INTERVIEW II

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INTERVIEWEE: DON OBERDORFER

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

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Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. Oberdorfer, at one point in your career you said that you spent nine days in Cambodia in the midst of a trip to Vietnam. Can you recall when that was?

O: I think it was in 1966. In fact I'm pretty sure it was in 1966. More than likely it was in the fall of 1966. But I did go over to Cambodia, yes.

G: You made an interesting reference there that you had an interview with a North Vietnamese official. But it was rather cryptic; you didn't name any names. Can you recall any details about that? Was it important?

O: It wasn't important. The North Vietnamese had a mission in Phnom Penh and because for American reporters covering the war, we rarely went anyplace where there was a North Vietnamese possible contact, just about everybody who went to Phnom Penh in the press corps made at least a pass at talking to the North Vietnamese. As I recall, I came in and the guy, through some prearrangement, said come back a second day, and I came back and he gave me tea and he gave me the straight position of the North Vietnamese government. The only thing at all

notable about it was it was the first North Vietnamese I'd ever seen or had ever talked to, I mean in the sense of a government official.

G: You mean he gave you the straight Hanoi Four Points to end the war?

O: Yes, absolutely. Yes. He was just a diplomat doing his thing, which was repeating his government's position.

G: I noticed that the last article from that trip, which carries a date-line of November 20, is one of your think pieces that you referred to last time as sort of an overview or summary--

O: November 20, 1966? Yes.

G: On reading these I feel you made some rather uncannily accurate--I won't say predictions but something along that line. Looking back now, how do you feel about some of the things that you were writing then?

O: Well, I guess my disadvantage is I haven't really looked back to look at them and see exactly what they said. I felt then, as I do now, that when ending some important trip or episode or whatever, that it's a good thing, though often painful, to try to sum it up, both for your readers and perhaps even more important for yourself. Because you don't do it as a journalist; you go through the daily routine of reporting this story and reporting that story, and you rarely sit down and sort of face it and say, "All right, what does it add up to?" So at the end of each of my visits to Vietnam, I sat down and tried to assess where the situation was as best I could see it. I think we talked last time about my sense, after my first trip, that South

Vietnam was a country in search of a leader. I don't remember what the conclusion was in the 1966--

G: Well, we can just refer researchers to the two articles which we have on file.

O: Yes. But I've felt all along that the United States had a limited amount of time to deal with this problem. I didn't know what the limit was, but I knew that it wasn't unlimited. So the real question that I was trying to answer was, how much chance does this enterprise have of success, and can it be done within a time limit that is going to be allowed to it?

Some of these summaries, I think possibly this one, sort of left the question open, but said in effect something is going to have to happen within the next year, whatever, in order to justify this continued enterprise. And in that overall sense, I think I was right. I mean, I think it was a question of time. I think we talked before about the famous quotation, "This is going to be a long, inconclusive war, and Americans don't like long, inconclusive wars."

G: Did you go back to Vietnam between November 1966 and January 1968?

O: No. I wasn't there for the entire year of 1967. I'd spent almost six months there in 1966, two different trips, and that was enough for me for a while.

G: It's wearing. So you came back--?

O: January 1, 1968.

G: Just in time, one might say.

O: That's right. Almost uncanny. I mean, I didn't plan to go back for the big offensive. In fact I read, before going back, the predictions of the winter-spring offensive and all that. You know, every year there was a winter-spring offensive, so it didn't strike me as anything special.

G: Some officials, in hindsight, have said that while they didn't appreciate the scale of what was coming or the fact that it was going to be urban rather than rural, that they knew there was going to be a special effort. Do you recall any sense of that getting across?

O: No. Not from Washington, certainly. From Washington and from reading the press, talking to officials here, there was no sense of some impending big turn in the war. Once I got to Saigon and began talking to people, a few of the people there began to give me a sense that we were approaching, not necessarily the turning point of the war, but we were approaching something very unusual.

G: So some people did have their suspicions that something big was afoot?

O: Yes. But of course you remember this is now less than a month before the offensive, and there was a lot of intelligence. The big problem with Tet wasn't the lack of intelligence but the lack of belief in the intelligence.

G: Some people have told me that the problem is also there's so much background noise in the intelligence. You have to pick out what's important and what's not and put it together. Were you talking to Douglas Pike at all at this time, or was he still around?

O: I don't remember Doug being out there then. I don't recall. He was not one of the people that made any impression on me in that respect.

G: Where were you when the Tet offensive began? I know you know exactly where you were.

O: I was in Laos.

G: Oh, dear.

O: This takes a little going back to. When I got to Saigon, and after a few days there, it became clear to me that something, a major thing, was in the wind, and I wrote it that way. I think I mentioned to you that on--what was it, on the twelfth or so of January? I've got the stories in the collection [I showed you that] you have [there]. I wrote a story saying that something big was in the works, and that the period between then and Tet would be particularly crucial, in the opinion of American commanders and so on. This was based in part on contacts with the U.S. intelligence people and in part on an interview I had with General Weyand, Fred Weyand.

G: He was the commander in II Corps, I think.

O: The II Corps commander. I believed that and I saw it coming, but like a lot of other people, I didn't think it was going to take place during the Tet holiday. A few days before, Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker had had a dinner for a number of correspondents at his house, and he was talking about Laos and the growing problem of Laos, and how he felt that he was going to have to recommend, probably, to Washington, cutting the [Ho Chi Minh] Trail in Laos.

G: That would mean invading, of course.

O: Yes. So on the strength of that discussion, I decided that if nothing happened before Tet, I would go over to Laos and take a look at that during the holiday, because I assumed that the four or five-day holiday would be a total dead time in Vietnam.

G: It always had been.

O: And there would be nothing to do and nobody to see, and all the Vietnamese would be celebrating, and all the Americans would be sitting around on leave or doing nothing. So on the eve of Tet, I went over to Laos, went to Vientiane, and I was up around Luang Prabang at an area where they'd had some recent action, interviewing soldiers in a hospital, Laotian. Some crazy American doctor said to me and my traveling companion, Tony Day, then of the Philadelphia Bulletin, "Well, you guys don't have an Embassy anymore in Saigon, I see." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "The American Embassy in Saigon has been captured by the Viet Cong." We said, "Oh, come on." He said, "Yes, no fooling." So we got on the phone and called the press attache in Vientiane, who told us more or less what had happened, and we got the hell out of Luang Prabang. We dropped what we were doing, got out of Luang Prabang, down to Vientiane, went to Maurice's Hotel, where all the correspondents stayed--hardly qualified as a hotel, a little villa--paid him, grabbed our bags, hired a pedicab, got down to the river and hired a little boat to take us across the river to the Thai town of Nong Khai, got on the train, and got to Bangkok.

G: How long did all this take?

O: Well, I think it was late morning, perhaps, when we heard about the thing, and by that evening we were on the overnight train to Bangkok from Nong Khai.

G: Can you give me some idea of what your state of mind was while you were [inaudible]?

O: Well, we didn't know exactly what had happened, but it was clear that something important had happened, and it was obvious to me that this was part of what was coming.

So we got to Bangkok, and pretty soon there were a number of correspondents there who were out of the country, or who showed up from one place or another. Tan Son Nhut was closed; in fact, all the airports in Vietnam were closed to civil traffic. The army finally agreed to take a planeload of correspondents in on a military plane. I refer to the plane trip and the trip into town in my book [Tet!] and in an article I did at the time. Keyes Beech was along on that flight and, I don't remember, probably fifteen or twenty correspondents. When we got back to Saigon I suppose it was three or four days after the attack in Saigon. So that's where I was.

G: Now, this is interesting. Obviously there were rumors flying thick and fast in this party of people who had gotten together in Thailand and then flew back. How did the picture you were building in your mind compare with the situation you found?

O: Well, we had the radio and we were hearing the reports, but it's not like being there. The first thing that impressed me was when we landed at Tan Son Nhut we were met on the tarmac by a military bus

with armed men in the front of it, and our bags--there was none of this customs or anything; I think we may have had to go through some kind of immigration. But they took us straight downtown in this heavily-guarded, armed bus, which is usually a rather tortuous trip from Tan Son Nhut downtown, heavy traffic and honking cars and pedicabs and motorbikes, and fumes, and people crossing the road in every direction, and so on. And there was nobody. I mean, it was just like a ghost town. There was nobody in sight, all the shutters, every store was shuttered, very few signs of any people anywhere. There was a twenty-four-hour curfew on. And the bus just went, zoom, just straight downtown. To the Caravelle [Hotel], if I remember right. And my lead on the story was, "The silence was deafening."

Then it became a question of trying to assess and find out what had happened, what the dimensions were of what had happened, what the significance was of what had happened. And the military and the U.S. mission pulled out their briefers and--

G: Is that where you began, with the official briefers?

O: Well, that was always part of it. You begin with it, you don't end with it. Fortunately, because I'd been talking to people in the previous month and I hadn't just come into the situation cold, I had people to talk to who I had talked to before, and said, "All right, this is what you've said. What do you think now?" and so on. I went back to see Weyand, for example.

G: Can I interrupt you for a second? There's an interesting story that surfaces occasionally, and that is that [William] Westmoreland had

been pressing Weyand to get his battalions out in the hinterland, and Weyand, acting on his own intelligence, was resisting that and keeping them around Saigon. Are you familiar with that?

O: Yes, I am. That's quite true. Not only that, but it goes further than that. Weyand convinced Westmoreland to move some troops back from the hinterlands, if I remember correctly. This is covered in my book in some specifics. Weyand, I think, really saved Westmoreland. He saved Saigon, I don't have any question about that. Because he saw what was building up, he didn't like it, and he saw it wasn't in the pattern. Weyand was the former chief of army intelligence and in my estimation deserved the title, because he could see the picture of what was developing. He had a clear grasp of it, and he was not so bureaucratically inclined that he was reluctant to give contrary advice. He went to Westmoreland and told him that things did not look good and that he was quite concerned, and just as you say, he got this business cancelled of sending more troops up around the border area, and in fact I think got some troops moved into the Saigon area.

G: What sorts of interpretations were being put on the enemy's objectives at the time, then and now, in your observation? Why were the communists doing this?

O: Will you give me that again?

G: What was behind the Tet offensive? What was the communist objective?

O: You mean what was it thought to be then and what is it thought to be now, is that it?

G: Has it changed any? There were lots of reasons being given at the time. I know the Battle of the Bulge simile was used a lot.

O: Yes. Westmoreland called it go for broke. People used that. Well, as you know, there were many interpretations placed on it at the time, depending on what one's inclination was about the where the war stood, and where the war was going to stand. They ranged widely; some people took literally the stated objectives, which were to win the war. Others felt that it was done for American public opinion, still others felt that it was done to affect the political situation in the South. Then there was a feeling that it might be a prelude to negotiations, to improve the position.

G: You're saying we were very confused about what the communists were trying to do.

O: Well, yes, there were many different opinions. I don't mean to say that one person would hold all these different views. But it was something which for most people came out of the blue.

G: How were the correspondents that you knew affected by this operation?

O: It's hard to generalize, because the press doesn't react in a big lumpen mass. One of the reactions was of correspondents who had felt for quite a while and [had] written or broadcast in their own way that the war was not going well and had been attacked for it, for saying so, at home, had been put on the spot by their news organizations or by the government, and for whom this was the proof that they were right in the sense that their prophecy had come home.

Correspondents were very busy, because all of a sudden there was a big story and it was all around them. And the place filled up with--[Peter] Braestrup has the figures [in his book, Big Story]--hundreds of people, some of whom had never been there before. I think there was very little sense among the correspondents that this was a military disaster for the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong. Basically [they] believed that was some kind of line being put out by the government because it conflicted with the physical evidence before them.

G: What was thought about the body count figures that were being put out?

O: They were treated with the same skepticism that body count figures always were, and always probably should be treated in terms of a precise measurement. On the other hand, as I went around the country in those first weeks after Tet, talking to people, it became very clear that the losses had been extremely heavy, especially losses of Viet Cong, indigeneous South Vietnamese troops, who had just come out into the open everywhere, and many of them had just been slaughtered. No, I didn't necessarily believe the figures, the figures are mythic anyway, in a sense. I did believe, after a few days, that there had been some very, very heavy losses.

G: What was the impact of Tet on the South Vietnamese forces?

O: Well, it varied a lot, depending on their commander, and where they were, the degree of their exposure. In some places, the South Vietnamese commanders and forces just were paralyzed at Tet, totally paralyzed.

G: Can you give an example, or do you remember?

O: Well, there are some examples cited in my book. The Mekong Delta, the commander of that IV Corps region, whoever he was--

G: Cao, I think it was Cao.

O: I forget now. [Nguyen Van Manh] But he just totally went into shock. There's a wonderful, fascinating, horrible story told in a book that was done on a province in the Mekong Delta, by a guy named Harvey Meyerson. Maybe you have it. It's also cited in--

G: War Comes to Long An, is that it?

O: No, that's a different [one]. That book, War Comes to Long An, was about an earlier, much earlier phase. What's the name of that? Vinh Long I think is the name of [Meyerson's book].

G: Okay, I do know the book.

O: And he recreates, from his interviews with American commanders of the advisers on the scene, what happened in Vinh Long in the operations center when the attack came there. The Vietnamese local commander just came unglued, and the American adviser was saying "do this," [and] the guy was just sitting like a zombie.

Then there were circumstances in which the ARVN and even local force troops fought, and fought well. So I think it's pretty hard to generalize, as is the case with so much that happened in Vietnam.

G: Someone has said that the problem is that there wasn't a war in Vietnam; there were forty-four wars, one in each province, depending on where you went. Does that sound like a pretty apt description?

O: No, I don't think it really is. I mean, I don't think there were forty-four wars. I think there was a war; I think it had many different manifestations and outgrowths, but it was not something that was going to be won or even lost on a province-by-province basis in the end.

G: Were you able to get any insight into one of the apparent peculiarities at Tet, which was that it was the VC, rather than the North Vietnamese in almost every case--I think Hue is the big exception--who went into the cities? Were we able to see that that was the fact at the time, and what did we make of it?

O: Yes. I think quite close to the time it was pretty evident. And it was also evident, as I said a moment ago, that there were very heavy losses by these Viet Cong. I think that that's one of the things that led some commanders and so on to say that this was a sort of last gasp throw of the dice, because they knew very well that there couldn't be that many more VC and that the communist side was using one of its principal assets, and using it up fast. And one would have to think that he knew that this could not be done again. I think the intelligence on that score, probably after a couple of days, a few days of fog of war, was pretty good. In fact, I'd have to say I think the intelligence, as far as I know, comparing what intelligence officials, military and otherwise, were telling correspondents in the field and what retrospectively I read in connection with my book, was not bad, throughout Tet and even before Tet. The problem was not intelligence;

the problem was belief in the intelligence, or interpretation of the intelligence.

G: What was different about Hue? Why did we think the North Vietnamese went into Hue?

O: I don't remember, really, at the time, except that Hue was--when you get up to that region of the country, you had much greater presence of North Vietnamese regular forces. But they were able to take over Hue very easily, and they took over Hue basically almost without firing a shot. If they had been able to take over Danang and Qui Nhon or some other major cities in the same way, there would have been a similar battle. But they weren't, and I doubt--I've never seen any evidence--that the objective of the North Vietnamese at Hue was different from the objective anywhere else. It's just that it had a much greater degree of success.

G: Were you able to cover the fighting at Hue?

O: Yes, I was there.

G: There was a lot of criticism of the destructiveness of the methods used in retaking Hue. What were your thoughts on that subject?

O: I felt the same way. I felt that there was indiscriminate use of firepower, bombing and other kinds of firepower. At the same time, it was awfully comforting to be with some unit and have air strikes come in to help you and plenty of artillery pounding the wall ahead of you. But in the overall sense, I think the Battle of Hue was treated as a sort of set-piece, almost World War II-like battle.

G: House-to-house sort of thing.

O: Well, there was that, but I was thinking in terms of units and--it's the one urban battle where you could get out your charts and you see this battalion over there, and this battalion, and you're going to send this group, and yours circle around--it's the kind of thing, I guess, that West Point classes and commanders could live off a long time. In this respect it had an interesting aspect, and that is that it was during the battle of Hue, which lasted for over three weeks, that Walter Cronkite came to Vietnam. And Cronkite went up to the area, up there to Hue, because that's where the only really remaining action was, and he was briefed by General [Creighton] Abrams, who was then deputy to Westmoreland, but who had established something called MACV Forward, which was a special headquarters near Hue, I think at Phu Bai.

G: Would you comment on that high-level treatment that Mr. Cronkite got?

O: Well, I'm coming to that.

G: Okay.

O: Everybody in Vietnam supposedly had, the correspondents had a so-called assimilated rank. If you were the third man on the AP desk you might be a lieutenant, or somebody who was a correspondent for the Knight newspapers like me, I don't know, might be a major, and Joe Alsop was probably a general of some kind, or Walter Cronkite--

G: Lyndon Johnson called him General Alsop all the time.

O: Yes, that's right. And Cronkite would have been a four-star general, I guess, I don't know, in terms of importance. But he was given the big VIP treatment, taken up there, spent the night at Abrams'

headquarters, and was given a big briefing by Abrams about the battle of Hue, and [by] Abrams' staff. And the thing that appalled Cronkite, and impressed him, at least so he told me, was that they were talking about this as if it were just another World War II battle, just as it had been in Italy when he'd seen similar battles and so on. And Cronkite, just out of his gut, out of his feel, out of his sense of the situation, knew Vietnam was far different from this. What may not have been so clear to him was that this was the one special unique situation during the whole war that looked more like a World War II battle in a city than anything else ever did before or since. But he came back convinced that, among other things, the wrong strategy was being applied to the war in Vietnam, because of his experience in Hue.

G: I think he reported his opinion that the war was stalemated, didn't he, at that point?

O: That's the essence of it, yes. Although if you go back and read what Cronkite actually had to say in his famous broadcast, or watch it on a videotape, it's much more suggestive, though no less powerful, than people remember. People remember it as a kind of flat announcement that the war is lost, or that there's no hope or something. He didn't say that.

G: How do you account for that? So many people do remember "when Cronkite turned against the war."

O: I account for it because Walter Cronkite is a real professional, and knowing how divided the United States was on this subject, he was going to contribute what he could in terms of his opinion and his view

on the basis of having been out there, but he wasn't going to do it in a way that damaged his credibility or his position with the many millions of Americans who he knew were on the other side of it.

G: One of the things that Tet is credited with doing is destroying President Johnson, of course, so that on March 31 he came out with his famous speech. Most people know exactly where they were and what they were doing when that speech was broadcast. Can you recall where you were?

O: I was in Saigon; I don't remember exactly what I was doing. It would have been early in the morning in Saigon time, I guess. But I remember the reaction to it among the Vietnamese, which was fascinating, was that this was very clever of Johnson, that it meant that he really was going to be re-elected by making this clever maneuver to say that he wasn't going to run again. It was a typical Vietnamese interpretation.

G: Are you suggesting that they put those kinds of interpretations on all significant moves?

O: Probably, probably. The Vietnamese, especially the educated classes of Vietnamese, are very conspiratorial-minded people, and they had this sense of politics from the French, too, and their view of political motivation and maneuver was extremely, not only subtle, but they love it. They love conspiracy theories and that sort of thing. It was clear to me what it meant at the time.

G: Were you surprised?

O: I don't remember.

G: Were you surprised about the bombing restriction which accompanied that announcement?

O: No. Well, you remember, we had periodic bombing restrictions, and I wasn't surprised at that. Because in fact it didn't sound like, as you listened to it, any very big or sweeping--it didn't cover all of North Vietnam, as I remember.

G: Up to the twentieth parallel, I think.

O: Yes. And it sounded like a kind of temporary operation, which it probably would have done had not the North picked up the peace maneuver.

G: Is that the interpretation you put on Johnson's withdrawal from the candidacy, that he was really after peace?

O: No, I think there were a number of factors that came in here. I think, as you are aware I'm sure better than I am, Johnson had for a long time talked about whether he would run again, had really probably never completely made the decision that he would. There were domestic factors, there was the Democratic Party, and there was Vietnam. I think Johnson must have seen that the war was coming down around his ears.

G: What was the reaction of the other Americans that you knew? You said "the fascinating reaction of the Vietnamese." What about the press corps and the military?

O: There was a lot of anti-Johnson sentiment around out there.

G: Among whom?

O: Among the Americans, I mean. So some of them were probably pleased.

G: Are you talking about the military and the press now or primarily--?

O: There was a good deal of both, I think. I really don't know; I just don't remember. It didn't make any special dent on me, what they thought about Johnson, I'd just be projecting my own ideas.

G: How long did you stay then on that trip?

O: It seems to me I must have left around the middle of April. I was still there when Johnson made his annoucement, and I left a few weeks thereafter.

G: There were a lot of statements made that Tet had set back pacification, well, pick a number of years. Were you able to do any investigating of the impact of Tet on the pacification programs?

O: Yes. I mean, I went out to a number of provinces in various areas. I went back to villages I had been to before; I went to provinces I'd been to before. And I don't think there was any doubt that there had been a setback, the question was whether it would be temporary or permanent. And I did some reporting on it for the Knight papers: pacification programs, this village in that area, and trying to put it all together. I mean, the most graphic symbols of people were the pacification advisers, with maps on the wall that were riddled with bullet holes from battles in the province headquarters, and all that sort of stuff. And it did set back pacification in one sense. In another sense it made the job of quote, "pacification" easier, because of killing off so many of the local Viet Cong.

G: A very prominent British adviser, a man who'd been in Malaya in the early days, said that he was astonished when they finally began to

move back into the countryside and how easy it was. Did you have a similar impression, or was that not what you saw?

O: Well, you know, it may seem easy intellectually. People were scared. The Vietnamese were scared, Americans were scared. This had happened, they didn't quite know what was out there. I guess once they got back into place and they sort of began to feel around and see there wasn't much out there, then it began to look easy. But I don't think it felt easy at first.

G: Not at first. How long did it take us to move back into the countryside?

O: It varied greatly from area to area. And there was a push on from Saigon to get back, and they were really having to push a lot of the provincial commanders, and local commanders didn't want to move. Their troops wanted to find out--I mean, here were the troops out in some province in the Delta, and then they were worried about what's happening back in Qui Nhon or wherever their home town was. Many of them had been away at Tet, even though some leaves had been cancelled, as you know, and all of a sudden there was a grave concern about the Vietnamese for something across the country in their home towns. So there were problems about getting them going.

G: You said in our previous interview that you spent a great deal of time covering the Vietnamese side of things. What was the result of the Tet offensive on the view the South Vietnamese had of the Viet Cong, or whatever? Did this hurt their image any? One would suspect that it might have.

O: I certainly don't think it helped it. Again, it's so hard to generalize about Vietnamese opinion or anything about Vietnam. But I think this rather hurt the credibility of the Vietnamese communists. They said they were going to put on this big thing and were going to win the war; they tried it and it failed. And the Vietnamese did not need to be impressed with their military prowess, because they already were impressed. But I think a greater damage was perhaps the inability of the Americans to prevent it from happening. The Vietnamese had this--and right up until the end they had this--almost at one level blind faith in the Americans, that here's this big powerful country, the most powerful superpower in the world, and when it really comes down to it, they won't let this happen. They will do it. That kind of thing, like the gods will take care of them, you know. And even days before the fall of Saigon, many Vietnamese pretty confidently expected that things might look bad, but just wait, Washington, the order is going to be given, and all over a sudden, swoosh, and everything is going to change.

G: There will be the dramatic intervention; the cavalry will arrive.

O: That's right.

G: How did they feel when it didn't?

O: Panic. Or resignation, there's some of that in the Vietnamese character, too.

G: When did you go back to Vietnam next?

O: After Tet?

G: Yes.

O: I went back to Vietnam in the winter of 1969, November or December of 1969, for a month.

G: Now, Nixon's Vietnamization was taking hold by this time.

O: That's right. And by now, in the fall of 1968--I came back in April of 1968 from Vietnam to the States, and I covered the political primaries for the Knight newspapers.

G: Did you cover New Hampshire, by any chance?

O: No, New Hampshire was too early; I was still in Vietnam. But I went with Bobby Kennedy to California; I was with Kennedy when he was killed in California that spring, early summer.

Then in the late summer I was hired by the Washington Post. I switched from the Knight newspapers to the Post and covered Nixon's presidential campaign in 1968. Then when he won the election, I became one of the two White House correspondents, wrote about the administration and wrote a column on the presidency.

Then I got started on Tet!, the book. And it started, I don't know, in a strange way. I had been a magazine writer, done a lot of writing and free-lancing before joining the Washington Post. Of course, I'd been with the Saturday Evening Post before. And after the campaign and after I got started covering the White House, after a while I thought, okay, it was time for me to do a little magazine writing again. And I got in touch with my agent in New York; I began to think about some articles that I might write. And as I focused on this question, it became clear to me that the one thing that I really wanted to write about was Tet. I felt then that I had a perspective

on this particular event, which I thought was an event of historical importance, and historic importance, that very few other people had, because I had gone back and forth between the war zone and Washington, because I could see the tides of American public opinion as they began to flow out, and what had happened, and had a sense also of what happened in the war zone. It was I guess you could say almost a compulsive thing to me, and after I began to think about this, I realized that this is something I really wanted to do. I saw it as my book; this was the thing that I could really contribute that maybe nobody else could in the same way.

So in that summer of 1969, I got the approval of the paper, and I got a book contract. I wrote an outline, a prospectus, and I got the then-foreign editor, Harry Rosenfeld, interested in sending me over to take another look at Vietnam almost two years after Tet, a year and a half after my last encounter there. It would have been around a year after Nixon's election. And I told him, it was clear to him, that in addition to doing that I would do research on my book. So that's when I did the Saigon end of the research, spent a month out there, wrote some long pieces for the paper and did the research on Tet. So that was the fall of 1969. In the late summer and fall of 1970, from around July, August, September, October--that's right--I took leave of absence from the paper to write the book. It was published in 1971.

In the summer of 1972, I left Washington to be the Washington Post correspondent in Tokyo, [for] Northeast Asia. I wanted it understood before I left, and I got an agreement and understanding,

that I was not to be considered the back-up man for Vietnam, because I knew that if I was so considered I would never be able to cover Japan. You know, I'd have a few weeks in Japan, and then something would happen in Vietnam and I would be bouncing down there, and I would be coming back and forth and I didn't want that. But I did, during my service of three years in Tokyo, go down there twice on special occasions.

G: What were they?

O: The first one was in the late fall of 1972 when Nixon announced that peace was at hand, just before the U.S. elections. It looked like there was about to be a big breakthrough in the Paris talks. The South Vietnamese were dragging their feet, and it looked like, from afar at least, this was going to be the end of the war or something. So they asked me to go down, which I did. I was there for about a month, I guess, two or three weeks.

G: What did you find?

O: Well, it was rather frustrating, because basically the action was in Washington. I found the Vietnamese apprehensive, and I took the occasion to go back to some of the places I had visited in the past to see what was happening there. I found that the level of warfare and everything had diminished greatly. It was the most stable period that I had seen in terms of--

G: Did you ascribe this to the absence of the old Viet Cong infrastructure? Had Tet done this?

O: That had been part of it. The government was better organized; there were lots of different factors that went into it.

G: How had pacification been going?

O: It was going splendidly, if you take the surface indicators. I'd like to go back and look at my pieces from that period, I don't have much of a clear recollection of it. It was the most frustrating of my trips to Vietnam, because I didn't see as much as I otherwise would have. I went there for a particular purpose, which didn't prove to be very worthwhile, and therefore because we were waiting for action in Saigon, I wasn't able to travel as much as I otherwise would have.

Then I went back at the end, in 1975. I was asked to go back, help out, and I didn't know when I went down that it was the end, but it became clear to me rather fast that it was the end. I didn't stay until the fall of Saigon, I left about ten days ahead. Which I regret now.

G: Why do you regret it?

O: I would have liked to have seen the very end.

G: Were you ready to take your chances on getting out?

O: Yes.

(Interruption)

G: Then you went back after--

O: Then I went back in the summer of 1980 for a week to--well, I went to Vietnam for a week, went back for a couple of days to Saigon, which was fascinating and agonizing and just a. . . .

G: That was a wrenching experience?

O: It was a very wrenching experience. I didn't expect it to be as much as it was. It was because of the people and what was happening to the people, especially economically. Politically I was more prepared for it than I was economically.

G: What kind of changes struck you especially?

O: Well, the whole place was just going downhill fast, and it's not working: people sleeping in the streets, people with barely enough to eat, which was never true in Vietnam. All of the inherent problems of the country, which were in a sense masked by the American presence, have reoccurred and been intensified and exacerbated by Vietnam's own isolation and its own actions with regard to Cambodia and its alliances with the Soviets, its conflict with the Chinese. And those of us who would like to see the Vietnamese come out of all this with a better life for their own people, under whatever political or social system they're going to have, can only find this dismaying. I still believe that something has to give there. I can't believe that over an indefinitely long period of time the leadership in Hanoi is going to continue down what is to me a hopeless road, and somehow in some way I think they're going to change their direction. Now, I can't say how it's going to be done or when it's going to be done, but what they're doing now leads them nowhere.

G: Where did the new leadership come from in the South, or were you able to tell?

O: The new leadership in the South, as best I could tell, is mainly the old leadership from the North. I mean, the people at the top have

been brought in from the North. One of the interesting things is that the southern-oriented [?] forces, politically and otherwise, this Viet Cong or PRG [Provisional Revolutionary Government] or whatever tag you want to put on them, [their] leaders are not much in positions of authority at all and have been pretty much ignored. Nguyen Huu Tho is the nominal vice president of the country, but nobody thinks he has much say about anything.

G: I hesitate to use this analogy, but it sounds to me like you're describing a sort of carpetbagger situation. Is that taking it too far?

O: Well, I don't think American analogies are very good. You've got to remember, [in the] first place a good deal of the leadership from the North was indigneously from the South, in Vietnam. But those elements which had taken the brunt of theoretically being the political arm and so forth from the South during the war have ended up being pretty much ignored, as far as I can tell. And from all I could learn of it, I don't think the leadership in the North has done very well adapting their style of leadership to the South. The basic problems of the country go far beyond that; they're not problems that could be much changed. It can only be marginally changed by that kind of situation; the basic problems are overall big problems the country has and they have to do a lot with their international position.

G: How freely were you permitted to observe on that trip?

O: Well, it's like any other country; I was permitted to wander around as I wished on my own. Interviews were set up for me that I requested;

in a tour I requested I was accompanied, but of course the problem is not speaking Vietnamese. In the North there was really nobody I could talk to among the Vietnamese without a Vietnamese official being present as an interpreter or something. I did have diplomats; I talked to a lot of diplomats stationed in Hanoi. When I got to Saigon, there were a lot more people who could speak English, and I was able to talk to a good number of people just walking around the streets and seeing people I had known in one place or another in the city.

G: Did you feel any need to be cautious about going back to see old acquaintances?

O: Oh, yes, I did. I was cautious. And I tried to think of whether this would be complicating for them. And in fact I didn't see many.

G: I remember you said last time you had considered going to see Quang again.

O: Tri Quang. Yes, I wish I had. It would have been senseless for me to go to see him without an interpreter, and I was determined I wasn't going to go take some government official out there, and so it never did quite work out.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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