INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 6, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: BARRY ZORTHIAN

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Zorthian's office in the Time-Life Building, New York City

Tape 1 of 1

M: Let's begin by identifying you. You're Barry Zorthian, and your main official position during the Johnson Administration was as minister-counselor for public information in the American Embassy in Saigon, South Vietnam. But prior to that, you had been I believe deputy public affairs officer in India for several years and had spent some time with the Voice of America, USIA, during the late 1940s and 1950s. Is that correct?

Z: That is essentially correct. Let me summarize it very quickly. I was with the Voice of America from 1948 through 1961, and my final position there was as program manager, which is the officer responsible for the whole program output of the Voice of America. From June of 1961 until early February 1964, I was deputy public affairs officer in India, stationed in New Delhi, and from February 1964 until my departure, July 7, 1968, I was with the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, initially for approximately one year as director of USIS. In January of 1965, the President gave me an appointment as public affairs counselor, with the rank of minister, and then the titles changed somewhat for various reasons. I initially had the rank of minister

for Public Affairs; I became director of the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office in May of 1965, and in the fall of that year, my minister rank was changed from minister for public affairs to minister for information. Technically, it was counselor for information with the personal rank of minister. [That] is the exact diplomatic definition, usually labeled minister-counselor for information.

M: In your career with the Voice of America and/or in India, did you ever have occasion to encounter Mr. Johnson, either before he was vice president or while he was vice president?

Z: No, not directly. Obviously, in a number of situations, I dealt with developments involving him; in the case of the Voice, [it] was news stories; in the case of India--he had been there a few months before we arrived--but there were developments involving the then-Vice President. Never any direct contact with him.

M: I see. Then, in 1964, he had just been president a few months when you were sent out to Saigon in your capacity there.

Z: That's right.

M: The description given by your predecessor, John Mecklin, which is in some detail, describes the difficulties, credibility gap or so on that existed between the press and the government out there. Did Mr. Johnson give you some sort of special instruction, or a special charge in connection with this when you were sent to Saigon?

Z: Not prior to my transfer to Saigon. My appointment in Saigon was one of the last acts approved by Ed Murrow as director of USIA before his resignation in the spring of 1964. I went directly from New Delhi to Saigon without a visit to Washington. So, outside of a letter from Mr. Murrow, I had no real instructions, no brief from Washington, and certainly none from the President.

However, it was obvious that various things had to be done in Vietnam, one of which was some action on the whole problem of press relations. I might say that initially--and this doesn't involve the President directly, but it puts your question in context--my instructions from Ed Murrow received in writing in New Delhi were that I was to have nothing to do with the press in Vietnam. This was at the specific request of Henry Cabot Lodge, the ambassador. When I was nominated to replace John Mecklin, Ambassador Lodge took the position--and it had nothing to do with me as a person, but simply as a matter of operational philosophy--that all he needed was a press assistant --he finally appointed one, a young foreign service officer named Joe Lubin--and he would be his own press officer. His position was that the director of USIS was to focus on psychological operations and to have no official responsibility for press relations. This was a change, of course, from the earlier arrangement whereby John Mecklin was the mission's primary channel to the press, at least on the civilian side. MACV had always had it own press operation.

So those are the conditions under which I went into Vietnam:

very explicit instructions from Ed Murrow, reinforced and reconfirmed by Ambassador Lodge when I arrived there, that I had no role with the press.

I got along quite well, at least from my viewpoint, with the Ambassador and, I think, from his viewpoint. We inevitably began to talk press relations. However, no change in these arrangements were made until after the Honolulu Conference of June 1964 at which point there was a change in the military command on the way. If you remember, General Westmoreland was to replace General Harkins. If I remember the mechanics then, Prime Minister Nehru of India had just died. Secretary Rusk flew to New Delhi as the U.S. representative at the funeral, and then his plane came through Saigon, picked up Ambassador Lodge, General Westmoreland, a number of other mission officers, including myself. We flew to Honolulu where we were met by Secretary McNamara and various DOD officials, including General Wheeler; also including Carl Rowan, who by then had taken over the position of director of USIA after Ed Murrow's resignation.

That Honolulu Conference, chaired by Secretaries McNamara and Rusk jointly, and the Saigon side of the table including Ambassador Lodge and General Westmoreland as our primary representatives, dealt with a number of subjects, all designed to achieve some political stability in Vietnam, to achieve progress in the war.

One of the subjects was press relations. Carl Rowan was appointed to chair a group to consider the whole question of press relations, and what arrangements could and should be made in regard to improving

the Mission's relations with the press. Arthur Sylvester was part of that group. Bob Manning was also there. He was then still assistant secretary of State for Public Affairs. I was included in that group as the Saigon representative. Colonel Bill Helmantoller who was the CINCPAC I.O. at that time, was the CINCPAC representative. There were undoubtedly one or two others, but these were the principal ones.

M: That's a pretty formidable group.

Z: First, I gave a briefing to the assembled group, each of us gave a briefing in our field; I gave one on psychological operations--the need for improving media capability in Vietnam--and expressed the thought that in regard to press relations, we were operating under an illusion that this could be separated between military and civilian requirements; that because the war was intertwined--our recognition there was reflected in the position within the country of the ambassador and his relations with the MACV commander--because the war was intertwined, the press relations approach ought to be unified and put under one direction with responsibility to the ambassador, primarily, in Siagon, but ultimately to Washington, of course; but again, to a combined channel of responsibility in Washington, hopefully, the White House press secretary.

This working group I mentioned endorsed that concept, I think had reached that same conclusion probably on its own initiative, and recommended such to the plenary group, chaired by the two Secretaries

and Ambassador Lodge and so on. This was endorsed by the plenary group. McNamara and Rusk both approved it in principle. Westmoreland and Lodge at that table suggested I be identified as the man to be in charge. We had worked together at that time for three or four months. Both endorsed it. That was early June. After that, if you remember, Ambassador Lodge resigned, came back to the U.S., took part in the Republican convention. As a matter of fact, it was while we were in Honolulu that the California primary was held in which Goldwater won and, in effect, killed Nelson Rockefeller's chances, and also Lodge's incidentally. If you'll remember, Lodge had first made his big, I was going to say record, but I should say he showed his strength in New Hampshire and then was somewhat weak in Oregon. But at any rate, these were subsequent to the June meeting.

By July 7, after Maxwell Taylor had actually taken office--I may be a little off the date, but right after July--finally a written directive came out from Washington signed by the President. There were two directives, really. One said, "Barry Zorthian"--and this was by name, I think I'm probably the only officer who ever got a directive by name out of the National Security Council--"is in charge of press relations for the whole mission. He will serve as principal public relations officer to both the ambassador and the commander of the military." It laid down some very explicit authority in some very explicit terms. This was a presidential directive and obviously carried tremendous weight. As a matter of

fact, when it first came in, Lodge was still there and said, "My God, this makes it sound like you've been appointed Pope."

M: And even though your title changed after that, basically--

Z: Let me shift back. That directive actually came out in early June, after the Honolulu meeting about the first or second week in June because Lodge was still there.

Then in early July, and that was July 6 or 7, came a second directive again endorsed by the President, and in fact, ultimately [was] an NSC directive, which laid down a policy guideline. This was a so-called maximum candor, that our basic approach should be one of maximum candor consistent with security considerations. So by July of 1964, I had in my hands two directives both endorsed by the President, issued by the President in fact, one giving me authority overall for press relations in Vietnam, obviously subject to the ambassador and through him to MACV, as well, but responsible ultimately in the chain of responsibility to Washington. The other gave us a substantive directive to exercise maximum candor and issue maximum information about the war.

I had a counterpart in Washington for about two months, probably less than two months as it finally worked out, and that was Bob Manning, who in July, and I'm not sure of the exact date, left the job of assistant secretary of State for Public Affairs, was succeeded by Jim Greenfield, and had in his hand a charter from the President, a written statement from the President, saying: "Bob Manning will be in charge of press relations dealing with Vietnam in

Washington"--and therefore had authority over State, DOD presumably, and the other elements of the government involved.

M: Are you saying that Greenfield didn't have that authority?

Z: Bob Manning left the government about the end of August or early September to become editor of the Atlantic Magazine. Jim Greenfield never got that letter Bob Manning did. One of the headaches we had over the years, I think, was the issue of lack of unified channels in Washington on press relations. No, Jim never had that.

M: And his successors didn't have it either?

Z: And his successors did not either--Dix Donnelly. He was in charge of State; Sylvester and Phil Goulding were in charge at DOD, and both were subject, obviously, to the White House. But then there's always a question as to how much time Bill Moyers or George Christian had to really exercise the kind of direction, the kind of central authority that was necessary. There was no doubt of their authority to do so; the exercise of it was another question, a practical one.

But, as I say, by July of 1964, I had these two directives. They were extremely critical and important and were, in effect, never rescinded. They were in effect right through my service in Vietnam. Sometimes they tended to be watered down; the military tended to spin off as it got bigger, but on paper, at least, both these directives were there, and the knowledgeable military recognized them.

These developments in the press area, incidentally, were quite distinct from the developments on psychological operations. The Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, which developed differently, also

had some innovations in it, in that, by the spring of 1965, we had a Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, not a USIS one. But in our Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, which embodied the concept of a united functional approach to this program of psychological operations, we included military personnel and AID personnel, USIS personnel, combined what were existing operations of all three. And that was approved as an NSC directive; it had institutional authority approval. It wasn't just an ad hoc organization created out in Vietnam.

M: What about the Washington end of that? Was that unified?

Z: You really should check the NSC directive on this. The Washington end of it--as it came out, the NSC directive gave Leonard Marks, gave the director of USIA overall responsibility as executive agent for the government in the field of psychological operations, authorizing him to draw on the resources of other agencies--DOD, AID, and others--both manpower and funds to carry out the job. He, in turn, delegated the field responsibility in Saigon to the director of the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office. And that directive had a last line in it, saying, "The responsibilities of the minister for information in Saigon are hereby reaffirmed," reaffirming, if you will, the earlier presidential directive on press relations, as well as the director just by responsibility.

It got a little complicated, obviously. But the important basic element in all of this was the concept of one man being in charge of the whole communication process, ranging from press relations all the way over to tactical, psy[chological] war,

which was executed by the military. The policy direction was coordinated. Now there was a lot of argument with this by people in the business. It wasn't always accepted that easily. I think, since I agreed with it and had a vested interest, I would label the ones who agreed with it as the thoughtful ones, but I do think the thoughtful ones were all for it.

M: It's always easy to label those who agree with us as the thoughtful ones. This substantive direction you described giving you the maximum candor policy for press relations is the policy, more or less, that Mecklin says he was fighting for during his term.

Z: That's right. That thing took a long time to evolve. It was written, in the final analysis, I think, by Bob Manning, essentially. I don't want to take away credit from anyone else; I'm sure there were other participants in it.

M: Did it work?

Z: It got approval from a number of places. Did it work? Sure. I had the greatest freedom and the greatest authority and perhaps the greatest effectiveness, because we could go nowhere but up in our relations with the press, during the Maxwell Taylor period there. Because with these two directives fresh in my hands, with MACV still in an adviser role, not an operational role--the operational role came the following summer, perhaps really almost after Max Taylor left, the second Lodge period. With our press relations at a low point from September until we got horribly institutionalized--very big a year or a year and a half later--I had almost a free hand out there.

Washington was all tied up, and really, as a matter of philosophy, was leaving the authority to us. I tried their "by maximum candor" just as fully as I could, and there were times when I'm sure Washington thought we went too far. The daily press briefings, for instance, the so-called Five O'Clock Follies, had their origins in September of 1964, when I told the press that since I had a lot of responsibilities of running around, I couldn't always be in my office, but I would guarantee then I'd be in my office every day at five o'clock to answer any accumulated questions they had during the day. At the time MACV was simply issuing a daily press release without any meeting, without any questions being answered, unless correspondents wanted to call in.

Gradually this took hold. I would be there at five o'clock. First one or two started stopping in; then, three or four. At one point, we'd get as many as ten or fifteen a day. There were only about twenty-five resident correspondents then in Saigon, and a lot of them were out in the field.

Then in October, I told MACV Colonel Lee Baker of the Air Force, who was then MACV I.O., that I thought he ought to have a man in my office every day in order to answer any questions that might come up out of their daily release. That thing stayed in my office until March 1965. By then, that little office was crowded as could be. I was given a deputy for press relations, Harold Kaplan, in February of 1965. MACV had become more institutionalized. We had to move it out of my office. I no longer did the daily briefing. I turned that

over to Kappy. We moved two or three times to various locations in the building and, meanwhile, were reconstructing the downstairs auditorium. [We] moved into that auditorium in the JUSPAO Building in the summer of 1965.

M: By that time, it was a fairly formal . . .

Z: By that time, it was a fairly formalized place with charts and slides and training aids, and anything from a hundred to two hundred correspondents sitting in. It was the place to go. It was the best and the one and only show in Siagon, so to speak. Lots of people went there to sit around and kill a half-hour.

M: Before you get off that subject, the timing of it, as you describe it, sort of came up as a matter of convenience to you. Some of the correspondents complained about that timing.

Z: To try to pick out the best time, you couldn't keep everyone happy. Saigon's twelve hours off U.S. time, and there was no ideal time, but it was sort of the end of the day when the MACV reports would be in, when the military was in the best position to put out a release, late afternoon. It was convenient to me, in that, it was the end of my day with meetings and so on, so that, I was relatively current. And it was five o'clock a.m. in the U.S., which enabled the radio-TV people to get in something, if necessary, over their feeds. They used to have feeds ranging from six to seven o'clock. The wire services could make the very early morning shows here. And even the dailies, the specials, the New York Times or the Washington Post, could make a late edition, you see. And every other period of time we thought about would

have had drawbacks, greater drawbacks. There's nothing ideal. Since you had to cover TV, radio, news specials, and the wire services, both in terms of Vietnam and in terms of Washington, we really were on a twenty-four hour basis in feeding out news. So the five o'clock thing just got established to some extent by convenience, some extent by choice, because it seemed to be the best compromise.

We finally moved it back to four forty-five, because the correspondents did want to have a little more elbow room in there in feeding back.

M: The ones who complained were probably the specials who thought the radio-TV people would get in ahead of them.

Z: They probably would, but, as I say, I don't know what hour would have kept them all happy. There just wasn't any. For a while we tried a noon briefing to meet some of the complaints, and that didn't work out. By the time we got institutionalized, anyone who had a special problem could get information on a current basis.

M: Probably the most recurrent criticism that the various ones who have written extensively about the press relations have brought up is what they called the excessively optimistic tone of the general government briefings. Do you think that's a valid charge?

Z: A little bit, but nowhere near as valid as the press would like it. A lot of it goes back to that one statement of Secretary McNamara in September of 1963, which they never let him forget. I used to say, "There ought to be a moratorium on post-mortems, five years at least. By 1968, we ought to have forgiven McNamara for it." But, never, even today. If you ask for optimism, people will still refer to that 1963

statement. ["Light at the end of the tunnel."]

Look, you get into the middle of a thing like the attack on the embassy in the TET Offensive of 1968, and in the tension and emotion of that moment when the fighting is going on, dead VC around, we had just been under attack, obviously Westmoreland is going to sound gung-ho. "Damn it, we pinned their ears back. They tried to get into the embassy; they couldn't make it," and so on. So he got criticized very heavily for false optimism.

I think if you get away from ad hoc statements, the occasional enthusiasm of the moment, the occasional emotion of the moment, and look at the considered statements, I think you will find that even though those would tend to claim movement, to claim progress, they usually said, "Any resolution of this war is two-three-four years off, unless there's a political intervention, unless the war ends for other reasons."

One of those things that Westmoreland has been heavily criticized for, the National Press Club speech of the fall of 1967, November, 1967, you go back to it, and you will find that in there his saying, "Well, if things go as they're going, if the Vietnamese army improves, maybe we can make a token withdrawal of U.S. trocps in about eighteen months to two years." Which is exactly 1969, and we are right now talking about withdrawing troops because ARVN is improving.

Now, I'm not going to talk about the White House here. I think there were times, out of Washington, when there was excessive

enthusiasm and optimism, and I think Walt Rostow, at times, used to get carried away in trying to counterbalance the very negative, pessimistic reports. But I also remember that once, when Harold Johnson gave a speech and said, "The war is going to go on for ten years," he got his ass chewed out. That was denied awfully fast.

M: Did the White House ask, as they're sometimes charged with doing, for good news?

Z: They asked that we make an effort to try to get out a balanced picture; where you'd get a completely pessimistic black picture, that the positive elements also be incorporated or at least released. And this was a never-ending battle.

I could make the same charges against the press. If we're going to have to justify every sentence by every American official under all circumstances, out of those millions of words, you can pick out an awful lot that make the U.S. government look very stupid and foolish. If you take the considered statements of responsible officers, even there, occasionally, you're going to find a McNamara 1963 statement. But I think that the weight of them would be reasonably justified.

Now, if I went back to the New York Times and took every time one of their correspondents said "this will never happen," and then it's happened, the New York Times record, I suspect, might not look too good. The press--and I won't say the Times here--but many elements of the press said, "Ky will never give up office." Well, he's [Nguyen Cao Ky] given up office. "The Vietnamese will never

write a constitution." Well, they've written a constitution. "They'll never elect a president." Well, they've elected a president. Prior to that, they said, "They'll never last more than a few months." Well, they've lasted two or three years. And then the criticism was, "They've lasted too long." "They'll never overcome the Buddhists up in Hue." Well, they did overcome them. "Tri Quang will overcome the government." Well, he hasn't. "The Vietnamese military will collapse."

If you want to start post-morteming, the millions of words written about Vietnam, as well as the millions of statements made by government officials, if you want to post mortem the press, it can look awfully bad. I think there's enough failure of understanding, enough lack of balance, and enough flaws in the performance of both to more than justify that each of us, press and government, stick to our own knitting and clean out our own house first.

M: That probably ought to be the burden of the book you might write about it sometime.

Z: I hope to.

M: What about the problem of quantification being demanded by Washington? This is frequently mentioned.

Z: Some of it undoubtedly was Washington. Some of it undoubtedly was the press, too, incidentally. You get to this horrible thing of body count, which I always felt was a miserable phrase, a morbid phrase, that I wish we could have gotten rid of, but which we got hung up with. We got into this body count box for two reasons. One was Washington's official demands, and the other was the press' demands.

But this goes back to the 1963 period, when there was a great deal of controversy over the results of battles in which only ARVN had participated. It was only ARVN then. We would issue statements based on ARVN claims: two-hundred VC dead, three-hundred VC dead, particularly on that battle involving Harkins and Dave Halberstam--the Battle of Ap Bac, I guess. And the questions being raised by the press: "Well, whose claims are these?" "They're Vietnamese claims." "Have Americans verified them?" Gradually, we got into this habit of American verifying them; then it became: "Well, have they counted the bodies, actually?"

At the same time Washington and McNamara were looking for indices of progress. How do you measure the war? Well, they had just as many doubts about the Vietnamese army claims, particularly under Diem, as the press did. So we got into this horrible image that may have initially been accurate of a body count, although I doubt that it ever took place even in its initial phases where the concept was that, literally, someone went out and counted the dead bodies. And that's all you claimed. Now, there were individual units throughout the war, no doubt, that insisted on this. But you didn't have to be a correspondent out in the field for very long to see the fact that bodies were not being counted in all cases. Military situations just didn't permit it. An outfit under attack is not going to stop and send some guy out ahead of the front lines

and say, "Go count the bodies." Correspondents would be out there with them; see that at the end of the day when the platoon leader made a report, he made an estimate, and usually a fairly conservative estimate, sometimes probably an inflated one. You'll get varying front line commanders. But they would see that and literally come back and hear this being claimed as a body count at the briefing because, as far as the briefer was concerned, it was being presented to him as a body count as they came up through channels. And they'd raise hell about it.

You will see, however, that in November of 1966, when we codified all the ground rules on coverage that had been growing over the years, we included in there a paragraph that said: "The casualty estimate you receive is not a body count in the literal sense of the word. It is the best estimate possible under the military conditions prevailing and should be regarded as such. Sometimes it will be body count, other times an estimate."

But the term "body count" had worked its way into our language so much that no one ever got rid of it. The briefer would use it occasionally and Westmoreland would tend to use it still, because Westmoreland would go to his commanders and say, "Dammit, I'm under pressure on this body count issue. Is this a body count?" A lot very often would come back to him and say, "Yes, it is." So he had to take the word of his commanders. What the figures represented really was an addition, a compilation of the estimates from local commanders, starting at the platoon level up. MACV only totaled them up on an

adding machine. Now the theory of a battalion commander, who thought his platoon leader had overestimated, had given him inflated figures, he should check back, he should deflate them, how often this happens, I don't know. And in combat, you can get an awful lot of disagreement about the nature of casualties on the part of the enemy. How bad were these?

But even the worst critics of the casualty figures, I think, would accept the fact that the overall casualties claimed were more or less of the right order of magnitude because our announced casualties did not in theory include indirect casualties, unobserved casualties, casualties from air strikes and indirect artillery fire, because there was no way of estimating those.

You will notice that not too long ago Oriana Falacci, the Italian journalist who writes for Europea in Italy, and also for Look magazine, got to Hanoi and had an interview with Pham Van Dong, an interview reprinted in the Washington Post. This was in the past month. Mr. Falachi said, "What about the claims of the Americans that they have killed five-hundred-thousand of your soldiers? Pham Van Dong said, "Precisely. That's exactly right."

And I think this would be accepted even by the critics. But there was such a nice straw man to pound over our head that I think some of the correspondents would have been disappointed if we ever got rid of the phrase. What would they have criticized next?

M: Did you have some of the same problems with quantification of things, like the pacification efforts, how many hamlets . . .

Z: Again, in the worst possible image. One of the worst ones was those damned computers being used for the hamlet evaluation surveys, where all anyone could do was talk about computer figures and the image of computers. And the Vietnam War, and a guerrilla war, was just such a contrast that it became a joking matter. Computers happen to be the handy way of doing an awfully lot of addition, an awful lot of math, compilation of figures. But, again, there was the same thing. You'd argue about pacification. How deep was it? One of the great issues was the judgment of what was pacified, what wasn't, how effective were the efforts in the field.

If you talk about pacification as people's attitudes, then that's obviously a very difficult thing to measure. But if you set up certain objective standards--Has this hamlet had an attack? Does it have a self-defense force? Is a school running? Are various things happening?--then, at least, you can measure those objective standards. And then you can read into that whatever you want. There was an assumption that if everything was working, inevitably it would affect people's thinking. But there was never that claim except in the process of interpretation. It's like any survey, Harris, Gallup, or Roper, you get your figures first, and then you've got a process of interpreting them. The only thing the computers did was put the figures together, and with twelve-thousand some hamlets and a lot of factors to measure, this was a handy way of doing it. The machines were there and so on. The computer issue should not have clouded the basic issue. Did the statistics have meaning? If so, what? And

that was a perfectly legitimate question.

M: The computers just didn't figure in that at all.

Z: They shouldn't. But because they made such a handy target as straw man: "Robert Komer's computer figures today said such-and-such," and as I say, the contrast was so great, it was a nice, nice way of knocking down the effort there.

M: How far did your maximum candor policy do away with the claim that was made, while Mecklin was there, particularly, that there was excessive classification and that, actually, misinformation was given frequently?

Z: I think we licked the classification thing pretty well. For one thing, it finally got to a stage in Vietnam where nothing was classified, in a sense, except maybe some operational plans. We laid down some ground rules as to what correspondents had to protect, one of which was operational plans in advance, and those were pretty well observed. Over the years, we lifted credentials on less than a half dozen correspondents.

But I think the rest of the stuff--God, the place was so wide open that there was very little issue really of classification. There was hard military information that was classified but beyond that, things were fairly well known.

One of the extraordinary things about Vietnam, and this I'd argue regardless of who would claim otherwise, was that this was the first war we fought without pre-censorship of the press. Any correspondent could write anything. Now, if he violated some of these

ground rules, his credentials would be lifted, but that wasn't much of an issue, as reflected on the fact that only four or five in four years were lifted. There was no pre-censorship. And in all the time I was there, only one correspondent's visa was ever lifted in a situation that undoubtedly had a relationship to his coverage, and that was Ev Martin, Newsweek bureau chief. This happened in the spring of 1968. I say it was related to his coverage because there were enough technicalities in Ev's case to give the Vietnamese government a leg to stand on. But there's no doubt, the reason they didn't overlook the technicalities was because they were unhappy about his coverage. The Vietnamese government would argue that there were no correspondents' visas lifted for coverage. This, as I say, was on technicalities.

But let's concede Ev's case. That's not a bad record for a country at war with a country that has as little established press traditions as Vietnam. There were, perhaps, two or three cases, maybe more, maybe a half dozen, where visas were refused. But even in providing visas, the Vietnam government was amazingly responsive. At least two Communists, I know of, came in. They were identified Communists, Communist Party members, one from Yugoslavia and one from Australia. And certainly, the most bitter critics of the government you could possibly have, came in. Oriana Falacci, whom I mentioned a little earlier, is just one. Dozens and dozens of critics of the Vietnam government were permitted to come in.

Now, this is a fairly amazing record, I think when you look at it.

That there was censorship within the country, yes. That's a whole different problem.

M: You mean of their own press?

Z: Of their own press. That's a whole different problem, and one that you discuss in a different context, whether you approve or don't approve. The foreign press was never given pre-censorship. The Vietnamese were unhappy at times about some of the coverage. They got copies of cables that went out and looked at them and so on, but never censored. There were critics who will say, "Well, at times of crisis, copy was delayed." Occasionally, the PTT was closed down because of a coup or so on. And even if you concede this, I don't accept that these were deliberate, but even if you did, I still think the record of openness was amazing. Any of these correspondents could go anywhere in the country that they wanted to. We made U.S. military facilities available, but where those were inadequate, or didn't reach, they were certainly welcome to make it on their own, hitch rides on local planes or local vehicles. Correspondents did get all over the country.

M: Critics had no more difficulty doing this than those who supported the policy?

Z: No. Now, occasionally the critic would say, hell, he didn't have access to the same people as a friendly correspondent. Well, you can't force a major, or a colonel, or a general to talk to someone. But even the critics, by and large, Mary McCarthy, for instance, who came out to write a nasty story, got some awfully cooperative

treatment, certainly wasn't discriminated against.

M: What about the problem that Mecklin describes which he objected to, he says, of trying to trade down sources of leaks, and so on, to critics? Did that continue?

Z: I just refused to do it. If there was a security violation, as there have been on occasion, Westmoreland would get annoyed and try to run it down, but not even much of that. But there was no sense in tracing; you're not going to win. The place was too wide open. And when you end up with five-hundred-thousand Americans in the country, any one of whom has a right to talk to the press and usually did, you're just wasting time trying to run down specific leaks. There were occasions when a story raised enough hell that someone would cable from Washington and say, "Find out what stupid s.o.b. said that!"

M: What kind of job do you think the press did, by and large?

Z: Pretty good, by and large, they filled their role. I did a whole speech to the press club on that.

M: Then you don't need to repeat that. There has been the charge, though, that I've heard by administration dependents particularly that the press spent their time lolling around Saigon bars and so on.

Z: That's grossly unfair, not at all true. Having been somewhat critical of some of the press for other things just now, I'd also defend them very much against that kind of a charge. Again, you're talking--the trouble is the generalities we tend to end up with. Over the years, at least two-thousand correspondents were accredited out there, and a lot of those came back two or three or four times. So we had

four thousand accreditations, over four thousand, but perhaps only two thousand individuals. With that many press, you're going to have a whole range of talent and outlook. Some of them did hang around the bars and nothing else. Some of them were what I call non-journalists. They'd obtained a letter somehow. Some of them were just adventurers, hangers-on. But the responsible, serious correspondents out there, certainly one charge that would not stand up is that they stuck only to Saigon or hung around the Caravelle Bar. In fact, no one went to the Caravelle Bar most of the time I was there. In the early days that was the case, but the only people who went to the Caravelle Bar towards the end were tourists trying to find the press, who were elsewhere.

M: If you were a historian twenty to thirty years from now and were wanting to know which of the press to use as the best source for events in Saigon, who are some of the correspondents you would recommend?

Z: Boy, you go back a long way! The New York Times, in the time I was there, had a pretty good line-up. Peter Gross, I think, was good. Jack Langguth followed him. Charlie Moore, Johnny Apple. I thought Johnny, toward the latter part of this thing, got too much mixed an outlook. Gene Roberts was very, very solid. The Baltimore Sun had a good string of correspondents: Peter Trumpal, Pat Ferguson, Ralph Kennan. And the Post had fairly good ones: John Maffrey, Ward Just. To toss some out. It's not a complete list by any means, Bill Tuohy, I think, who just won the Pulitzer this morning

incidentally, both in his Newsweek days and in his Los Angeles Times days; Ward Just; Johnny Apple in his first year and a half almost; Frank McCulloch, when he was both Time and Life bureau chief out there.

M: You're not mentioning any TV people. Does that mean that they would do certain things . . .

Z: They were so much harder to judge; their spots were so short. Now, when they did documentaries and so on, sure. But then the major documentaries would tend to be by people who came in just for that. A Charles Collingwood would come in, or an Eric Sevareid would come in; whereas, the correspondents on the scene would do the one, two, three minute spots, or take part in the documentary.

And that's part of the tragedy, you see. The most influence on thinking probably was TV. And yet to not include them in this leaves a gap. Now, Morley Shafer obviously had a tremendous effect. Morley I regard as a good friend of mine; but the argument I would make on Morley is that Morley was violently anti-war, did not like war. That's perfectly legitimate on his part, and I respect him for it. But then you come to a question as to whether, and particularly towards the end, those eyes that are that strong retain their full balance in judging war. I have enough respect for Morley so that I'd argue he never consciously distorted his product, but whether he saw it as balanced as he might otherwise, I'm not sure. Morley was a damned good correspondent. Peter Kalisher was. NBC's Garrick Utley in the early days. NBC kept a turnover going, as did

ABC. I'd almost need a list of correspondents. So many have gone around the pike, really. You take a Hanson Baldwin, who came out and did a special series that I thought was very good in the matter of judging the military situation; but there's quite a difference in judging that as against a guy who's out there day in, day out on a long tour. Bob Chaplen, I happen to regard as perhaps the best on the lot, certainly on the political side; Dennis Warner of The Reporter, first-rate in his judgments. You know, sitting here and thinking, dozens of names would come up.

M: Did President Johnson ever talk to you directly about the operation of the press?

Z: Oh, yes, a number of times.

M: When did these talks occur?

Z: I met the President first when I came back to Washington with Maxwell Taylor. It was about September of 1965. It was the first Taylor visit back.

M: This is at the end of his ambassadorship?

Z: No. When he went out there, he came back every few months. His first visit back was early in September. I came with him because my family was here and my home leave had been cancelled. I got all of two days home leave back here. So I came back with Taylor. He attended a National Security Council meeting at which Arthur Goldberg was reporting. If my timing is right, I may be off, but remember that

major effort of the President, where he sent ambassadors and representatives all over the world to a so-called peace offensive?

M: Yes, I think it was in 1965.

Z: Was it Christmas? Then this came before then. Arthur Goldberg, at any rate, reported on U.N. developments; Maxwell Taylor, on Vietnam. He had me sitting behind him. I guess I was the only one there, because Westmoreland didn't come back on that, nor did Alex Johnson.

At any rate, along the line, the President said, "Why can't we have better press coverage from out there?" And Taylor pulled me up to the table, and we discussed press relations. You know the way the President went: "Come on up here, you! I want to ask you some questions." You never got in your answers, of course.

In that same visit, Leonard Marks had just taken over, or was about to take over. I'm not sure he had been sworn in, but at any rate, he was sitting in these sessions. He and Bill Moyers and Frank Stanton of CBS and myself had a private session with the President in that little room off the main office. And we had about an hour or so then, and a number of thoughts came up.

Then I saw the President--it was also at that visit--where he got the congressional leaders over. No, that was a later one.

Then the President talked about this again at various times, at the Honolulu Conference, at the Manila Conference; less at the Manila Conference, where he had an awful lot of protocol with the other

visiting chiefs of state. I sat in on a couple of briefings he had, but didn't have much direct contact with him. At the Guam conference. Also a couple of times when I was back in Washington. And one very memorable session, from a personal viewpoint, was one Bill Moyers and I had with him alone in his bedroom. He was sick after lunch or getting a rest or something. It was my first look at the President's bedroom. But nevertheless, [he was] again, very, very interested and [we had] a very strong-minded discussion at that point.

M: Did he have some consistent ideas about what he wanted you to be doing that he made clear in these various meetings?

Z: Essentially, and I think he had said it in many forums and many meetings, a feeling that the press was not providing a balanced picture, and why wouldn't it provide a balanced picture; recognizing the criticism, but the feeling that the picture being given to the American public in creating opposition to the war was just not a completely accurate one.

We talked about various things. I used to suggest that one of the areas that needed the most work was with the editors back here, the editors and the producers. Correspondents worked for editors, their boss is the way anyone else's is and they're responsive to direction. Very often, you would run into correspondents who would be disturbed by the nature of the coverage out there. They might not support the war effort, but they also didn't feel that there was a very balanced picture coming out. But they had to respond to what was being run. If you don't get on the air or you don't get in print, you're not very

effective as a correspondent.

M: Do you know whether he ever followed up that line?

Z: To some extent there was a follow-up in the sense of encouraging some editors to come out here. Not too many came out. A lot of other correspondents from the States came out over the years, and that, I think, was encouraged by the White House. The President made himself available to reporters who were coming out here; in fact, would almost go out of his way to brief, particularly, people from the White House press corps who were going to come out here. He'd usually have a session with them, very often would have a session.

M: Did they do a pretty good job in the White House in general, the White House press secretaries, in your opinion?

Z: The White House press secretaries did. I think Bill Moyers was realistic. I think there was a tendency in the Walt Rostow shop to--and I can't blame them, I can understand, but the tendency, when the correspondents came out of those briefings, was to feel they'd been given a snow job. It was just too optimistic, too positive; the charts, the curves all went the right way. And correspondent after correspondent would come out and say, "Jesus, Rostow got me in there, and he pounded away until I didn't believe a word he was saying, and now that I'm out here, I can see that he was too optimistic." As I say, I can understand it, but Walt would never accept that the picture he was giving was too one-sided. But the correspondents saw it.

I never sat through a briefing so it's hard to judge at

firsthand--I mean one of Rostow's briefings.

I think Bill Moyers was balanced, and I think George Christian was, as far as that goes; although George, I always felt, was less knowledgeable about details of Vietnam than Bill, because they were at different periods. When did Bill leave?

M: The end of 1966.

Z: 1966. You know, the intensity of the heat of the thing was starting to ease off a bit. We'd taken our licking to a great extent.

M: The President was not, in your presence at least, vindictive toward the critics?

Z: Occasionally. You know, if you hear the President hold forth on one of his non-stop, half-hour monologues, he'll cover a lot of moods and sentiment.

M: They always talk about the Post-Times-Newsweek axis. Did he have anything to say about that group?

Z: I've heard him give Dr. Frank Stanton hell about the coverage of some of the CBS people.

M: You mean, in person? To Dr. Stanton?

Z: In person, to Dr. Stanton. Sure. In fact, individuals he'd know about, by name, and particularly the ones who weren't American, he had some very real suspicions of.

M: He'd pay close attention to what individuals would say?

Z: But then, at other times, he'd recognize, he'd give just as much weight to free access to the news. The President--well, hell, you're sort of examining his whole life and performance--as you know,

would sometimes be inconsistent on one subject or, in the course of a monologue on it, would be on both sides of the fence.

M: That's a safe way for a politician to be. What about secrecy? He was awfully concerned about secrecy at home.

Z: The executive agent on Vietnam on the non-military side was State, and we would occasionally get in trouble because there would be leaks that State found troublesome. Some of those, some of that concern was expressed as a result of White House pressure, I'm sure. But on the civilian side, there weren't that many secrets until you got past the March 31 thing with the Paris talks and so on, and there it was a whole different type of ball game.

He was concerned enough about it, and there were times when we got the lash from Washington. But that wasn't as big a problem as indiscreet statements, one-sided evaluation, incomplete, unbalanced pictures that were coming out.

M: What about briefings of non-newsmen? Was that handled out of your office, too?

Z: Some of it, but we wouldn't be the primary thing. We'd participate in the mission brief of congressmen.

M: I was thinking of George Romney's famous--

Z: We took part in that, but certainly we didn't arrange it, nor were we one of the primary briefers. For that kind of a briefing, and even for group correspondents and so on, eventually, it would get fairly standard. But, hell, you'd have an ambassador kicking off; you'd have the political section; you'd have AID; you'd have the military

putting on a briefing; the economic section, perhaps; we would do one on psychological attitude, and so on.

M: Did the President show any interest in the psychological side of your particular job?

Z: Some. But that certainly was, in his eyes, or at least as far as you could judge from his discussion, the less important side, in psychological operations as such. Now, if you define this broader, which I'd like to do, on the political side of the effort out there, then he showed tremendous interest. But that would incorporate not just my work, but an awful lot of people's work, including, obviously, AID. That, I think, he had real appreciation of.

M: Well, that's a military thing.

Z: I'll never forget one of his suggestions. It never got done, but that's a virtue. He was talking about when he was a youngster and owning title to land. One of the suggestions he made, he said, and I bet this happened when he was a youngster: "Take aerial photographs of a man's land and give that peasant a picture of his land that he can hang on his wall, that he can see physically." And this kind of a thing would be a much more concrete evidence of ownership than a fancy deed or whatever else they were passing out.

M: But that wasn't done?

Z: It was not done, and probably should have been. But in the sense of his origins, the President's origins, his closeness to the land, his knowledge of poverty and so on, he recognized some of the issues, the very real issues, from the viewpoint of the peasant. And in these things, I think he was very sympathetic, very conscious, and very

supportive in any efforts in trying to meet that kind of aspiration on the part of the peasant. And I would regard this as psy-warfare, psychological operations, in the broadest sense.

M: Did the military show appreciation for that side of your operation?

Z: Some did. Again, the range would be all the way from psychological warfare, tactical psy-war, the leaflet drops in the middle of battle or the loud speaker thing, to an appreciation of the political dimensions of the war on the part of a lot of the military, at least, the good military. Some never did understand it. But then, hell, there are a lot of civilians who didn't understand it either.

M: Did your role change from ambassador to ambassador? Was it different under Lodge than it was . . . ?

Z: To some extent, yes. But the situations of the ambassadors also changed. Maxwell Taylor was much more in charge of the whole thing, and since he had pinned three of Westmoreland's four stars on him and had just come from being chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he obviously had much more weight on the military and was heard on military subjects as well as political subjects. Now the mission was also smaller; we had much closer staff work; it was a mission run by a four-star general named Maxwell Taylor, in which you would function according to a military staff, and well run in that sense.

But then Lodge came back for a second time; the military was growing; he obviously had fewer credentials on the military side. Westmoreland would therefore tend to be much more autonomous on pure

military questions than he had been under Taylor. Lodge's job became quite different. Taylor was trying to establish political stability. Lodge was trying to establish political evolution; stability had been achieved by the time he came back.

Bunker, of course, came back at the time where he had to lead through this election and then this last year, the whole talks proposition. Bunker's job, in effect, was to pave the way towards negotiation, if you will, prepare the country.

Then, each of them had their own personal approach on operations. Taylor would tend much more, really, to turn over responsibility to you. He would respect your responsibility, and you pretty much had your head in your field, in a thing like press relations, in a thing like AID. Lodge, on press relations, tended to play it much closer to the belt. He recognized he could no longer be his own press officer, but nevertheless was never completely comfortable with a great big press structure that was very often getting him in trouble and which he did not control. He had been a loner. He had been a politician all his life, where you control your own press relations. Bunker was pretty good about it, recognized the importance of it, and worked with us, but I'm not sure brought the press people into his inner councils quite as much as Taylor did, for instance.

M: You mean the press people on his staff?

Z: On his staff. Me or my people. Taylor, once he endorsed you, accepted you as his key man of a given field. You were all the way with him. You got into everything, participated in it. He gave

you his support and was responsive to your requests.

M: That's a good kind of man to work for.

Z: In a staff sense, Taylor was the best manager; Lodge, the worst; Bunker, in between. In terms of a political sensitivity to what that peasant felt, or what the country needed in political terms, Lodge probably had the greatest sensitivity; Taylor, the least; Bunker, in between. In terms of dealing with the Vietnamese, diplomacy if you will, I'd almost put Bunker first; then Lodge; and then Taylor. But, as I say, each of them had his strengths and weaknesses, and, therefore, your roles would change.

The only two who were there through all of this, virtually the same time in period of service, were Westmoreland and myself. Things would change as other personalities changed, too--the AID director, the political counsel, the CIA man, and so on--because they would bring different things to the mission council table. As deputy ambassadors changed, they obviously made a difference as to the way the Mission operated.

M: Was that turnover a problem?

Z: To a certain extent, sure. In four and a half years there, I worked with five deputies to the ambassador. One was a DCM, Dave Ness. He didn't last too long. Alex Johnson, Bill Porter, Eugene Locke, and Sam Berger, that's an awful lot of deputies for that senior a job.

M: Was it that killing a job?

Z: For various reasons. Johnson and Taylor went out as a team for one

year really. Then Eugene Locke came in, but he got interested in Texas politics.

M: Unfortunately, as it turned out for him.

Z: Porter came in with Lodge, and he got sidetracked into this pacification, and then when another new team was in, Porter wanted to get out. Then they took the pacification under the military, if you remember, and this Porter wanted no part of it. Then Locke did get interested in Texas politics. Then Sam Berger came in. But I think the turnover of deputies was too great.

M: What finally determined you to leave your position there last summer? Did you come back to take this job?

Z: I thought my war had ended with the President's speech on March 31. USIA, for various reasons, had been trying to get me out of there; part of it, a feeling I had been there too long; part of it, Leonard Marks would probably say I wasn't accepting his direction enough. I'm not sure. The USIA ultimately wanted to reduce its effort there. The price they were paying in terms of manpower resources in Vietnam was too great, in their eyes. But at any rate, I got assigned to Tokyo as PAO, a very good job.

Bunker, when the time came for me to leave, called me in and asked whether I would extend through the election. They felt this was an important period--this was when the President was presumably running--and that it was critical, for him and for me, to be there, since no one else they could get in would have had the same experience and so on. I agreed, but because of my relations with USIA, I said only if I could spin off JUSPAO even though I was against the division in principle. I thought for that one year, if we could live with the

division, and let JUSPAO be a separate organization, or at worst, under my general direction, but a new director . . . .

But USIA agreed. Ed Nichol came in from Tokyo to take over JUSPAO. I became special assistant to Bunker. I intended to spend this year, up through last fall, on the job.

The President gave his March 31 speech, as you know, and I thought that marked the end of a phase of the war and it was time for some new blood and a new team out there that would bring a fresh look to it. And waiting through the election would have been inconvenient, personally, at that point, particularly since the President wasn't running. Leaving in the middle of the year, you upset your kids' schooling and the family.

So I came back here in April, looked around. USIA didn't have anything I really wanted. The best State Department would do and ultimately told me in May God bless--and this was where I'd obviously made Dean Rusk a little sore at me--the best they could think of was an ambassador to the African Republic of Niger, which I looked up. It wasn't hard to find, but it was mostly desert, 98 per cent desert. It's one claim to recognition was that it didn't have a single daily newspaper.

M: Just the thing for a press officer!

Z: I was damned if I was going to spend the next three years of my life in the middle of the Sahara Desert.

So I arranged and asked for a year of what amounted to a sabbatical diplomatic resident assignment at Tufts, but asked Ambassador Bunker to release me from my commitment so I could take some leave

with the family, and then the boys could get back to school. Leaving in July was just convenient and was the real point of that timing. And came back.

In the process, along the way, Time, Inc. had been nibbling, and they made a hard proposal which I decided to accept, largely because I saw no future being a PAO for the next twelve years until I was ready to retire. After Vietnam, what do you do for an encore? And because State obviously was not going to open the doors, if the best I could do was ambassador to Niger, then it was time I looked outside.

M: Did you see President Johnson on your return?

Z: No, I did not. I did not ask to. I was a little annoyed, frankly. The Vietnamese government decorated me three times for performance out there. My own government didn't give me a single bit of recognition. I got a private letter from Leonard Marks, a pat on the back, and that was it.

M: Do you know of any reason for this?

Z: No. I suppose by that time, by the time I had gotten out, I had probably made enough mistakes to get enough people annoyed at me. The military, in their turn. I don't think Secretary Rusk ended up completely happy because of various things that had happened. And you know, in a press job, you finally chew up your credit. This is part of the ground rules. When I first went there, I told people that there's an end to your credit out there, that whenever I left Vietnam I'd probably have a lot of people mad at me by then, which

is the way it turned out.

M: You've been mentioned, one time at least, as working, to a certain extent, on the Humphrey campaign.

Z: I didn't work on it. I was in touch with some of the Humphrey people and came up with some suggestions, particularly on Vietnam, which, since I wrote them, I happened to think were right.

M: That was what I was leading to, was how much did you contribute to the final Humphrey statements?

Z: Not much. Here's the paper I gave him.

M: I'll attach this to the transcript. And this was your basis for your suggestions for his speech, for his position, as it finally came about? And you say it's not very close to what he came out with?

Z: I don't say that he didn't necessarily take my suggestions. These, I think, a number of people were suggesting, roughly parallel. He didn't go as far as I would have liked him to have gone. But when you look at the final thing on this, you find some surprising similarities, such a thing as suggesting, and this was in September, that we pull some troops out in the year 1969, anywhere from fifty to one-hundred-thousand.

I would have liked to have worked on the Humphrey thing, but, one, I couldn't as a civil servant, and I was hanging on as a civil servant in the government to become eligible for retirement under that FSIO career thing. I had to stay till October. And then when I took this job, the day after you move in, it's awfully hard to say, "I'm going on leave of absence to work for the Humphrey campaign."

M: I don't want to cut you off, but are there any subjects that we

haven't delved into that you think are important to get down here?

Z: I don't know. You're taking on a monstrous work if you get into all the details of that administration, and even just the one problem, granted a major one, of Vietnam. You'll need another three libraries to store it all.

M: As President Johnson said to our director when we began: if we just interview his goddamned enemies, it would take three years. So I expect you're right.

Z: This area is one you ought to probe. Art Sylvester, you ought to talk to.

M: Yes, I have talked to him.

Z: The State Department people, and obviously, people like Moyers and Christian.

M: I've talked to the current State Department people, but actually the people previous, Manning and . . .

Z: Jim Greenfield's one, and Bob Manning. Manning would be critical; Greenfield would be critical. Both of them would be.

M: I've talked to Donnelly, but I haven't gone back yet. That's what we need to do.

Z: If you really want the . . .

(Interview ends abruptly)

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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