needed to operate, but it was still their money, their people, their organization. But they had no control over it. As Don McDonald once told me, "You run Air America." Of course, you know Air America was split in two pieces. One of them was the CIA piece, and the other one was everything else. And the only way we could get around the country was Air America, because all the highways were blocked, and there was no way to go from A to B by highway. So we had choppers and Beechcraft [?] and all kinds of planes. At one point our little airline was carrying more passengers per month than Braniff. And [if] we wanted a plane, we called up the plane and took off. And Don McDonald, who was head of AID, once told me, "Dammit, Wade, I'm spending twenty million dollars to keep your airline running; it's my airline, and I can't get on it without your permission!" (Laughter) I said, "Yep, Don, that's the way it is."

G: How well did this organization work? You've hinted that there were some major problems with authority and funding and so on.

L: No, I didn't hint that there were problems. There weren't. For some reason or other, it worked extremely well. Barry Zorthian, who was a hardnosed JUSPAO, a good friend of mine, remained such, went along with it. So did the AID director, so did the CIA station chief.

(Interruption)

G: So the heads of the various bureaus cooperated.

L: They cooperated. We had a few arguments, and in particular I had arguments with Barry, but we always resolved them amicably. And the funny thing was that I think those of us at the top were convinced that OCO was a step; it was getting the civilians all together operating the pacification program as a means of moving them under the military. But we tried to operate with our organization as though that weren't the fact; that we were a permanent organization, and I think the entire staff was so convinced all up and down the line that our morale was extremely high. In fact, I wish I had a copy of it, I didn't save a copy, but one of the guys up in I Corps wrote a songbook about OCO. And it was a marvelous songbook; had about a dozen songs in it, all with OCO as the theme.

But the morale was very, very good. And we thought we were making real progress, insofar as we could, of course. Our biggest problem, of course, was taking care of the refugees, because as anybody who understood Vietnam knew, the villager didn't want the government; he didn't want the Viet Cong; he didn't want the North Vietnamese; he wanted to be let alone. He didn't want the Americans; he didn't want anybody. He'd been able to tolerate the government as tax collector and policeman, but that was the role

of central government. But when it came to a choice, when the VC came in, or the Americans came in, or the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] came in, and they had to evacuate, they all came to the government. They all came to the South Vietnamese government side, and we provided the resources. We stockpiled all over the country, under our refugee organization, rice and rebar and galvanized roofing, so that we could help the Vietnamese set up refugee camps and then gradually issue them, as they wanted, their ration of rice and their rebar and their galvanized roofing and resettle them someplace else.

Of course, this was all done I'm digressing now with, as far as I'm concerned, a lack of understanding on the part of the military of what land meant to the people. We knew. We knew that the worst possible thing you could do to a Vietnamese peasant was move him off his land, because whether he owned it or whether he was in debt for it, it was still his land. And any time you moved him off his land, whether it was your fault or the enemy's fault, nevertheless he hated the people who moved him off the land. You didn't win hearts and minds that way. In fact, one of my biggest arguments with some of my military colleagues, including General Westmoreland, was when we were going to clear out a valley because we couldn't make the valley secure. The military couldn't make the valley secure, so they were going to move all the people out of the valley, and just make it a free-fire zone. And I made the point: we're trying to win the people. We're not going to win the people by taking their land away from them. That just didn't go across. We needed that free-fire zone.

But anyway, one of the biggest jobs, of course, was taking care of refugees, which we did, I think, admirably. We were making progress in getting the village councils reorganized, in establishing real political control back in the villages and hamlets. We thought we were making real progress on economic development, in helping them rebuild their bridges and their roads and their dikes along their canals, and getting in good seed, good crops, fertilizers, and just generally doing what the pacification program was supposed to do, even though we recognized that security was paramount; that any time two VC could come into a hamlet and capture a son and take him off, and threaten him that if he didn't cooperate and be a part of the VC, they'd kill his parents. And threatened his parents: if they didn't cooperate, they'd kill him. And that was exactly what was going to happen, and winning hearts and minds wouldn't have anything to do with it if the fear was there. And the only thing you could do was to keep the VC out, or to convert those that were already there.

Nevertheless, we thought OCO was making real progress. But I think General McNamara and Bob Komer, Bill Leonhart in the White House, and the President were all convinced that we just weren't hacking it, that pacification was not moving forward; we weren't licking the VC. And so in the Guam Conference in 1967, President Johnson did make the decision to amalgamate it all under General Westmoreland. And I think General Westmoreland referred to that in his book.

My role: I went there on Ambassador Lodge's staff as head of OCO. I went to the Guam Conference; we had a private session with all of us except the President, and

frankly, both Komer and Lodge told me before we went in they hoped that I wouldn't kick up a fuss or create any problem. Well, we got in and discussed with McNamara the idea of amalgamating OCO and what was then the Revolutionary Development Support staff of MACV [Military Assistance Command Vietnam], which was the military. Their job was primarily working with the local ARVN, the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces, and improving security and trying in some ways to do the same things we were doing in the pacification program; they were doing [them] on the military side.

Anyway, we discussed the idea of pulling them together, and of course, being a maverick, I did say, "We are in the process of trying to convince the Vietnamese to build up their Revolutionary Development ministry as a civilian ministry, separate from the military. How do we satisfy the Vietnamese [now] that we're going in the opposite direction from what we've been encouraging them to go?" That went over like a lead balloon and got no response. Anyway, we adjourned and McNamara and President Johnson had a private session and then we all got together and introduced each other around. And that was the first and only time I met Lyndon Johnson.

At the end of the session and I didn't say anything in that one; there was no point in it. The President said he would think things over and let us know what his decision was. Well, I thought his decision was obvious on the surface, but it was to be I guess politically delayed for a while. At any rate, on the way back to Saigon, according to his book, General Westmoreland and Bob Komer had a session and pretty well agreed on the organization. I didn't know that at the time, but General Westmoreland did come and sit

down with me and ask me, if the President made the decision to pull them all together under him and of course my response was, "What do you mean, going to make the decision? He's already made the decision." He said, "*If* he makes the decision, will you come on my staff as a civilian assistant chief of staff for CORDS?" or whatever you call it, and we decided then to call it CORDS [Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support]. He said, "If you do, I'll give you one of my best generals as deputy, General [William] Knowlton." And I said, "Well, I didn't resign when I was given the opportunity to come to Vietnam; I'm not going to resign now. Yes, I'll do it."

So we went back and made OCO function for another month, knowing full well that within the month CORDS was going to be announced and the whole thing would be changed. And that's what happened. I took over as assistant chief of staff for CORDS, and Bob Komer came out from Washington as deputy COMUSMACV [Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam], deputy to Westmoreland for pacification, and I was under the chief of staff as assistant chief of staff for pacification, for CORDS. And we ran it much like we had run it before, except that we were an amalgamated organization. I must say that to the surprise, I think the surprise of General Westmoreland, we had early agreed Komer and Westmoreland and everybody, Colonel [Robert] Montague, who was on Komer's staff and was helping to organize the corps structure all agreed that we'd have the military corps commander visit each province and pick the man who was to be the province chief, the chief advisor to the Vietnamese. And let the chips fall where they may, be he civilian or military. If he were civilian, then the

military [man] would be his deputy, because we already had the military and civilian structures side by side. In fact, Westmoreland mentioned that on the plane back from Guam as a possibility, and he said he thought as many as a third, maybe a third, of all the province chiefs would be civilians. I think it was to his surprise and mine, too, when the corps commanders came in with their recommendations that the majority of the province chiefs be civilians with the military as their deputies. They found, by and large, that the civilians we had on board were those they wanted to be the chiefs. And we set it up that way.

The strange thing was that in the rest of my tour in Vietnam, we found absolutely, in all my travels and I think Bill Knowlton will tell you the same thing, all of our travels found absolutely no conflict or problem once you got out of Saigon between the military and civilian. They were a team; they worked together. That in itself to me was an amazing public administration experience. They just worked together, did what they were supposed to do, did their jobs, operated as a team with no conflict and no jealousies. I think there were one or two cases where the military resented being under civilian and they were replaced. But there were only one or two of those. Most of the time there was no problem at all. We were quite pleased with that result. And we thought it worked pretty well.

We still had the basic problem of security, because the basic security for the villages and the hamlets was the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces. And many of them felt that they were not either fully trained or properly armed for that role. When we

first set up CORDS, it wasn't clear that CORDS was responsible for that particular arm of the pacification program. Eventually we did set up an RF/PF division with the American advisers as part of that division under the CORDS program. So that we finally folded in all the elements necessary for pacification.

Nevertheless, the RF/PF, as organized, as trained, as armed, were not up to keeping the hamlets and the villages secure.

(Interruption)

G: Let's see. We were talking about the last month of OCO, and the conversion into CORDS, and we had gotten to the point where you were describing the amicable and efficient way in which the teams tended to operate.

L: As a matter of fact, that was most clear, I think, at the time of the Tet campaign, when there was no question but what the MACV compound and see, even with the organization of the two together, the MACV compound was maintained in each of the provinces, because that's where the military lived. That's where they had their quarters; that's where they had mess and everything else. So we never objected to saying, "Oh, heck. Let's break up the MACV compound, or make it joint." But when Tet came along, there was no question but what the MACV compound was headquarters. That was where everybody went, and it was both civilian and military. And yes, the civilians did use, probably which they shouldn't have, they did use arms, considerably. They had to.

But no, the morale, I thought, in CORDS was very good, though we were faced with a couple of things, I think, which were misleading. One of them was the Hamlet

Evaluation System, which I'm sure you're familiar with. The Hamlet Evaluation System was put in at Komer's insistence as a means of getting hold of where we stood on pacification, where we were secure and where we were not secure. And we put in a major, major computer setup, one of the early ones, not one of the present state-of-the-art ones. (Laughter) So it was quite a feat to put that into MACV.

I never really trusted it, and this is the one place where I feel like I let my personal integrity get away from me, which I tried not to do. When McNamara came out after we had set up CORDS, and after we had set up HES, I gave him a briefing, having gone through the pre-briefs, the pre-pre-briefs, and all that stuff, so that it was all down neat and white, and we had the dog and pony show. I always resented the dog and pony show, but here I was all of a sudden, the fellow with the stick. And I went through the HES with him, and I think Secretary McNamara was impressed with it. Here I say I was not, because I could not help but remember way back when the British Empire ran India, when on the floor of Parliament they were talking about the issue. I can't remember the quote now, of how things stood in India. And finally one old guy got up and made the comment that, "Hey, the night watchman just puts down what he wants to put down, and that's what's reported." Well, I had talked to several of the district advisers, and I would pull out my HES, and I'd say, "It says this hamlet is green. Let's take a drive over there." "Not me." I'd say, "Why not?" "Well, hell, you might get shot." "But it says green; completely secure." "Well, gee whiz, we've got to turn in these reports," and I can't remember now whether they had to turn them in weekly or monthly. I think it was

weekly, but I'm not sure. But in any case, they would sit down with the local ARVN commander and the village chiefs, and decide what status each of the villages and hamlets was. Didn't ask the question, as I recall it, "do the hamlet chiefs sleep in the village at night?" Which of course is a key thing: if the hamlet chief is not going to sleep there (Laughter) it's not very darned secure.

But at any rate, I felt that many of the areas we showed as secure were not secure, not really, because secure meant you could go. Well, if the guy who worked there wouldn't take me there, it wasn't very secure. So I felt in that case the Hamlet Security System was misleading. It did give a good overall picture, if you did not look at any specifics. If you looked at it in totality, then things tended to even out, so that yes, you could get a pretty good picture. But if the HES had been completely accurate, Tet would never had happened, because after all, there were over eighty-five cities hit.

In any case, I felt one of the keys was the ability of the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces to perform their function. They were armed by and large with 03s. The VC had rockets, mortars and the AK-47. Well, what chance does a locally recruited force have against that kind of weaponry? One of the staff papers we had prepared I felt and my staff felt that the RF-PF needed to be more heavily armed, including the M-16. As General Westmoreland has pointed out in his book, we weren't getting that weapon which was the equivalent to the AK-47 fast enough to supply the Americans. I felt very strongly that since it was very clear in our staff briefings that a major portion of the casualties were being taken by the RF/PF every week and this was pointed out in the staff

briefings that they should have the arms first, not last. But the decision essentially was, we arm the Americans, we arm the ARVN, then we arm the RF/PF. Well, of course, Tet came along before the last could happen. And so I felt it was not only training, and we had a minimal number of trainers assigned to RF/PF as opposed to trainers working with the ARVN. But in addition to the training was the arming, and I thought we could never provide the security we needed to really move forward with pacification unless there was the security, and the security had to be provided by the local forces, the RF/PF, Regional Forces and Popular Forces.

The main force ARVN divisions, battalions, troops, companies, could not be moved and located, hamlet by hamlet, village by village, in such a way as to provide them security. After all, that had been tried way back in the fifties, and it didn't work. You had to relocate the population in order to do that. So the only way to provide security was through local forces, and I felt that that's where the armament should be. Right or wrong, I still feel the same way. There I did have an argument with the chief of staff and the rest of the staff, because that issue, as far as I know, never got as far as General Westmoreland, because we couldn't agree at the staff level as to what should be done about arming with the M-16.

G: How did Tet change that situation?

L: Primarily time. I think it would have taken another four or five months, maybe, before the RF/PF were in a position to protect the villages and hamlets. Now, true, Tet was primarily directed at the cities where the ARVN were located, and *they* couldn't protect

them. So obviously--(Laughter)--I may well be wrong in my own analysis, and I'm not a military man. But at least that's the way I feel about it.

Tet itself was rough, and I never want to go through anything like that again. I think you may have seen some of my comments in that letter. You want to hear about Tet?

G: Sure.

L: That night--of course, I was living at a little apartment. When I arrived as deputy director for the AID mission, they had a house set aside for me, a great big house. At that time, there were six guys living in it, with maids and everything else, and all set up. I took one look and said, "I'm not going to do that kind of entertaining, and that's not what I'm here for." So I took a small apartment, which was one bedroom, a little study, in an apartment building. And that was plenty for me. That's where I was, and that's where I had my commo set up, in order to be able to keep close touch with MACV, which was out at Tan Son Nhut, and with USAID-2 and the rest of the staff. Not only a telephone, but my CB and everything else. Incidentally, one of the public safety guys, as a matter of fact, was in the same apartment building with me, which helped a lot in the coordination: Charley O'Brien.

The night of Tet we decided to take a look and see how it was. We'd been to a couple of parties, and we got up there at midnight, and I've never seen anything like it in my life. It looked like the whole city rose two feet off the ground with the firecrackers, because of course the way you celebrate Tet is with explosives. And it was incredible.

And then things quieted down. I went back downstairs to bed, and all of a sudden things started--I could hear explosions, and I knew it wasn't H&I; we had stopped H&I a long time ago. H&I was Harassment and Interdiction, which I was familiar with when I first went to Vietnam. We can go back to that, if you want to.

But I knew something was happening, and about that time up came my commo. "They're attacking the palace." Well, frankly, my first thought was, "Damn, they're trying to stage a coup." (Laughter) Because I'd been through coups before. Then I woke up to what was really happening. Tet was happening.

At that point I got hold of my fellows, made sure that USAID-2 was secure, that they were alerted, that we had enough people over there and they were armed. Public Safety guys were over there, and those that didn't live nearby had been able to make it. So I felt fairly good about USAID-2. I called down to MACV and of course there was fighting out there around Tan Son Nhut. MACV itself was okay. So then I called George Jacobson, because I knew he was by himself in that little house next to the Embassy, and the Embassy was under attack. I kept in touch with George off and on through the night while the Embassy was under attack, and he was reporting to me. Everything was quiet at this place until they suddenly started focusing on his house. And I asked him if he was armed, and he said, "You wouldn't believe: I retired as a colonel just shortly before and I don't have a firearm in my house." (Laughter) I said, "Oh, my God." About that time the marines--I'm sure you've heard this story before--one of the

marines came up to the wall and threw a piece up to him. And Jake caught it, and that's what he shot the VC with that came up the stairs.

I stayed there in my apartment, I guess, for two nights, because the next morning I went out--and of course my driver didn't show up; I wouldn't expect him to--and I climbed in the car and pulled out from under the carport, and did what any good man does: called my exec at MACV and told him where I was and what I was going to do, and drove out. Of course, by that time, rolls of barbed wire were all across the street, and there was a police post right across the street from me, and I negotiated that and negotiated out to the main highway, and started down the main highway, and all of a sudden my CB came up and Public Safety said, "My God! Fitzgerald's been trying to get hold of you." He was my exec. So I switched channels and got hold of Fitz and said, "What's up?" He said, "You're heading into a firefight! Go home!" I said, "What?" (Laughter) He said, "The ARVN and the VC are fighting right across the highway in front of you." So by that time I had rolled down my windows. Normally in Saigon we drove with our windows up, because you didn't want people throwing grenades in the car. So I rolled them down, and sure enough, I could hear the firing. So I turned around and went back, fortunately, or I wouldn't be here. That's one reason I'm so fond of the guy that was my exec, because he really saved my life on that one.

Anyway, I stayed there two days, and then they sent two jeeps, fully armed, in from MACV to get me, and I went out to MACV and stayed there for the rest of the

month. I came back to the apartment a couple of times to take a shower and change my clothes, but otherwise lived out in my office at MACV for the rest of February.

G: How long did it take before you were able to get anything like a coherent picture of what was happening out in the countryside?

L: Almost immediately. Our communications were very good, our radio communications, and it was very obvious what was happening all over the country. I was getting it in my apartment through my commo setup, and then of course once I got out to MACV I had full access to theirs. And it was pretty tragic, what was happening to our CORDS people. Why we didn't have more casualties, I don't know; I guess because they were pretty smart and took care of themselves. But it was incredible, the attack that took place. Shortly thereafter, General Westmoreland called me frantically and said, "There are going to be millions of people"--well, I don't think he said millions; I don't remember, but "lots of lots of them are refugees. Shouldn't you do something about it?" I said, "We have. We have stockpiled throughout the country enough rice, rebar, galvanized, everything that's needed, medical supplies, and *piastres* to take care of the whole darned country, already there." He, I think, had the idea that we might have to be commandeering planes to ship materials out from the States, because there would be so many people flooding out of the cities to the refugee camps.

No, no, we hadn't necessarily anticipated what might happen if there were a Tet, but we were prepared for massive refugees at any time from any point, and no matter where they came from. So we were prepared. The whole organization worked extremely

well, and I was very proud of them, particularly the way in which the civilians and the military worked together. I wish I could remember the names of the guys involved, but two guys at USAID-2 particularly I wish I could remember. One of them was the deputy administrative officer, and the other one was the deputy executive officer, who was a colonel, who just happened to be there. They, the two of them, went out in a jeep, one of them riding shotgun, and brought in the secretaries, who were scattered all over Saigon, living by themselves, living in apartments under attack by the VC. They got them all in safely with no casualties, and yet they themselves were subjected to fire all the time, taking their lives in their hands. But there was no question about that; they just went out and did their job. And I cannot remember to this day their names. I wish I could. But that was quite an experience.

G: There was a lot of speculation on the impact of Tet on pacification, and a lot of cables flew back and forth.

L: Yes.

G: What was your estimate of the thing? How long did it take you to decide whether pacification had been set back, and if so, how much?

L: The best way I can put it is that by the end of February, when I was going to leave, Bill Colby was going to come out first as assistant chief of staff and take my job, then to move up and take Komer's job. I wrote Bill and said, "You've got the opportunity I wish I'd had. I'll stay here and run the show. You take a month and learn the country." He

traveled all over Vietnam to all the villages and hamlets; he learned the program. We were in operation; we never stopped operation. From day one we didn't stop.

Yes, we were ready, and the pacification program *per se*, what we were doing, was not really set back. See, the fighting was really in the cities and that's where the strength had to be mobilized. So there wasn't much in the countryside, in the villages and hamlets; they weren't too much involved. Where we had our casualties, was in the provincial capitals, which were under attack. But once our boys could get moving and work out in the villages and hamlets where they'd been, they were able to do so, and Bill Colby was able to go visit them, work with them, and see what they were doing. The impact of Tet lasted far longer in the United States than it did in Vietnam. It was very clear at the end of the first week or so that they hadn't won; they had lost. But we had lost at home.

Whether or not we could have won without Tet is a real serious question in my mind, because the Americans could never have won in Vietnam. The reason we were there--I'm convinced of this--was China. The aura of China, who lost China? Had [Senator J. William] Fulbright stood up for the bombing of the ship--he stood up for our going into Vietnam, and then changed. I have been convinced, and always was, then and later, that had we not gone into Vietnam, Senator Fulbright's committee would have been holding hearings on who lost Vietnam, just like they held hearings on who lost China. That cloud was hanging over the heads of all of us, all the time, that we've got to save Vietnam; we can't let it go the way of mainland China. That's the reason we were there.

I wrote my daughter. I remember I'd been in Vietnam about six months, and I wrote her a letter when she had asked me what was it all about. I said, "Had we known then where we are today, we would never have started it. Just like grabbing a bull by the tail: we've got it; we can't let it go. But we had no choice but to come in and start when we did, but we never dreamed we'd be where we are, or we wouldn't have done it."

G: What role were the Revolutionary Development--or Rural Development, I'm not sure of the right name--cadre playing in your operation?

L: Oh, I missed one very, very, very important point, and that was that our whole job in pacification was there to work with and help the Vietnamese. It was not to fight the war for them, to engage battalions instead of them, or if the battalions were there, to engage them. It was to work with and for, and help the Vietnamese. Their role, the Revolutionary Development cadre role, was to work in the villages with the villagers. Our role was to work with them and to help them, provide the resources they needed. It was not to work directly with the villagers and do it for them. It wasn't to go out and show them how to build a dike or to repair a dike; it was to work with the Revolutionary Development cadre, who were to do that.

(Interruption)

G: You were going to say something about the RD cadre.

L: What I was saying was that our job was to work with them. For example, we didn't provide rice to the refugee. We provided rice to the head of the refugee camp, who distributed the rice. The same thing was true of the RD cadre. The RD cadre was trained

largely at Vung Tau by the CIA element, and their job was primarily to train them in political and economic and other things they could do to help the Vietnamese, plus the intelligence operation. Now, the intelligence operation I haven't dealt with at all. One reason I haven't is because I didn't know too much about it, even though I was in theory head of the organization. The Phoenix operation, in which the effort was to determine who in the village and hamlet was VC or VC sympathizer, and how it was done, I frankly knew very little about. I knew it existed, but I didn't have too much control of it.

G: Was that Evan Parker's operation?

L: Well, yes. That's about all I can say about that one. You'd have to get that from somebody else.

G: Did you know Colonel Jean Sauvageot?

L: Oh yes, I knew him, and what a terrific guy he was. He could go into any village, in his black pajamas, at any time of the day or night, with his fluent Vietnamese, and be right at home. And he could do things and go places that none of the rest of us would dream of going. And he brought back some wonderful stories. But he was a great guy, and made a tremendous contribution. He made a contribution, I would say, of the same caliber as John Vann's contribution, and in an entirely different area. And when John worked, he knew the villages, he knew the countryside, he knew the problem, and he worked hard in helping with the problem. But he wasn't a Sauvageot, by any means. Yes, I knew him.

G: Would you comment on the charge that is sometimes made that the RD program, when it was expanded, lost a lot of its quality because of the dilution of effort, as it were?

L: It's hard to comment on that, because it's like saying you take a school, a college, which has four good professors, real good ones, and it becomes a very good college. So they decide to make it a university, and have four schools instead of the one, and a hundred professors instead of the four. That, I think, is a better description of what happened, is that they had to expand fast, with people that weren't as good instructors, teachers and leaders as the ones they started out with. It wasn't the concept or the organization. It was simply manpower. At least, that was my valuation.

G: Did you know Major [Nguyen] Be, the Vietnamese?

L: Oh, yes. Now, he was terrific. But he was terrific as an individual. And he was terrific in inspiring other people, but he wasn't terrific at getting other people to be as good as he was.

G: What role was General Lansdale playing in all of this when he came over the second time?

L: The second time it was a role he was playing with which I was totally unfamiliar. He was working primarily with the Ambassador and the embassy and some of the military, particularly G-2, but [in] a role that I was unfamiliar with and had little contact with.

I'm saying by all this one of the things that I was saying at the outset: I've never had a job I didn't do the best I could do; I never had a job that I didn't feel, when I got through, I had done everything I could. And this was one of the areas: I could have and should have known more about what was going on in all aspects than I did. And there just weren't enough hours in the day.

G: Sure. You said before that you had gotten, as part of a dowry or package, Daniel Ellsberg into your operation. Now he's of course quite a controversial guy later--

L: Yes.

G: --but at the time, what was your evaluation of him?

(Interruption)

L: You were asking about Dan Ellsberg, and I really don't have too much to say on the subject. The problem was that Dan at that time was working out of the Embassy, and my association with him was primarily in the OCO days, and that was a very short three or four months. And Bill Porter felt that somebody should be supervising Dan, because Dan was going all over the country; he was writing papers; he was talking a lot, and Bill thought that somebody should know what he was doing and where he was going, and keep control of him. And I felt that that was an impossible task, and so while I accepted the responsibility on the surface, I didn't accept it very far, and Bill knew that. My impression of Dan at the time was that he was not happy with the way things were going, but that he was convinced that there were ways in which we could go, and particularly in terms of the Lansdale philosophy of working with the government and with the people, and the job being theirs to make the country resistant to the North without the massive American involvement that we then had. But at the time I felt that Dan was not at all convinced that the North Vietnamese and Ho Chi Minh were right in any way. I may be wrong. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. But at the time I felt that Dan was simply like the rest of us: searching for a way to make the thing work within the historical context

we were given. And too many of our people came out there for one-year tours, with little background and little information, little historical perspective, and what was needed was historical perspective: where the cadre came from; where the people came from; where they were going; what they wanted; more understanding of the relationships, the religious relationships particularly, and just more understanding about the country and working with them to get the job done. And I thought that was what Dan was after at the time. But as I say, he was a pretty loose operator, and so I made no real effort to learn or understand or work with Dan. He was just another one that was there, like Ed Lansdale.

G: What turned him around, do you think? Did you have any clues that this was coming?

L: Didn't have any clues; none whatsoever. I wasn't close enough to him to be able to do that, and he's the kind of guy that you would have to sit down with in the evenings and have long talks in order to understand directions that somebody is going, and that opportunity never arose.

G: Now, you left Vietnam when, soon after Tet?

L: It was April, 1968. Yes, April 1, I think it was. I believe that was when I left.

One last comment: Bob Komer took me to the airport, and on the way Bob Komer said to me, "Wade, if I'd known you then like I do now, I wouldn't have cut your throat when I was in the White House."

G: What was he talking about?

L: I think partly the mission directorship, but other things my reputation wasn't of the best, either in AID or in running OCO, before he ever came out to [Vietnam]. And I think his

implication was that some of the things he said about me were not too flattering. But I had known through other channels (Laughter) that that was the case, anyway. So I just laughed. But he said, "If I had known you then like I do now, I wouldn't have cut your throat." (Laughter) I thought that was amusing.

G: That was a remarkable admission, if nothing else.

L: Well, particularly since Bob Komer and I never really had very much love for each other.

G: Was he Lyndon Johnson's man in Saigon?

L: Yes. In fact, he told me once that Lyndon Johnson had told him, "Well, now, Bob, you've been back here running pacification, and telling everybody else what they should do. Now I want you to go out there and do it. You're so smart you think you can run pacification, you go out there and do it." And Bob said, "Okay, I'll do it, provided I get a good ambassadorship afterwards." And presumably that's why he went to Turkey; I don't know. But I presume so."

G: Did Komer tell you this?

L: Yes. He didn't tell that's the reason he went to Turkey, but he told me that's what the President told him, and his answer. No, Komer was one of the smartest, one of the most brilliant and articulate men I've ever met in my life, and one of the most ruthless and self-centered I've ever met, too.

G: Do you know if he was reporting independently back to Washington?

L: That I do not know, because of course at that time I did not have access to the back channel. Could have, but I didn't see any necessity for it. In later posts, of course, I used

the back channel itself [myself]. But I presume he used the back channel, and that would be very easy to do in his position.

G: Yes. A little tricky, perhaps, if you get caught.

L: Not necessarily, as deputy ambassador. I mean, he was there with the rank of ambassador, of course. He had access to the embassy, and the embassy facilities, as ambassador.

G: You left Vietnam and went to Korea directly, or you had leave, presumably?

L: Well, I had a very short leave, and then Frazier Wilkins asked me to go in the Inspection Corps, because there wasn't another assignment available for me at that time, at least not one that I wanted. And so I agreed to go over to the Inspection Corps. Shortly before I was to take off to Nigeria for the first inspection, we got a telegram from Bill Porter, who was then ambassador in Korea, and asked that I be assigned as his deputy in Korea because George Newman was being replaced. George Newman was deputy then. And DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] in Korea sounded like a very good assignment to me, and working with Bill Porter sounded like a good assignment, so I said yes, I wanted it provided the Inspector General would release me. And the Inspector General was a very good guy, Frazier Wilkins, and he said of course, even though the inspection had been all set up, and it was the second time he'd gone after me for inspection, he was willing to let it go, but he wanted to come back after me again one day. And did, and I ended up my career as an inspector.

G: Did the embassy have anything to do with the *Pueblo* affair when you were there, or was that being handled directly?

L: We had a lot to do with it. General [Gilbert] Woodward, at the time I came there, was the U.S. liaison at the DMZ for the talks with the North Koreans. And of course the *Pueblo* crew was captured in January of 1968, and I didn't go until the fall of 1968, just when we were getting to the point where we wanted to start negotiating, or where they indicated a willingness to start negotiating on the release. That was kind of subtle, too. So no, we were deeply involved, because all of the negotiating instructions had to be either developed in the embassy and cleared in Washington or vice versa. So all during the period of the negotiating instructions we were on the secure communications with Washington, and I was myself many nights, spent many nights in secure communications with the watch office, with representatives of the Pentagon and the White House, as well as State and the President, and we worked out the negotiating instruction. And then the last minute when I called General Woodward over, and we'd worked out the negotiating instructions, what he was to say, so he took them back and had them translated and flew up to the DMZ with them. And delivered his little speech, and he gave them the written apology, and then as soon as the men crossed the bridge and got in our hands, then he denounced the apology. And that was all worked out in advance.

G: Do you know whose idea that was?

L: No, I don't. I don't know whose idea it was. It was one of those things that works out over time. And I think now, even today, I think the North Koreans fully expected us to

denounce, but they had their face-saving device in the piece of paper, and they expected us to say, "We only did it to get the men back." But face means an awful lot in the East, and they had their face-saving device. But then that isn't talking about Vietnam.

G: No, but it is germane. Was there still any discussion at that point of the possibility that the *Pueblo* and Tet were in some way connected?

L: No. I do not recall any, any talk of connection between the two.

G: There was a lot of conjecture in Washington, I know, that--

L: No, not out there. At least now, again, remember that I arrived about seven months after the *Pueblo* crew was captured. So there may have been talk there during the seven months before I arrived. But after I arrived there was none, no talk like that.

End of Side 1 of Tape 2 and Interview I

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L. WADE LATHRAM

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