INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: DON OBERDORFER

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Oberdorfer's residence, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Can we begin by getting you to give us a sketch of your professional background as a journalist before the time of your Vietnam coverage?

O: My first journalistic job was with the Charlotte Observer in North Carolina. I started in 1955 as a beginning reporter. Three years later I was sent to Washington to be the Washington correspondent for the Charlotte Observer and in the Washington bureau of the Knight newspapers, K-N-I-G-H-T newspapers.

In 1961 I left the Observer and was a magazine writer for four years with the Saturday Evening Post. In 1965, at the time of the start of my Vietnam experience, I left the Saturday Evening Post and returned to the Knight chain, this time as national correspondent based in Washington for all of the papers of the Knight group, which was then about five or six newspapers.

In the summer of 1965, I was just at that point going back to work for the Knight papers, which I guess leads into the question of why I got involved in Vietnam. At that point I remember the last assignment that I did for the Saturday Evening Post was an article on Bill Moyers, who was President Johnson's press secretary, and I remember in the process of interviewing for that article, sometime in the

spring or summer of 1965, Moyers said, "If you're going to be available, why don't you come around at such-and-such a time today to the White House press briefing." In those days, the press briefing wasn't in any grand briefing room like it is now; usually there would be reporters standing around the press secretary's office, around his desk. So I did, and at the press briefing Moyers said, "Well, gentlemen, the President would like to see you all." So we trooped through the White House over to the family quarters in the White House. Johnson on that day was making the announcement that he was sending the first combat troops to Vietnam, the marines, and he was explaining it, why he was doing this and the instructions that he had given these marines and so on.

Well, it was very clear to me at the point that I was going back to daily journalism from being a magazine writer, that Vietnam and the developments there and the emergence of the war on a large-scale basis and the American involvement in it was by far the most important story for a Washington journalist, the most important story for the United States. I used to say, and I still believe, that at that point it was the first most important story, it was the second most important story, and it was the third most important story. So I didn't feel that I had a lot of alternatives. I either had to do something about covering Vietnam or to relegate myself to about the third or fourth rank of my profession.

I began by covering what was here at hand, which was the political controversy that was developing in Washington about the war even

in those early days: the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and others, the administration's position. But if you got into that, it became increasingly clear that the people here were dealing with shadows and that a good deal of the comment, both from the politicians and to some degree the administration and even in the press, was being made on the basis of different assumptions about what the circumstances were in Vietnam, in Southeast Asia. So again, it wasn't something that I thought up; it just became obvious that if I was going to continue to cover adequately the political controversy in Washington, I'd better go out there to Vietnam and find out what was really going on and take a look at the situation on the ground. Which I did, starting in the spring. My first trip was in the spring of 1966.

G: Were there already early signs of a rift within the administration over Vietnam policy before you went the first time?

O: Well, I'll have to think about that one. That developed more slowly in the perception of the administration in the press than the rift between some of those on the outside. By 1968, of course, that was very full-blown.

G: There was a debate on the bombing resumption, I think in January of 1966, in the administration. Did you get any wind of that? You know, there had been a long bombing pause--

O: Yes.

G: --and then there was debate over whether to resume it or whether to prolong the pause.

O: Yes. I remember the debate, but what I don't remember clearly was whether we knew about how much debate there was within the administration. I'd have to go back and look.

One of the things that I did, parenthetically, to prepare myself for going to Vietnam, and for the general coverage of the situation whether there or back in the United States, was to rather systematically--as systematic as a journalist does anything, I guess--try to gather basic information about the situation in Vietnam, to read some Vietnamese history, and to go around town and talk to some of those people who either had positions which gave them some authority over the situation out there or who had some long-term knowledge. One of those whom I talked to and got to know at that time, who I thought was extremely valuable to me, was Bernard Fall, who only lived a few blocks from my house and was almost a neighbor of mine. I remember going to see him, telling him that I was going to start reporting on Vietnam, and asking for his assistance. He took me down into his cellar, his basement room, and he had a big room like a rec room type thing, and each wall was covered with bookshelves and books, most of them in French, on the French experience in Indochina, histories of Indochina, one thing and another. And as we talked, he would remember something in some report by General [Jean de Lattre de] Tassigny or somebody, and he'd reach up, go over to the shelves, pull this out, and say, "Yes, they said this in 1951," and so on and so forth.

And this was extremely important, to have a sense of where

Vietnam was, what it was. I wish I had done more of it, a lot more. And one of the lessons, I think that--

(Interruption)

I wish I'd done more of it.

G: How did Fall impress you?

O: Oh, he was a very, very interesting man. He really knew his stuff. I remember particularly one conversation with him that I've thought about a lot. In those days, in late 1965, early 1966, it was the practice of Secretary of State [Dean] Rusk to have a backgrounder in his office, I think it was every Thursday afternoon. And [Robert] McNamara [held one] generally on Friday afternoon, or maybe it was the reverse, I forget. At any rate, they would see maybe fifteen or twenty people from the Washington press to basically give them the government view about the war. And I remember in one of those backgrounders in McNamara's private dining room at the Pentagon, he had a big chart there, and it showed two lines. One was bomb tonnages, tonnage of bombs dropped on North Vietnam, and the other line was tonnages of supplies coming from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. And the lines were sort of coming--the bomb tonnages were going up, and the supplies coming down from the North were going down. And McNamara said rather confidently that when these two lines intersect, that will be the point at which we've turned the tide in Vietnam. That was the way McNamara thought, that by increasing the tonnage here, you could bring the tonnage down [there].

I told that to Bernie Fall. I remember I was about ready to go; I'd been to this backgrounder and we were standing on the steps of his house over here a few blocks away. And he looked at me and he said, "That poor man. He's going to end up like Jim Forrestal, jumping out of a window. That may have something to do with American production or the Ford Motor Company or something, but that kind of thinking has absolutely nothing to do with Vietnam."

Fall knew Vietnam; he knew it well, and some of his articles were rather prophetic and some of the quotations which he had were rather prophetic. There was one from Pham Van Dong which was quoted in an article by Fall in 1962. That was a marvelous piece. And he quoted Pham Van Dong as saying, "Vietnam is going to win because this is going to be a long, inconclusive war, and Americans don't like long, inconclusive wars."

G: That's a famous one.

O: And I think that in that quotation lies much of the story of the Vietnam War.

G: I think you're right.

Now, you went to Vietnam in the spring of 1966--

O: That's right.

G: --for the first time. Did you volunteer for that? Was that--?

O: Yes, as I say, it was almost--volunteer? Yes, I volunteered in the sense--the fact was, I was covering the situation in Vietnam and there really wasn't an awful lot of choice about it. If I was going to really do a job of reporting on what was going on in this great

national debate, I had to have a better sense of what the lay of the land was.

G: What were your first impressions, can you recall, when you first arrived?

O: I don't, really. I had had previous experience in Asia, not in Vietnam; I'd been an army lieutenant in Korea. I'd always been interested in Asia, and in college Asian Studies was my sort of area of interest, and I'd traveled, after getting out of the service in Korea, throughout Southeast Asia and South Asia, though stupidly I'd allowed an American consular officer in Japan to talk me out of going to Indochina. It was right at the time of Dien Bien Phu. He said it was too dangerous for Americans. So I hadn't been in Saigon. So the great exotica of Asia was more familiar to me than it would have been to another reporter who had not had prior experience in that region. I had many impressions, but I don't have any overwhelming--

G: Did you base yourself someplace in Vietnam and make field trips or--?

O: Yes. What I did, as most correspondents did, was that home base was Saigon, and I got a room in the Caravelle [Hotel], and then I'd make trips out from there. The communications all went out from Saigon; Saigon was the only place you could file copy. Both the PTT [Saigon civilian telephone system], telegraph office, telex facilities--I don't think in 1966 we had them--and the air freight and everything else [were there]. You had to go to Saigon to file, essentially. So if I were going off on a trip of, say, a week's duration, I'd give up

my room and put my stuff in a locker or something, or lock it in a closet, and tell them when I was coming back.

G: The Caravelle, of course, has been famously or infamously cited as the place where, especially in the earlier years, I don't think so much later--I forget who made the remark, but he said, "Too many newsmen are filing their stories from the bar of the Caravelle Hotel," or something to that effect. Is that hyperbole, in your observation, not in your own personal case, but what was the Caravelle Hotel like? I've heard about it, but you're the first person I've ever talked to who stayed at the Caravelle Hotel and can talk about that.

O: Not only stayed there, I was there last year.

G: Last year.

O: I stayed there in the summer of 1980, when I went back to Vietnam.

G: There's a whole interview.

O: Well, the Caravelle, in the first place, physically is a fairly modern building which--gee, I'm not sure exactly when it was built; it must have been built, I'd say, in the fifties--had a Vietnamese staff but with a smattering of French expatriates at the top, running the place. Two elevators, well maintained, a bar which nobody much hung out at, and a roof-top restaurant where people would go up and watch the war, watch the exploding--

G: The flares and the tracers and so forth.

O: That's right. Particularly at the time of Tet, when the war got awful close. And that was <u>the</u> place where foreigners, if they had the money, would want to stay; it was the best hotel in town. Across Lam

Son Square is the Continental Palace, which had more atmosphere. It had the old revolving ceiling fans, a sort of W. Somerset Maugham atmosphere.

G: Got rattan chairs, too, I hope.

O: Something like that. And I stayed at times in the Continental Palace, too. But the Caravelle was more modern, it was bigger, and the Continental was always harder to get into because it was much smaller. Most of the transient press corps, which I was a member of, stayed at the Caravelle and [so did] a few of the more or less permanent press corps, those who were there, say, for a year's tour. Most of those latter people rented a house or an apartment or something like that.

For the press, which is a very competitive field, at the same time there's a certain security in being where the others are, because if something is popping around town or around the country, you are going to hear about it from others, from your colleagues. Whether it's day or night, somebody will rap on your door and say, "We're going out to the demo down on Van Dien Phuong Street [?]," you know, that sort of thing. It was an exciting place to be.

G: One of the first stories you filed, if I'm not mistaken, was an interview with Thich Tri Quang, the Buddhist monk so--

O: An early story, yes.

G: --much at the center of the news in those days. And it's sort of a puzzling story, because I gather he was a puzzling sort of a person. Is that accurate?

O: Puzzling to us, yes. He was one of the most interesting people I've ever met, and my discussions with him, which went on over a long period of time and ended up by lasting many, many hours, were fascinating and really unforgettable.

G: What became of him, do you know?

O: As far as I know he's in the An Quang Pagoda in Saigon. When I was there last summer I tried to go see him, and it was very clear that it was complicated. Even toward the end in Vietnam it was hard to see him. He practically always would see me, even after he retired from politics, but he doesn't speak English and I had to take somebody with me, I mean somebody who sort of knew the ropes around the pagoda. He at one time was reported to be under some sort of arrest, but so far as I know he is in the An Quang Pagoda and as free as anybody else is in that sort of place.

G: How did you get that first interview? Was that difficult?

O: Well, it wasn't difficult on the scale of journalistic difficulty. It wasn't that hard, surprisingly enough. When I arrived at Saigon on that first trip, the day I arrived I went to a press conference that General [Nguyen Cao] Ky had in his quarters at Tan Son Nhut. I don't remember now how it happened, but I guess I got there and got to the hotel and ran into somebody I knew, and he said, "We're going out to Ky's house for the press conference." This is the way the Caravelle was. I said, "Can I go along?" And they said, "Sure." So we went there, and Ky announced that Danang was in communist hands, meaning Tri Quang and the Buddhist movement. Well, it was clear, sort of,

from Washington, but when I got to Saigon it became much clearer that the central dispute, the central crisis in the Vietnam situation was not the war, but it was the internal political situation, which at that time was just sort of busting apart, between the Buddhist movement and the Ky government.

O: Can I interrupt you a second?

O: Sure.

G: I don't think that that struggle was ever clarified, really, in the minds of most Americans. Most Americans remained just as puzzled at the end of it as they were at the beginning. "What is going on?" was the question you heard all over. Can you clarify what was going on between the Buddhist movement and the Ky government?

O: Well, there were a number of things going on, but when you get right down to it, it was a question of who was going to exercise power in the country. Is it going to be the military, who in Vietnamese terms had very little legitimacy? They were just people who--they hadn't had a large military, or important military, and here come the Americans, and they are pumping these billions into the military establishment, both on the U.S. and on the Vietnamese side of the war. And suddenly these people like Ky, who was a flyboy from the north, wearing a purple bandanna, becomes the national leader, supposedly, of the country and starts ruling with a pretty heavy hand.

The Buddhist church had its offshoots throughout the country. They had been engaged in an enormous struggle with [Ngo Dinh] Diem and, as you know, had contributed to Diem's downfall in the sense that

that whole struggle for power between Diem and his people and the Buddhists, the bonzes, had been the thing which led to an increasing lack of confidence in Diem.

At any rate, it really got down at heart to the question of who is going to run the country and in what way.

G: Did Tri Quang want to run the country?

O: I'm not sure about that. He never said to me that he wanted to run the country.

G: He disclaimed on a number of occasions. . . .

O: But I think he would have liked to have had a lot of say about how the country was run, and he wanted to have people whom he believed in and trusted running the country. He thought that the country could be not only better run, but I think he thought it was going to be a disaster if it were left in the hands of, from his point of view, venal and military people who basically just wanted to go along with the Americans and make what they could out of the situation. Some of those close to Tri Quang were also military, but of a different social group and different persuasion.

There were some regional factors involved here. The thing that really made the Buddhist uprising, so-called, into a first-class crisis was the decision of Ky to relieve the commander of I Corps, the Vietnamese commander, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, who was close to the Buddhists [and] who ruled from Hue. There's that Hue-Saigon polarization, the tension there, and Thi refused to be relieved, insisted that

he had control of his area. And that's when you began to have this facedown as to what was going to happen.

G: Did you ever get to talk to Ky, other than at a press conference?

O: I tried, but I never had much luck with Ky. I talked to him, as you say, at press conferences. These were not formal things like we think of as press conferences in this country. I mean, twenty reporters would be milling around with drinks in their hands and so forth, and Ky would be there, and somebody would shoot a question and he'd answer, and you would all sort of gather around and listen and then--

G: I understand he made good copy when you could get him going.

O: Oh, sure he did. Yes, he did. I tried consistently over a long time to see [Nguyen Van] Thieu. I never did succeed in having an interview with Thieu. He was very shy about seeing correspondents unless he almost had to, and then he would--you know, if it was sort of the New York Times or the Washington Post he'd occasionally spring for some interviews, but not for the likes of me.

I want to tell you the story about how I got to Tri Quang, because it's an interesting story. I started by saying that it was clear to me when I got to Vietnam that this was the most important aspect of the story at that moment, what was going on. That the whole struggle, the Buddhists versus government struggle, was just really busting out completely, and Ky's assertion that Vietnam was in communist hands and all the rest. So I asked around, "What's going to happen here?" I asked people. I asked people at the embassy, I asked my colleagues, and the universal answer was, "It depends on Tri

Quang," you know, this Buddhist monk. I said, "Well, what's he going to do?" They said, "Nobody knows." I said, "Well, what does he say?" They said, "Well, he's very enigmatic; he doesn't say anything." I said, "Has anybody talked to him?" They said, "He won't talk."

So I went to a Vietnamese government official whom I knew. He was head of Vietnam Press; it's Nguyen Ngoc Linh, L-I-N-H I guess it is, and he was one of the few people I knew around there who was plugged into the government. He was an official of the government, head of the news agency, in effect the head of their USIA. He knew the American press. I went to see Linh and I said, "Tell me about Tri Quang." He talked about him a while, and I said, "I'd like to do a story on Tri Quang. Who knows him?" He said, "Well, I have one friend who knows him very well." I said, "Would you send me to him?" And he said okay. So he sent me to the man who ran the Saigon radio station, whose name I can't remember.

G: We can find it if we have to.

O: Anyway, I had a long talk with him. This guy knew Tri Quang because his family, this radio station director's family, had taken in Tri Quang--it was either in central Vietnam [or] it might have even been in North Vietnam, across the line in central Vietnam somewhere. Tri Quang had lived with them for a number of years before coming to the South and they were intimate family friends. After I'd talked to him for about, I don't know, an hour and a half or two hours, about Tri Quang, what he thought, what he was like, why he was doing this, and all sorts of things, I said, "I understand he doesn't see reporters.

But if there's any way to do it, I'd like very much to see him." And he said, "Well, I think maybe that can be arranged. Call me tomorrow morning," whatever.

So I called him and he said, "Meet me at the radio station Sunday morning at ten o'clock," or whatever. So I met him there, and he took me to the Dui Thanh Clinic [?], which was on Dui Thanh Street [?], only eight or nine blocks from the cathedral, maybe a dozen blocks from the Caravelle, in the middle of Saigon. And there was Tri Quang, who was living in this clinic under very little security, no guard or anything like that. He had a room there, and I was brought by this man, who translated for us and who took a picture, which I have downstairs, of Tri Quang and myself on that first interview.

That was the beginning. I had my first meeting with him, which lasted, oh, I don't know, perhaps an hour or longer. I asked him questions about what he thought, about where the country was going, about what he was trying to do, and so on. And I think it was successful because he could see that I was actually interested in the situation in Vietnam, and I wasn't just a newsman who wanted a quick hit of, you know, "Give me a story for tomorrow" and then goodbye. And I think I got to him because his friend felt as well that I really wanted to find out what was going on, and Tri Quang was being interpreted as a communist agent and God knows what, obstructionist. And I saw him, and he gave me a story, told me what he was trying to do. He said he would call it off if the government agreed to elections, and the government did agree to elections. So I went back to see him and

said, "Now they've agreed; now what's your position?" And we talked some more.

Then he went to Hue when the struggle got really tough. I went to Danang, where there was a clash in the making between government forces and General Thi's forces, and then went to Hue with my friend Paul Vogle of UPI, who speaks fluent Vietnamese. Paul was then working for one of the local Saigon newspapers, either the Saigon Guardian or the Saigon Daily News, and he was tremendously helpful to me because of his Vietnamese language ability.

We went to Hué in the middle of all this and went to Tu Dam Pagoda, where Tri Quang was, and notified him that we were there, and Tri Quang sent word, "Be there this afternoon." We came right in the middle of the highest point of tension in this Buddhist struggle. We came and sat with him. I remember for several days we'd go in the morning, say, ten or ten-thirty in the morning, and we'd sit with him until, say, noon. And he would be getting messages, phone messages and people would be coming in and out with information from Danang, where the battle was taking place and where the thing was coming to a head. Then he'd excuse himself for lunch, and he'd say, "Come back in the afternoon."

We'd come back in the afternoon and sit with him some more for another several hours, and even one evening, late. It got dark. The so-called struggle group, that is, the insurgent forces, had control of the city of Hué. And it was dark, and it began to get dangerous, and he said, "Where are you going from here?" Well, I asked him for

help--that's what it was--in getting from the pagoda to the American consulate, because that was the only place I could get a telephone to call Saigon, to get a friend to dictate a story that could be filed. I said, "Could you assign one of your people to help us get there, because I'm afraid with all these roadblocks you've got, in the dark we'll have trouble." They wouldn't recognize us. So he issued some orders in Vietnamese, and a jeep pulled up, and Tri Quang got behind the wheel of this jeep, with Vogle and myself, and he drove us to the American consulate, which wasn't very far, a few blocks away. But as we'd get to a roadblock, there would be shouts, "Stop!" and you'd hear bolts of guns go back, and somebody would shine a flashlight and they'd see Tri Quang, and they'd almost fall on the pavement with "Oh! The Venerable!" And so on and so on. So, swoosh, we went.

This kept up for two or three days. During this time he would not see any other reporters except once, at our behest, he agreed to see a television reporter who was a friend of mine and who was dying to get an interview with him. He would not, except on the most cursory basis, see any officials of the U.S. government. He did see the American consul--the guy's name was [James R.] Bullington--who came and talked to him for about twenty minutes, and Tri Quang dismissed him.

But we had this relationship, and he would sit there, and whatever was going on it was all taking place within our hearing and discussion, and it was really extraordinary. I've never been in a situation like that before.

G: How did you interpret the whole situation? You had virtually exclusive access, even [almost] to the [exclusion of the] American embassy, as you've just said. Why was Tri Quang getting you on the inside track this way and nobody else?

O: I've often wondered about that, and I think there are really two answers to it. The basic answer is he was confused about what was effective in this case. He thought, I think, that through me he would get his case directly to the American people, to President Johnson. He kept saying, "I want you to get this message to President Johnson."

G: Do you think he was confused about your access to such people?

O: I don't think he thought that I was going to physically tell him, but I think he felt that if he told me, this would be published in the American press in some big way. Well, of course, if I'd been working, say, for the New York Times that might have been the case, or Washington Post. Some of my stories were carried, in cutdown form, by the Washington Post, which received it through the Knight papers and Chicago Daily News service. But he thought that I had a much, much greater, powerful voice than was the case. That's one.

Secondly, I think he liked me and trusted me. And Paul he also came to like, who was the man with me. And he enjoyed being with us. These two things came together in his mind, and we were there and we would give him our full attention. I think he may have been flattered by that, too. And I did like him. I mean, I thought he was fascinating, really. Fascinating and a magnetic person, incredible magnetism. He'd walk into any room or something and everyone would know

that there is a person there who was just radiating magnetism. He was that way.

G: Were you able to follow his career, if we can call it a career, after the Ky and Buddhist confrontation?

O: Yes, after the thing was over, when they broke the struggle movement, he went on a hunger strike. He went to Saigon, went on a hunger strike. When I came back in August--I left Vietnam in June, I think, came back in August--I went to see him, and he was in the clinic, in Dui Thanh Clinic, and he had lost a great deal of weight. I did a story about it. More than that, he clearly had lost his power base and no longer was the government really worried about him. They had broken the back of the struggle and had their military commanders in charge. I'm sure the police had well penetrated the Buddhist movement; they felt they had them under control, and people weren't hanging on his every word anymore. I wrote a piece about this, which I think he probably resented--I'm sure he heard about it--which pointed out that he'd lost a lot of his authority and strength. But though there was a little coolness in the relationship, I continued to see him every time I was in Vietnam until that last trip, when I was only in Saigon briefly and I couldn't find anybody at hand who could take me over there who I--I didn't want to get him into trouble.

Even during periods when Tri Quang wouldn't see anybody--and that was most of the time; during the whole time I knew him, most of the time he wouldn't see anybody--if I showed up he would sit down and talk. Sometimes he asked me not to report anything. I remember once

in 1972, I guess, he got out a piece of paper, sitting in a room in An Quang Pagoda, and he drew in big Chinese characters--he was always practicing his calligraphy--two big characters meaning peace. Gave them to me as a souvenir; I still have them. He said, "The most important thing now is peace."

G: Let's talk for a little bit about the American press-embassy, the American press-military relationship. Did you go to the press conferences in Saigon? I think they were commonly called the Five O'Clock Follies.

O: I did; not every day, but I did, when there wasn't something else going on.

G: Can you give an overall impression of how valuable those were?

O: Well, it's a little bit like the State Department noon briefing. It's the place where the government puts out its official stuff, and the wire services always got a story out of it, whatever they said. You know, "Air: north today," such-and-such, so many sorties, and whatever. "We've blown up two bridges, hit a supply depot," and so forth, and there was always a wire story on whatever military activity there was in the south. It was primarily a military briefing. Actually, the material put out there was pretty much meaningless. It didn't mean anything; it was words and numbers and so forth.

G: Was Barry Zorthian still presiding?

O: Barry Zorthian, at least at the beginning of this period, was not presiding over the briefing per se, but that was his operation. And then after the briefing, or at some time during the day, frequently,

at least once a week or so, he would have a little session in his office for American correspondents who were, in his view, serious about covering the situation.

G: Did that include you?

O: When I was there, yes. And it was on a background sort of thing. And now and then he would have officials of the government from Washington or of the Saigon mission at his house for dinner, to get their views across. There was a lot of interchange there. The Follies were a way of putting out information, and they were a gathering place for reporters. Again, you found out a lot of gossip about what's going on, or who's going where, or who's with what, just by running into people at the Follies. I never found it much of a source of stories.

G: Was Zorthian himself helpful or unhelpful or what kind of a relationship did you have with him?

O: No, I thought Zorthian was helpful. It's like any government information officer--and there was never any question about this--he's there to put whatever best face on the situation to give the government's viewpoint. But in the doing, [if] he's going to have any credibility, he had to be reasonably open and to some degree honest about the situation, and I think Barry was. There was an interchange; there was a back and forth with reporters, and if you wanted to do something and you ran into trouble getting somewhere or doing something, they had a whole staff set up to help you go places and do things. But if you ran into trouble you could go to Barry, and Barry, if there were something that he could help with, would pick up the phone and call

somebody in the embassy and say, "Would you please see Oberdorfer?" Or "Give him a hand if you can, in doing X, Y and Z."

G: Do we infer from this that you didn't have much trouble getting where you wanted to go in Vietnam or--?

O: That's right. In fact, that was one of the--from the press standpoint, let me talk about press policy in Vietnam. This is an often controversial point. I think, from my point of view, from the press point of view, the most important aspect of press policy in Vietnam was that it was accessible, that they would help you go where you wanted to go, and when you came to Saigon, you were given a MACV [press card]. You got accredited to JUSPAO, which was the USIS operation, and MACV, which was the military, and this MACV press card gave you, in effect, almost a priority--it was more than routine but less than militarily operational--but [it] gave you the right to get on any normally scheduled flights around the country. And as you know, Vietnam is a large country, and at that time, travel by road, except in a limited area around Saigon and into the Delta, was hazardous to impossible. So we could go anyplace and talk to anybody, really. And once you got a few miles away from the flagpole, people would tell you what it was they really thought. Even some in Saigon would tell you.

G: I was going to ask you what your experience was in getting knowledgeable people to talk candidly to you.

O: I had no problem. I had no problem. Many times people were so frustrated in the field that you had to apply a discount to what they said.

G: What kind of frustrations were commonly encountered?

O: Oh, the frustration of being in a province, or district of a province, and here comes this new American, and he's there for a one-year tour, and he wants to accomplish something. He wants to beat the Viet Cong at their own game, or he wants to improve the security of the district, or he wants to get a new school built, or whatever. So he comes in there and he's pouring his whole heart and soul into getting this job accomplished, because Americans tend to be result-oriented people. And in this case, on a rather short time span. One year seems like a long time, but in Vietnamese terms it's a very, very short time. And he sees how it ought to be done, and he can get up to the next echelon to get the supplies or whatever, and then the roadblocks start happening. The district chief is a crook--if he finds that out. Or he gets promised, yes, we'll get some people out to repair the road, but then nobody shows up. Or the district chief or the village chiefs, who he wants to sleep in the villages to show the people they're not afraid of the Viet Cong, won't do it. He says, "Well, we'll station our men, you know, at the perimeter." They still won't do it. Why? Because he's thinking like an American; he's not in touch with the Vietnamese reality. But he doesn't know anything about the Vietnamese reality except from his own vantage point, and there's a terrible frustration.

In 1968--I cite this in my book [Tet!]--one of the truest things ever said about Vietnam and the United States' involvement in it, someone said--I don't know who originated it--in 1968, "The United

States hasn't been in Vietnam for fourteen years; it's been there one year, fourteen times." And it's so true. And it's this disparity between the American time scale, particularly the limited time scale of those who were there on limited tours, and between the American context and the Vietnamese context, that is part of the tragedy and underlined the tragic lack of understanding and connection between the United States and that country. Again, so many Americans were always too much in a hurry to accomplish something to learn what it was, where they were, even who they were dealing with.

G: Now, when you completed that first visit in 1966, and I presume you had gathered some of these impressions, what was your overall feeling about the situation as you were returning to the United States? Where were we headed?

O: Well, I was looking at that this morning. Whenever I left an assignment--I've done it throughout my journalistic career--whenever I've finished an assignment, I've tried to write a report, a sort of sum-up report. I find it useful, useful to do journalistically and useful to do for my own reasons, because it makes you think. And if you don't, if you just go along doing the daily stories, you never have to think; you could just always kick them out. So when I left, in the summer of 1966, I wrote a piece about where we were, and the lead of the piece was that Vietnam is a country in search of a leader. What it said is what I believed at that time, and I still think was right, that the fundamental problem of South Vietnam was political, and you do not

have an acceptable political leadership that could generate support in the country.

G: Ky was not what they were looking for?

O: Ky was not accepted, never was, as a leader that was respected within the country.

G: What was wrong with him?

O: Well, he was a relatively uncultured, brash, Americanized, flashy jet pilot, who was pretending--not pretending, who had taken over as a national leader, and this is not the Vietnamese way.

G: This is getting ahead a little bit, but would you contrast him with Thieu?

O: Thieu had a style which drove the Americans up the wall, but I think he was much closer to being a person who had some of the qualities of a Vietnamese leader. That is to say he was working within the society, he had the manipulative skills, and he worked in the background for a while, and then he'd sort of make his move. Ky was seen, I think, largely as the creation of the Americans, and he was--you imagine a society that comes up from the rice paddies, in which the overwhelming percentage of the people are peasants, and if they're not peasants, their political leadership is French-based, lawyer, merchant, intellectual class, and suddenly the leader of the country--if you're going to call him that--the nominal leader of the country is a guy who flies a Phantom jet. You know, he was as foreign to the whole Vietnamese political picture as the Phantom jet is foreign to rural village life, or even mercantile life in Saigon.

G: How did he manage to stay in as long as he did?

O: I think largely because of the lack of alternatives. When Ky arrived on the scene you'd been through almost a revolving door series of Saigon governments after the fall of Diem, and I think when he won the struggle over the Buddhists, that was a big feather in his cap. And then I think that the Americans, having gone through what they did with Diem, were much more cautious about putting strong pressures on that could bring about another cycle of revolution. They'd been through this whole series of military governments. And Ky knew how to please.

(Interruption)

G: You left Vietnam about the time of the elections under Ky, is that correct?

O: No. Well, there were elections and elections, but I left--well, my first trip was from April, I think, until June of 1966, and at the time that I left they had agreed to have elections, in principle, first for a constituent assembly. And they had the elections in the fall, which was in, I guess, September.

G: I think that's right.

O: I went back to Vietnam for the elections. I got back there sometime in August, and then I was there all fall and finally came back home in November.

G: What attitude did the Viet Cong, the NLF, take toward the elections? Can you recall that?

O: Well, they basically said that they were a fraud, and of course they couldn't have participated anyway, because anybody that had any suspicion of being a Viet Cong was ruled out, and later, in other sets of elections, as you know, the excuse that people were pro-communist or something was used to rule out anybody who was a real threat to the regime. And there were threats that they were going to try to interfere with the elections.

G: Did they do much of that?

O: They did some of it but, if I recall, not a great deal and not terribly successfully.

G: Was this due to lack of ability, do you think, or because of some other reason?

O: My recollection of it--and that's all it is because I'd have to go back and look more carefully at the reporting of the time and perhaps, like anything, try to check into what I didn't know at the time--but my recollection is a sense that since they really didn't think they were that important, they didn't put too many stakes on interfering with the elections. I think the Americans, including me, thought they were more important actually than they were.

G: You, I think, wrote an article expressing a certain amount of hope that perhaps the elections would prove a turning point of some kind.

O: Yes, I did. I think that today that that was a bit naive. But to me it wasn't so much any idea that the election per se was going to make everything all right, but I went at it from the perspective which I discussed a minute ago, that the fundamental problem of the country in

the South was that of political leadership. It was not a country. It didn't have any real political--it had anticommunism, but beyond that it didn't have what it takes to be a nation, and those who emphasized what they called nation-building, I think they were quite right in their general conception. Now how you go about it is another matter. But I had hoped that these elections would be the beginning of a new part of a political process that would give people a stake. I think there's some truth to that, but I don't think that this particular process, which was designed by Americans and grafted onto the Vietnamese scene, was necessarily the most effective way to do it, and in retrospect I think to think that this kind of a process was going to bring about a real political change in the country was rather naive.

G: Were you able to revisit some places in the countryside that you had seen before? I know you did a couple of pieces on what we commonly called pacification, although there were lots of other official names for it. Were you able to measure any progress or--?

O: Yes, in my first trip to Vietnam, and then again on my second trip, I identified certain areas, certain villages and even hamlets where I'd spent some time, and then I'd go back to those places each time that I could that I was in Vietnam. There were really two of them, in terms of rural areas. One of them was in Binh Dinh province, near Qui Nhon, and it was a hamlet called Qui Song [?] hamlet. I went there first in the spring of 1966, I believe, although my stories will show when it was. Then each time that I was in Vietnam I would go back there to

see what had happened, what was the situation, what had changed, and so on. And the other one was in the Delta. This one I went to first in the fall. It was a village near My Tho, which I had a particularly good introduction to because an American who spoke Vietnamese had studied that particular village. And again, I went back each time and in fact I went back again last summer, to that village, under communist rule.

G: I'm going to have to get you to draw a comparison, but that may have to wait. Was there any measurable progress between your first two visits to the Binh Dinh village that you referred to?

O: I'd have to go back and look at my stories. I just can't remember in particular what the linear thing was.

G: That's fine. The Chieu Hoi program was beginning to operate at this point, wasn't it?

O: Yes.

G: Did you have any initial impressions of how well that was going?

O: Well, you know, the impressions of somebody like me are very spotty. They come out with a lot of statistics, and I went around and I talked to a few. I went to some Chieu Hoi center, and I talked to a few people who had done it. Yes, there was an accomplishment there, but it was very clear that that was never going to solve the basic problem. That was one of a number of marginal factors in the situation, because as fast as you could get Chieu Hois, there would be recruitment by the Viet Cong and the communist forces. And there was never

any sense that I ever had that this was going to so drain down the other side that they would lose the war.

G: Were the 1st Cavalry and the Koreans operating in Binh Dinh at that time, do you remember?

O: Well, they were certainly during the time of my reporting in Vietnam, but by at that time, if you mean a particular moment, a month or something, I'd have to go back and look.

G: No, I was just going to see if you had any impressions of the way they were operating.

O: I did not spend much time with the American military. You've got certain choices you have to make as a reporter, what you're going to concentrate on. I spent enough to get a sense of what the war was like. I went up to the area close to the DMZ with a marine unit at one time; I spent some time again with the marines, as it turns out, in the Delta. No, it wasn't marines, either, it was the Riverine--

G: 9th Infantry?

O: Yes, that's right, Riverine Force. And I spent some time in II Corps, with a paratroop battalion.

G: 173rd?

O: Something like that, yes. My choice was that rather than spend most of my time with Americans and American military units, I chose to spend the greater proportion of it with Vietnamese, whether it was in Saigon, or in the villages, or in provincial cities and so on, either with the Vietnamese or [with] Americans who were in touch with the Vietnamese reality. Because I always felt that the military side of

the war, while important, was a) better covered, that's where most of the reporters did most of their reporting, and secondly, I didn't really feel that it was basic and fundamental. I didn't think the war was going to be decided on a military basis. I didn't see how it could be decided on a military basis.

G: So that this made you something of an exception among the press corps?

O: I think that's true, yes, I was an exception in that respect. You know, you take the hill today, and you get off tomorrow, so where were you left?

G: In paying attention to the Vietnamese side of the war, the political struggle and so on, was anybody in the American mission of particular help in interpreting the Vietnamese enemy?

O: The Viet Cong and so on?

G: Yes.

O: A number of people were of help: the political section in the embassy; the CIA officers who--in Vietnam the CIA was more overt or more open than in any other situation that I've encountered around the world. Because I think--well, there was a great deal of frustration, not only with the situation in the war, but with other elements of the American government. They had their own ideas that they were interested in getting across.

G: So there was a tension between CIA and other agencies?

O: Yes, they saw things in somewhat different terms, between the estimates of CIA and military intelligence, for example.

G: Regarding infiltration, you mean?

O: Well, I don't know the specifics or the details, although I guess we have had this come out over the years. But naturally, military intelligence emphasized the importance of big-unit warfare, because that was the thing they were prepared to do something about, whereas the CIA, which had a different kind of organization, it was not involved in the big-unit warfare, tended to do an analysis which emphasized more the political side of the war. They had the Phoenix program; they had other things.

G: Of course, that came later, I guess, after Tet, didn't it, the Phoenix program?

O: No, I think it may [not] have acquired that name, but it was certainly in operation before that time.

G: Perhaps that was the PRU [Provincial Reconnaissance Unit].

O: They had a variety of names for it. I was reading recently a memoir by Peer de Silva, who had been the CIA station chief in Saigon in 1964 and 1965, and he was starting something that sounds like the predecessor of all that as early as that period.

Back to the question of who was helpful on the enemy side: the embassy was helpful, the CIA was helpful, but particularly a few private Americans who were out there, and especially a guy named David Elliott, who was a young man who spoke Vietnamese, was married to a Vietnamese woman. He had been trained and [was] a trained political scientist, and I learned from Elliott more about the Viet Cong and their side of things and how they thought--he had a number of former Viet Cong who worked with him.

G: What was his position? You say he was a private individual?

O: He worked for Rand.

G: Oh, he worked for the Rand Corporation.

O: Rand Corporation, at that point.

G: Do you know where he is now?

O: Yes, he's at California--what the heck is the university out there?

G: I can get it from you later.

O: Yes.

G: Did you have any dealings with Douglas Pike over there?

O: Yes, sure. I knew Pike. Pike was in--I forgot about them--USIS, and Pike's outfit--but I didn't really feel that. . . . They were helpful, especially in providing documents and things like this, which were very helpful. A lot of people in the press, and others, tended to laugh at the captured enemy documents and all that sort of thing, a big joke. Well, I didn't think it was any joke, I learned a lot from reading those documents. They could be misused to prove that we've won the war or some other baloney, but the documents were important, and it was Pike and the people at USIS who either had them or produced them or they could help you get them. And I learned something from them, too.

But it was Elliott who had, by far, the best understanding of the Viet Cong side of the war, and I learned a great deal from him and the people whom he introduced me to in the villages.

G: As far as chronology is concerned, this brings us up to something you

said you wanted to be sure and get down today, and that was the Manila conference.

O: Oh yes, the Manila conference.

G: Which was October 1966. Did you go to Manila?

O: I went to Manila, yes. I was out there, and the Knight papers asked me to go over to Manila and cover this Manila summit, which as far as I was concerned, and especially coming out of Saigon and out of Vietnam where the thing was going on, and then to listen to all this baloney that was being put about in Manila by Johnson and all the rest of them, just didn't have any ring of reality about it at all to me. I thought it was the biggest bag of wind I'd ever heard.

The reason my wife said to be sure and tell you about Manila is that I had one of my worst moments in journalism. It was later written up; there was a journalistic magazine called More magazine for a while--it's null now, defunct--which did a story a few years ago on great journalistic boners, and this one was in [it]. They called me up; they'd heard about it, and I told them the story, and they printed it as one of the great journalistic boners.

What happened was that there was a White House press corps, of course, that accompanied Johnson, and I was sort of attached to it, although I hadn't come from Washington. I was the Knight newspaper representative who met them in Manila; I knew the White House press office people and so on. And I got a call--we were staying at I think the old Manila Hotel--one night, rather late at night, around ten or eleven, saying that there would be a briefing at the embassy

the following morning at ten o'clock, and so I was invited to it. I asked the person who called me, "How important is this?" And he said, "Well, I don't know how important it is, but you're invited to the briefing."

I had already, the day before, arranged to go to the [International] Rice Research Institute, the people who were producing this miracle rice, in Los Baños, which is a couple of hours' drive from Manila. The Ford Foundation and others were working on this, or maybe it was Rockefeller. At any rate, I felt that some change in rice production was actually going to be far more important to what happened in Vietnam than anything that was said in this baloney conference that was being put out, to show that all the allies, hand in hand, arm in arm, and all that sort of thing--I was really disgusted with that conference. So I had arranged to ride down to Los Banos with one of the scientific leaders who was leading this program to develop this new strain of rice and talk to him about it. And then Johnson was coming down around noon and I was going to then go back with the press corps, something like that, but write a story about rice, about the one interlude in this summit that was really important.

Anyway, I was reluctant to abandon this plan, and the first thing in the morning, or later that night, I called the deputy White House press secretary, and I said, "Now, really, how important is this meeting with Johnson?" Not with Johnson, this meeting at the embassy, this briefing. He thought I was fishing, to file something. He just

wouldn't 'fess up, wouldn't tell me what was going on. "High security, total security." I said, "What would you do if you were me?" He said, "Well, if I were you, I think I'd go to the briefing."

Well, I figured the briefing was going to be the President. I said, sure enough, they wouldn't invite me if it wasn't a briefing by Johnson. I don't want to hear another briefing, a long briefing. So I went down to the rice institute. Well, the briefing was Johnson's trip to Vietnam, and the reporters filed into the room at the embassy, into one room and then they filed out the back, boarded helicopters and were flown to Cam Ranh Bay. Johnson then went to the rice [institute], to Los Baños, flew down by helicopter, from then flew to Corregidor, I think, and from then out over to Vietnam.

I was the only reporter who was on the ground at the rice research institute. Johnson came flying down with the pool, two or three wire service people, to do this twenty-minute [visit] or whatever it was, and they were all aghast at seeing me there, the pool members and press staff. "What are you doing here?" I said, "Well, I came down here to do this story." And then they told me, without saying it in so many words because it was still super-duper security, that Johnson wasn't going back to Manila. And I asked them, "Please, let me go with you." And they wouldn't. I guess they had their orders and the security mania about Johnson's trip was great. They said, "We can't because we don't have room for you; we can't take you. Sorry."

So I stayed down there and came back late that afternoon by car, and got back to the hotel, and the place was all deserted. There

wasn't anybody there; the press room was deserted. The whole press corps and the President had flown to Vietnam, this great dramatic story, and here I was, sitting there with a story about growing rice! (Laughter) When they got back, some members of the press corps--I mean, they were all laughing about what I had done. Bernard Gwertzman, who is now my competitor on the State Department beat--he's a New York Times reporter; he was then working for the Washington Star--was nice enough to come over and he sort of gave me his notes and his black-sheets, as we call them, carbons, and I wrote a kind of pathetic story which I sent. I felt, as Johnson would have said, lower than a skunk or a snake. I felt I had really screwed up and was wondering what the editors back in the U.S. were going to say. And a few days later I got a letter from Lee Hills, who was executive editor of the Knight papers, who said, "Don't bother your head about missing Johnson's trip. We had plenty of coverage from wire services. We're quite content to have you use your own enterprise to do something that everybody else isn't doing, and once in a while you're going to miss something."

But that was the big story that I missed.

G: How did they like the rice story?

O: Well, the rice story wasn't very good, because at that point the wind was so out of my sails it was not my best performance.

G: Wasn't that the trip that Johnson talked about nailing the coonskin on the wall?

O: That's it, at Cam Ranh Bay, yes. That was the great quote: "Nail the coonskin on the wall."

G: I notice that you had an article [at] about the time of the Manila conference about various important people who were present, giving backgrounders, and you named some names. Were there any repercussions about that?

O: I don't think so; they didn't pay any attention to what I wrote. It didn't appear in the Washington press.

G: I see. What was the talk among the journalists about the trip to Vietnam? Obviously there was a big stir and reminiscences after the trip.

O: Well, I'm not the best one to talk about that because I wasn't really on the trip; I didn't go to Vietnam for reasons I explained. Of course, I'd been to Vietnam. Most of these correspondents had never been there. The White House press corps had never been there, and so they were there for three hours or something at Cam Ranh Bay, which is not Vietnam either. But hell, I'd been there for weeks and months, so they had to tell me what's Vietnam like.

There were a million stories of Johnson there. [Peter] Lisagor had some great stories about him, and others who were on the trip [had some]. But then they a day or two later flew off to wherever they went. Did they stop somewhere in Europe or something on the way back? I forget.

G: That was the round-the-world trip, I think.

O: Was that the one where they saw the Pope, and all the rest?

G: I think that's right.

O: There were some great stories about it, but I went back to Vietnam, so it's not my bag.

G: There'd been a lot of opinions expressed about this time about Johnson's expertise, or lack of expertise, in conducting foreign affairs, at about the time of the Manila conference. Did you have any feel for that; do you have an opinion on the subject?

O: Well, I have an opinion, I wasn't close enough to have any real first-hand knowledge. But I think it was a tragedy for Johnson and a tragedy for this country. I think that he got himself quickly over his head and the country quickly over its head in a situation which he basically misinterpreted and did not understand, and it led to the downfall of his presidency. He was a man who had many qualifications to do things for this country domestically, and what he did in Vietnam made it impossible for him to be successful with the part of the mission that he really cared about most and wanted to do most with. I think it's really tragic. I don't think Johnson ever had any real feel for the situation in Vietnam; most of the people back here didn't. I'm certain that McNamara never did, up until he left, and I still am not sure that he did. I mean, I know he felt all this anguish in retrospect and so forth. But you're dealing with a really totally different culture, a totally different situation there from anything that was within the ken of an American politician or policy makers. And once the U.S. got committed, as it became so heavily committed under Johnson, it was very difficult for a policy maker to

look at it square in the face, because if he did, he'd have to deal with the consequences of so doing, which were unacceptable.

I guess we ought to wrap it up.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview 1

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