

INTERVIEW III

DATE: May 26, 1982
INTERVIEWEE: BARRY ZORTHIAN
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: Mr. Zorthian's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. Zorthian, what were the state of press relations in Saigon when you arrived in 1964?

Z: I will answer these questions, but let me add at the start that I recently did an interview--recently, it turned out to be January when I finally looked at the transcript--for the Marine Corps Historical Center covering a lot of these same areas. I've just gotten around to editing that, sent it back. When they send me a clean copy I will send that to you, because it deals with some of these questions, and while I'll try to answer these now, that may elaborate or this may elaborate that. ***

Secondarily, there have been a couple of seminars recently, but one of particular relevance here, which was a conference in New York sponsored by an organization called Peace Without War. It was last November I believe. And there then that was all on the record. I gave a talk on the issues of press relations and lessons to be learned and so on. And again, I've got a copy of that. While not absolutely clean, it's clean enough, and I'll send that to you. So it will complement whatever I'm doing.

*** See Zorthian special interview, January 8, 1982.

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The state of press relations when I arrived in Saigon in 1964 was awful. This in effect was the immediate post-Diem period. If you remember, the Diem government was overthrown in November of 1963; the death came a few days afterwards. I arrived there in February of 1964. The country was still reeling from those events.

The embassy's press relations had evolved over a period of two or three years, really going back to 1961-62, a lot of it developing on the basis of the presence in country, and the coverage, and the evaluations reflecting that coverage by a group of younger reporters, good journalists, but young mavericks, rebels, young Turks, whatever label you want to put on them. David Halberstam of the New York Times, Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press, Neil Sheehan of UPI, Nick Turner of Reuters, Peter Arnett at AP, Ray Herndon of UPI, a number of others coming up. These were younger residents, staff correspondents, but resident correspondents. There were other correspondents who covered Vietnam, but they were based essentially in Hong Kong, the more mature, older, some of the World War II and Korean [War] vintage correspondents out of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Bangkok, points east and west who would come in periodically to cover. Even Time magazine's bureau chief at that time, a fellow named John Shaw, was non-staff; he was a stringer on contract. Frank McCulloch used to come in out of Hong Kong.

So there was a younger [group], alert, trained to be extremely aggressive, extremely if you will--what's the right word?--skeptical. The group that challenged, if you will, the establishment, they

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reached that stage over a period of times. Because what they did, as a result of their initiative and aggressiveness, was go out in the field a lot, talk to people out there, both Americans and Vietnamese. And the gap between what was being said in Saigon and Washington and what they were seeing in the field and what they were getting from American military advisers, as well as the Vietnamese people, was so great that it seemed diametrically opposed to the embassy. In effect, they seemed to be calling the embassy liars, if you will, or at least deceptive. And those differences led to bitterness in due time. The embassy was an old-line established group, Ambassador [Frederick] Nolting, General [Paul] Harkins. They were just worlds apart in outlook and temperament. But beyond all that, as I say, the embassy, saying what it believed was right, seemed very remote, very distant from what these young reporters were seeing in the field. And they were very ready; they were not guided by the "who's on our team?" or "don't question us" approach. They were very ready to challenge the establishment, in that sense reflecting some of the social change that was taking place in the U.S.

John Mecklin, my predecessor, did a very good, little-noticed book called Mission in Torment in which he talks about this situation. One scene in there which he describes which I've never forgotten was of his driving one of these younger correspondents as a passenger, and driving by the home that General Harkins lived in. And that correspondent saying, "There it is. There's where that son of a bitch lives," and waving his clenched fist at him. It was that kind of

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atmosphere. And you know there's that famous quote of Kennedy putting more weight on the New York Times and AP coverage and so on than he did on his official channels.

So press relations up through the Diem period and right after were quite bitter. One of Henry Cabot Lodge's missions was to quiet down, blunt this hostility, this adversity. John Mecklin left; John had been doing some dealing with the press. Lodge took over press relations into his own office. He got himself a young aide named Joe Lubin. He became his own press officer and in theory at least, Mecklin no longer, up to the time he left, had anything to do with the press. In fact when I was assigned to Vietnam, the letter of assignment from Ed Murrow said, "When I proposed you to Ambassador Lodge, he was a little concerned about your lack of fluent French"--which was important in Vietnam--"but most important, when he accepted you he wanted you to understand that you would have nothing to do with the media. He's his own press officer, will remain his own press officer. You will run USIS, psychological operations, whatever you want to call it, but no relations with the media." And Ed said, "I know you won't like this. This isn't the normal situation, but that's the way it has to be. Goodbye, good luck," you know.

G: He didn't say "God bless you" on top of that?

Z: He signed off. Now after that, press relations were cyclical in Vietnam and it went through many phases, including a phase where it was relatively favorable, good, communicative at least. It got bitter

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again by the seventies, and, by the end of our effort out there, was extremely bitter once more. The bitterness, the real hostility started again. The seeds laid by the Halberstams, Brownes and so on, [which] were sort of subdued, subordinated, at times forgotten, sprouted again. There was an element of that, a dimension of it, all the way through, but it really sprouted again after Tet for the same reasons, on the basis that there was an enormous gap between reality and what the mission and what Washington were saying and what they were seeing. Then it got into a very, very sharp bitterness, real hostility in the late sixties, early seventies.

G: At the time that you arrived in Saigon was there effective coordination between the various elements of the mission?

Z: Not too good. I guess it had its ups and downs. At best it was spotty, at worst it was just bad. In the field of particular interest there were three different elements, all operating pretty independently: USIS, which was doing the conventional, traditional USIS job but was also undertaking some advisory role for the Vietnamese and some, if you will, counterinsurgency communications role. The military had a MACV psychological operations directorate under Lieutenant Colonel Bowen [?], who later became a major general. Remember the military at that period was in the role of advisers officially; [we] did not have full-scale army combat units there. But MACV was filling an advisory role to the Vietnamese military and, through the MACV reps in the province was carrying out something of a psychological operations program. And the third one--

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(Interruption)

G: You hinted at a rather interesting point earlier. If I read you right, you said that the question of press relations was in some ways a reflection of what can be called a generation gap back in the States.

Z: Well, I think to some extent the old-line establishment, the "don't question us" approach--I always felt LBJ all through the war, one of the drawbacks was he would speak about the war in the rhetoric of his generation and the rhetoric of World War II. The flags were flying, the troops were marching, you came aboard and you saluted. And that worked in World War II, it didn't in 1965 and thereafter with a new generation up. Theirs was a questioning, a skeptical, a challenging, if you will, generation of journalists. In Vietnam we reached a stage where the government's word was to be questioned until proven true, whereas in the past it had been the government's word was valid until proven to be wrong. That's a very critical, significant difference I think.

G: Some people have suggested that Johnson didn't go far enough, that he should have wrapped himself in the flag and declared a crusade.

Z: Well, sure. A lot of people suggested that. I think if there are two basic critical decisions President Johnson made about Vietnam, they're in the area of the nature, the process of our involvement and in the area of the domestic economy. First he decided to back into the war piece by piece, and this had all kinds of implications, not only in terms of public awareness and acceptance and eventual skepticism about the war, but in terms of the battlefield capability we had. You know,

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the M-16 didn't get to the Vietnamese until 1967. One of the reasons was we didn't order our factories to manufacture more. And we went into the provision of troops on an incremental basis, and each time was the last time. If you're going to go into this kind of situation, you go in with whatever forces you need right away to do the job. Something the Russians always practice incidentally, whether it's in Afghanistan or in Czechoslovakia. The other was the decision to have both the Great Society and war, too.

G: Guns and butter.

Z: And I guess the economists have traced the roots of some of our present troubles to that decision. I'm not too sure whether a lot of people are conscious of the impact of those two decisions; I'm not sure they've ever been analyzed, evaluated properly.

G: You were speaking about psychological warfare. I hope you don't mind if we call it psywar.

Z: Although this whole area you're talking about does have semantical problems. They range from the use of terms like body count to what you call our effort. Psywar I tend to speak about as the military tactical aspects of psychological operations. In fact, my favorite phrase is the whole communications effort, which ranges all the way from media relations to psywarfare, tactical psywarfare. We usually ended up calling it psychological operations rather than communications effort, but that covered a lot more than what I'd call psywar. But as long as those distinctions are sort of borne in mind, call it what you will.

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- G: What did your operation have to do with in-country psychological operations?
- Z: Oh, a great deal. We were talking about the lack of coordination [among] these three elements. I talked about the military having the MACV psywar directorate under Colonel Bowen. Meanwhile AID had a communications division which was essentially a provider of hardware for the Vietnamese: transmitters, equipment of various kinds, all the gears and gadgetry you needed, with an information program. They provided hardware without too much concern about what was said substantively over it. The military looked at it from a military viewpoint; USIS was torn halfway between a conventional USIS cultural/informational job and an advisory and psychological operations job. There was a so-called coordinating committee. That coordinating committee, when it decided issues, which wasn't too often, did it by vote, and it wasn't even a vote based on the agencies involved but a vote of whoever happened to be there that day. The coordination other than that was virtually nil.

There were some strains and, if you will, rivalries. At one point--I've never forgotten--one officer in USIA, during a staff meeting at which I suggested going to AID for certain information, said, "We're not speaking to AID these days." You know, while she probably overstated it, [it was] not by much. There was that kind of a gap between them. We finally got all this together after a couple of incarnations and changes, but finally got together a single line of authority.

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The same happened in the field of press relations. I said to you that Lodge came in and said when I came in, "You'll have nothing to do with press relations." In June of 1964 there was a meeting in Honolulu chaired by Secretaries [Dean] Rusk and [Robert] McNamara. The subject matter was how to organize for the war. Remember, this was still an insurgency and we were organizing for an insurgency-type situation. We were persuaded, and Lodge and [William] Westmoreland were advocates of this, that the whole press relations effort had to be combined, had to be integrated. They recommended that I be given responsibility for the entire press relations effort in Vietnam, which was later endorsed by the President in a directive to Westmoreland and by then, [Maxwell] Taylor, giving us guidance on media relations and maximum candor with minimum security, saying that the principal adviser to both the commander of MACV and the ambassador in the public affairs field will be the director of USIS, naming me by name. First time that kind of overall authority had been given. Now that later went through some slight changes, but that combined authority for the press media relations, the press aspects of it, remained all through the war under the ambassador, delegated, subordinated, seconded to the director of USIS or director JUSPAO and ultimately to a special counselor to the ambassador.

G: Of course, this all took some time before JUSPAO came into being.

Z: JUSPAO didn't come into being until July 1, 1965. It came into being informally in the spring of 1965, again a creature still of an insurgency situation. JUSPAO came as a result to a great extent, although

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we had been going in that direction, of a visit by Carl Rowan to Vietnam in March of 1965 along with Harold Johnson, who was then chief of staff. One of the things we recommended out there--and I'm proud to say the director of MACV Psyops, Bowen, and Ralph Boyce of AID and I jointly recommended that we merge it all together, we combine it. Carl took that recommendation back with the endorsement of Johnson, it went through the National Security Council, and there was a directive organizing JUSPAO, which we put into informal effect about May 1 and into official effect July 1. [It was] the first and as far as I know, the only fully integrated military-civilian organ, the first one in any field and the only one in this field of communication.

G: I think the Economist, the British publication, which was I think fair to say a friendly publication--

Z: Yes, basically. Far friendlier than many American publications.

G: I put my tongue in my cheek and say that they are quoted some place as saying JUSPAO was the greatest PR juggernaut ever devised by the hand of man.

Z: That may be, but there's also a book done by an Austrian in which he picked up a quote from one of my staff officers. He ran across the word JUSPAO and said, "What does that mean?" This is Bill Stearman who said JUSPAO is Armenian for chaos. So you take your choice.

G: How do you gauge the effectiveness of a particular psychological operation?

Z: Very hard. You're dealing with intangibles, men's thinking, men's outlooks, men's attitudes. There are some, if you will, objective

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benchmarks in Vietnam. One was the Chieu Hoi returns, although Chieu Hoi could be a result of a military action, military pressure, as much as psychological operations. But psychological operations, you would think, were an element in it. You would, I guess, measure it by the degree of loyalty of the peasants to the government, which wasn't great, but maybe the reverse was some evidence of effectiveness and that the loyalty of the peasants to the VC wasn't any greater, maybe less so. Or maybe their loyalty depended completely, as it probably did in the long run, on the government actions, on the VC actions. I've never felt communications, psychological operations by themselves, can change people's minds. They can elaborate, they can take advantage of, they can exploit, if you will, if that's not an unkind word, actions by the government but they can't replace them, they can't be a substitute for them.

G: I think you've written extensively on that, too, on that topic.

Z: I have.

G: Well, what kind of advice were you given on the Vietnamese psychology? Who was telling us how to appeal to the Vietnamese?

Z: No one on the American side, except for some conventional wisdom anyone would get when they got in the field about the Confucian mind and oriental thinking, Vietnamese. We would get some advice from Vietnamese nationals, Vietnamese locals in our employ, and some of that very useful. I would make a point of trying to talk to Vietnamese as much as I could, but inevitably the Vietnamese you talked to represented a particular viewpoint: a northerner living in the city, a

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southerner living in the city. [There was] very little communication with the village, with the hamlet dweller, with the peasant, whatever label. Some of that came out of places like the RF-PF camps down in Vung Tau, from Major Be, and that type of stuff. Eventually you absorb it through a lot of contacts, through constant effort. But there was no formal training.

Now, the government did try formal training in later years for both USIS personnel, other civilian personnel, and the military, sometimes a year's training, sometimes it was only six months. And a certain amount of that helped, but it sure wasn't very deep or very thorough or very complete. Remember when the war in Vietnam started-- I think this statement is correct, if not it's close enough so that the point's valid--we did not have a single Ph.D. in the United States on Vietnamese studies. Now, later we developed some programs, but I would ask you today how many Ph.D.s in Vietnamese studies are graduating every year from American institutions in 1982?

G: I think Berkeley has just started a center for Vietnamese studies, and they got Douglas Pike to head it.

Z: I know Doug's working on it, but I want to see how many students Doug gets.

G: Well, he's going to get a lot of Vietnamese students apparently.

Z: Sure.

G: What role did CIA play in psychological operations?

Z: CIA played a number of roles. One, my relations with them were very cooperative. Although there were those who charged I was a CIA employee

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or a staffer, that's never been true. I got those charges in India, too. Nevertheless my relations with [the CIA]--and I think I served with five station chiefs there--were all uniformly quite excellent, quite cooperative. CIA was very responsive. It was a much more open CIA, if you will, because of the situation than in most countries. So they were a source of information. I had pretty good access to their material. Not agents' reports identified by name or really any details on classified black operations, but nevertheless a pretty good exposure to their information. Even the black operations in my mission council that I had some awareness of, and some of it you didn't want to know. There was no need to know, no reason. So they were a source of information, and good information.

Secondly, CIA was very often both useful and responsive to the need to do press briefings. In today's world the thought of the media being briefed by CIA is very, very unorthodox if not heavily criticized. Then, hell, many a good journalist and people who need no defense from me for their standing professionally, first one they'd want to speak to when they came in country would be the CIA station chief or one of the particular operators because they knew they were very knowledgeable. And we would line up CIA backgrounders, briefings if you will. Furthermore, CIA interrogation reports, after I went through them and indicated the ones I wanted and got clearance from CIA--and generally that was almost automatic--I would make available to journalists. Then out in the field, of course, CIA performed some of the same roles and were sources of information for many journalists.

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Now beyond that, CIA was very cooperative with JUSPAO. There were a few CIA agents as such. Since JUSPAO was an integrated organization of all the agencies in the country, the CIA gave us some agents who played a normal province rep role, not a CIA agent role. But beyond that, CIA was a source of unvouchered money, black bag money, which our province reps needed to use and to be able to spend a few bucks here and a few bucks there to get things done that affected people's thinking, that made communications easier, that made the government look better without having to go through the entire difficult, arduous bureaucratic process of prior approvals and paperwork and so on.

G: I've heard CIA performed that service for several organizations. I think the special forces used to have access to CIA money and therefore they never had to stand in line for anything.

Z: I've gotten my tail chewed out every so often for even admitting that or mentioning it in the past.

G: I think it's in the public domain now.

Z: I guess it's gone beyond that by this stage.

G: I think so.

You've answered some of these questions, so I'm going down the line. Well, you mentioned black operations, black propaganda. That brought a man's name to mind who's down here, and that was one of the old operators in that field who came back to Vietnam I think in 1965, Ed Lansdale.

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Z: Yes, I knew Ed and worked with him. Ed Lansdale was recruited, employed by, I guess the Pentagon recruited him, maybe even McNamara, but approved by Cabot Lodge in time for Cabot Lodge's second tour out there. I remember meeting Ed Lansdale because one of the people Ed in turn had recruited for his team was a fellow named Hank Miller, who was an associate of mine from USIA days, and Hank was supposed to be Lansdale's psychological operations man. Hank and Ed and I had lunch at the Hay Adams Hotel, in the course of a trip I made back here for consultation.

His recruitment, his assignment, his role was initially conceived, again, for a counterinsurgency situation. By the time Ed got out there with his team, some of whom were first-rate people, the situation had passed Ed by. The role he was designed to play really in my mind at least--I guess Ed would dispute this--was almost superfluous. We had made the decision to be there in force, and in force of all kinds, overwhelming force. And the thought of this little team of ten or twelve people, no matter how good they were--and in some cases at least there were questions about their competence for their role. But the thought of their being able to do the insurgency job, advise the Vietnamese in the way Ed had advised them back in the fifties was just outmoded, outdated. Every organization, AID, we, MACV, had structure after structure, platoons of advisers to the Vietnamese. Ed unfortunately, and his team I think, was the proverbial fifth wheel at that point, and his role within the mission became that eventually.

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Now, he did fill a role. He was sort of ombudsman for a while to certain groups of Vietnamese. He ran that big sort of hostel he had as a house, and a lot of Vietnamese would stand there and moan about Westmoreland or Lodge or some commander or something. And you know, he had this mystique of [Ramon] Magsaysay and the early Diem period, of being a legendary guerrilla insurgency expert with a great feel for the people. So Vietnamese and some Americans who thought in those terms as against the reality that was facing them, which was conventional military units and a full scale war, would turn to Ed and get rid of their frustrations on him, brief him, talk to him, hopefully get through him to the Ambassador.

I hate to say this because I regard Ed as a perfectly sincere, decent guy who in the right situation was undoubtedly competent. But I just think he contributed very little to Vietnam in the years he was there because, as I say, the role that he could have played and what he could have contributed was no longer needed. The situation had long since passed.

G: Yes. Wasn't Daniel Ellsberg one of his boys?

Z: Dan Ellsberg was one of his people. Christ, he had that fellow Choate who later got into the sugar-coated cereal issue. He had Mike Deutsch, he had Hank Miller, he had--as I go along I'll think of more names. But he had a collection, some of whom came from his early Diem days. He had an ex-Philippine brigadier general who came from his Philippine days. He had people like Hank Miller who had been in Laos and so on.

G: Was Rufus Phillips with him?

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Z: Rufus Phillips, who later ran for office here, Rufus was there. Quite a collection, and as I say, in their own place probably pretty competent, unorthodox, maverick, certainly not bureaucratic. I would hate to have been their supervisor.

G: They broke crockery, did they, when they--?

Z: Well, they broke crockery, but by the time they got around to it, it was such a small thing. In the mission prior to the entry of the conventional military units it might have been a bigger factor. By the time they got to breaking crockery around they were just an annoyance, sort of a side show, not a mainstream. . . . See, CORDS took over. Bill Porter took over that job. What the hell was Ed supposed to be doing there? He and Bill didn't communicate too damn well. Sure they went through the motions, but. . . . And Ed wrote a book about this which I've never read but I'm told is very bitter.

G: Lansdale did?

Z: Yes.

G: Well, I know he wrote a book about the early days.

Z: No, this was a subsequent one. I'm not sure it ever got published.

G: Well, I looked for it.

Z: Well, he's down the road here, down in Mount Vernon.

G: Yes, he's in McLean.

Z: Ask him about his book. I haven't seen it, so I don't--

G: I haven't either.

Z: I'm quoting secondhand.

G: Okay. 1964 was an election year.

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Z: Right.

G: How did that affect your job?

Z: It affected us very heavily. One, there was an election going on, and you did have LBJ and Barry Goldwater or Curt LeMay bombing them back to the stone age and that stuff would get circulated. Two, up to a certain point, if you remember, Lodge was a candidate. One of my sharpest memories in Vietnam was in February of that year--or was it early March--early March I guess, was my very first field trip. LBJ had sent McNamara out to deliver messages to the Vietnamese, to [Nguyen] Khanh, who had just overthrown Big [Duong Van] Minh, "no more coups."

G: I've heard it quoted slightly--

Z: Taylor was with them, perhaps one of the greatest scenes of all history. They were the two most unlikely sort of back-slappers, Maxwell Taylor and Robert McNamara standing in front of a big Vietnamese audience with General Khanh, all raising their hands saying "Vietnam muon nam," Vietnam for a thousand years. Well, they went through all that bit. But Henry Cabot Lodge accompanied them on a trip north on the day that happened to be New Hampshire primary day. Lodge said, "You come along, it's about time you saw this," because I was just barely new on the scene. He and I were off to the side, and I remember up in Hue they had a big turn-out, reception, speech, crowds and so on, McNamara again somewhat awkwardly was trying to work the crowds. Lodge and I were just walking around the back, sort of as added baggage, not really part of it, and I said, "How's he doing?"

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He said, "He's all right, but he's got a lot to learn about the business." (Laughter)

We got back on the plane. On the way up all the questions were to McNamara, "What's happening out here? What is your judgment?" We got off the plane at Tan Son Nhut airport. There was a big crowd of reporters at the foot of the ramp. McNamara, as the senior man aboard, got off first, followed by his group, and the reporters just opened up and didn't ask a single question. McNamara walked right on through. Last man off, Henry Cabot Lodge. As he walked down, they closed in on him. In between, the results from New Hampshire had come in. He had won as a write-in candidate. He was now a candidate for the presidency, and that was their interest for the day. There was a great Time cover, if you'll remember, of Lodge as a candidate with that straw hat he used to wear out in the field, out in the paddies, sort of walking in the paddies. I always used to say we ought to do a TV commercial for his campaign, just taking a picture of him in the paddies with his hat on as he'd be walking through and looking Vietnamese, suddenly he'd stop and take his hat off and turn to the voter over television and say, "I'm just a diplomat out here working for my country," and put his hat back on. (Laughter)

G: That's a great image. You couldn't get him to do it.

Z: Well, when he finally decided to get serious about things, he was out of the picture. As you know, he resigned and came back and worked for [William] Scranton.

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But that campaign affected us even more in some other ways. The VC at that stage were feeling their oats so much, they were doing so well, the Vietnamese battalions were disappearing every week almost and the country was militarily in bad shape. There was even thought of it being cut across about Ban Me Thuot, somewhere along the northern part of South Vietnam and so on. And the VC and the North were getting more and more aggressive and bold. They were coming into the city, bombing U.S. installations and so on. There's no doubt in our mind they were tweaking our tail, and they did bomb, if you remember it, just before the election, about November 1. They put a strike on Bien Hoa air base. With the election coming up, LBJ wasn't about to respond to it with anything very forceful or threatening.

G: Taylor wanted him to respond, didn't he?

Z: Taylor wanted him to. After the election, Taylor went back to Washington. I remember the last mission council meeting, at which Ambassador Taylor said, "Gentlemen, I'm going back to consult with the President. It's my responsibility to make recommendations to him. I'm going to recommend that American troops enter this war. I think we will need as many as a hundred thousand troops. I intend to make this recommendation regardless, but I would like to be able to say that the mission council supports this unanimously." And we voted and there was unanimous support for it. He came back, they held their consultations. I know that at that time the decision was made to initiate air strikes at the first appropriate opportunity, the first sort of challenge to the U.S.

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G: Now, this would have been in December?

Z: This was after the election, before Thanksgiving if I remember. It may have been right after Thanksgiving. It was when Taylor came back. He came back. The next tweaking of the eagle's tail was just before Christmas when they blew up the Brink. That was that hotel Bob Hope said was coming in the other way when he was coming into town. American deaths and so on, right in the heart of Saigon. Christmas Eve. LBJ wasn't about to react. Meanwhile the governments were falling apart. We were getting new governments every ten days. It was absolute political chaos and military jeopardy. Finally in April when Mac Bundy was out there, Kosygin happened to be in Hanoi, and--

G: This was February, I believe, wasn't it? February of 1965?

Z: February, that's right. I'm sure the VC figured with Kosygin there we wouldn't challenge them again. Each of these, their timing--VC, one of the things they've always been superb on was timing in U.S. terms: hit Bien Hoa just before the election, hit Brinks just before Christmas, hit Pleiku while Kosygin's in Hanoi, we wouldn't do anything. Mac Bundy was out there; they talked all morning, decided this was the time to strike. They left one last possible chance to pull back. Mac Bundy and Westmoreland went up to Pleiku, saw the camp up there and what had happened to it, came back and said, "Let it go," in effect. That was the evening we announced the first air strike up north.

G: There were stories that Mac Bundy was extremely affected by what he saw.

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Z: Well, he was. Mac's life has been spent in the safe precincts of Washington, not exposed to anything like that. He got out there and saw firsthand what the VC were doing, particularly to American installations. I think there were eight dead in Pleiku, which was a large number then. And yes, he was affected I'm sure, and they brushed aside--they didn't brush it aside, but decided despite Kosygin's presence in Hanoi they would strike North.

G: I have to interject here that that's the earliest I've ever heard that General Taylor advocated troops. I had seen cables that he, in the spring of 1965, was a holdout, opposing sending troops.

Z: You can check other members of that mission council. Alex [U. Alexis] Johnson was there. Jim Killen's now dead. Peer De Silva's dead.

G: I didn't know he was dead.

Z: Peer died about two or three years ago.

G: Did he?

Z: So it's Alex, myself, Jack Herford may have been mission council.

G: Was Porter there then?

Z: No, Porter was not there yet. This was the Taylor-Alex Johnson combine. But there's no doubt in my mind Taylor in that mission council meeting said, "I'm going back and recommend this. I want you to know I think there may be a need for as many as a hundred thousand troops." Now, his framework and justification was defense of American installations, and the first troops that came in, came in with the mission of defending American installations. They were put around air bases and it was a defense perimeter they had. Step by step, we went from a

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defense perimeter into patrolling ahead of defense lines and to offsetting potential attackers and to helping the Vietnamese in trouble and to joint operations with Vietnamese and then into full-fledged American operations.

G: There's a kind of an inevitability connecting those, isn't there?

Z: Of course there is. But in all this, the thing I remember most about Vietnam and you felt there, it's not that we kidded ourselves or were unaware of issues or insensitive. The problem you always faced was what do you do? It's easy enough saying this isn't good and that's not good. But you usually have to pick between two less than desirable choices. You pick the least worse choice, and sometimes there were three or four worse choices. Now, people with the benefit of hindsight always find it easy to say, "Well, we should have pulled out. We should have packed up our bags and gotten out." That was always there in front of you, and you always decided the damage to the United States by pulling out would be worse than staying there. So you went into it piecemeal. But each time it was a selection of the less evil of two undesirable alternatives.

G: Sure. Sure. General Khanh that summer of 1964 was making some speeches which included this "to the North" theme.

Z: That Bac Tien speech has got to be one of the great stories about Vietnam. I was then, as USIS director, supposed to be advising how do we get a greater impact. We have to show unity among the Vietnamese. You can't have this constant revolving door government and so on. So one of the great brainchilds again--I kept thinking back of the Kremlin

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Politburo as standing at that goddamn stand at the May Day parades, the November 7 parades. We kept saying, "Let's get all these elements together," particularly on that day--what was it, July 23, the anniversary of the Geneva Agreements, which was sort of their great day of unity. I said, "What we need is calm, with the religious sects, the military, the civilians, everyone up there showing a unified front and they should all speak unity and so on." And Taylor sold this to Khanh. We pressured a number of people like Big Minh to be there, and the Cao Dai and the Hao Hoa and the Buddhists and everyone else came aboard. We kept thinking, well, when's Khanh going to show us his speech and how is it going to be? It didn't come. Didn't come, until the morning of the ceremony they released the speech text. We got a copy at USIS because we were going to distribute it. I went through it and I called up the Ambassador and said, "We got troubles." (Laughter) All that effort of unity the son of a gun ruined by putting in a paragraph, "We're going to march north united." Bac Tien. And we were taken aback. It was contrary to all our policy because we didn't want to challenge the Chinese and the Russians and so on. But Khanh, and this was so often the case, we set up this great, great plan and made all these arrangements, and Khanh just took it all apart, destroyed it all.

Then we got very annoyed with him, and Alex Johnson asked for a meeting and I was sent along. We went out to the compound, the army compound where Khanh had his headquarters, and we sat, Alex and Mel Manful and myself on one side, and maybe Sam Wilson by then was there,

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too. But at any rate Johnson said something like that "that speech does not represent the United States policy." And Khanh said, "Well, Mr. Ambassador, it sure represents Vietnamese [policy]."

G: This is an awkward situation.

Z: This would happen so often. One time in March Lodge said, "Well, let's take everyone up, show them land that's been recovered." We got up a plan, and correspondents came aboard and again, I was just observing, and Khanh went along and we showed newly liberated territory, progress being made. Then we went into one of these government houses for lunch, and while we're sitting around having some lunch off this buffet table, I saw Khanh over to the side surrounded by some correspondents. And Francois Sully particularly was over there. I went over and eavesdropped, and I came back and I said, "Mr. Ambassador, Khanh just blew the whole day." Son of a bitch was over there accusing the French of supporting the VC, feeding money into them, threatening France with breaking relations. And of course every correspondent went back, never mentioned the goddamned land we had brought them up there to see, did long stories on Khanh and his challenges to the French.

Once we had this enormous pressure to let correspondents into the Bien Hoa air base, which we never would, until we finally broke through and I kept saying you got to let them in, they say there are combat planes down there and so forth. So we said, okay, but let's not do it as Americans. It's a Vietnamese air base, they should do the briefing, it's their show. So we set it all up. The commander of

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the Vietnamese air force, Nguyen Cao Ky, was going to do the briefing. This was going to be a nice story about joint American-[Vietnamese] air cooperation, a common installation, all that type of thing. They do all that, they tour the thing. Then they go into one of these briefing huts and Ky is briefing them, and someone says, "Well, have you ever flown out of this air base?" and Ky says, "Yes." They say, "Where?" "Well, I flew my first mission out here. And one of the missions I flew from here was north of the 38th [17th] Parallel. I led the first Vietnamese air strikes." These had been hush-hush.

G: Those were the old 34A.

Z: That's right. Cross-border operations. The whole story--

G: The black bombers?

Z: --was blown. So we laid plans many times out there and the Vietnamese, and I'm persuaded most of the time deliberately, would blow our whole effort.

G: Ky was pretty good copy I think, wasn't he?

Z: Oh, Ky was great copy. The correspondents loved him. He was a colorful character himself. You know, you think of some of these guys, where are they now? He's running a liquor store I guess.

G: Out on the West Coast some place.

Z: Somewhere out there. Tran Van Don is somewhere around here. Khanh has either got a restaurant or doing something in Paris. You know, they're all--

G: I heard the former ambassador, and I can't remember which one, to the United States--

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Z: Has Goldberg's Delicatessen.

G: Yes.

Z: No, no. I see him periodically. What's his name? Oh, I know it.

G: Not Bui Diem, was it?

Z: Bui Diem.

G: Yes.

Z: And it's right up the street here on K Street. I've been in there.

His wife runs it for him. Bui Diem does the big thinking. He puts on his regular jacket and tie and so on. He wouldn't be seen dead--but he tells me some very funny stories about feeding pastrami to Jewish customers. To be more efficient he'd slice it in the morning, and they'd come in and they wouldn't buy it. He finally asked why. They said, "You've got to slice it right in front of us. Won't eat the stuff otherwise."

G: May not be kosher. That's great.

What involvement did you have in the public affairs involving the Gulf of Tonkin business in August of 1964?

Z: Simply the Vietnamese end of it. We knew about the attacks. That was a Washington show basically, but we were aware of it. The other part of our involvement was to do a little intelligence spadework. It happened that that weekend Khanh, in order to strengthen his relations with the American media, was having an outing and picnic and sort of reception for them down in Vung Tao. Colonel Thao, the guy who had the bad eye who later turned out to be a VC.

G: Not Pham Ngoc Thao?

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Z: Thao was in office then. He was then chief of information or whatever title. So he set it up. The press was down there. It was a big goddamned party. They brought down Vietnamese poppies for the correspondents to take out in the woods, which they were doing with enthusiasm. But Howard Simpson and I were down there on an intelligence mission, but we couldn't go into some of the press briefings and we were sort of on the outside trying to find out from friends what was going on and went back and reported back. And of course again Khanh took advantage of that whole thing to declare open war. I remember a headline in the Saigon Post about that time, "Vietnamese Navy Unleashed." Well, this was the result of a comment I had made at a press conference. We had no policy guidance; very often in that period we were making up our own policy. And someone said, "By what right does the Vietnamese navy have to hit something or other up the coast?" I said, "Well, if North Vietnamese are attacking down here, there's no reason the Vietnamese navy shouldn't be hitting up there. They've got every right to defend themselves and attack the enemy in their home bases" and so on. So Zorthian unleashed the Vietnamese navy one day.

G: It was sort of reminiscent of Chiang Kai-shek being unleashed.
(Laughter)

Did you get a lot of inquiry about the possibility that there had been South Vietnamese attacks which might have triggered the whole thing?

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Z: Sure. We played it dumb and reported it basically to Washington and Honolulu.

G: How do you counter the bad press that results from the frequent changes of regime that took place?

Z: You don't counter it. It's there, there's no sense in hiding it, trying to smooth it over or anything else. In fact, the only other thing we did was--in contrast to the past, and this was something I pushed for and got approval on--we made all the information we had available to the press. They had a worm's eye view. They could only be in one place. They couldn't see very much. We'd get reports in from all over, from the field, from within Saigon, various points. And a couple of those nights of the long knives I briefed the press every two or three hours, four or five times a night, with everything we could get. That was the only way I could think we could handle it, was complete access for the press to all our information. A couple of times when they closed down the telegraph machine, I'd let the press file limited copy through embassy channels to Washington. There's no way you can gild that lily and there's no sense in trying. In fact, if anything the relations with the press through that period were about the best because there was a certain amount of common bond of sympathy for each other's problems.

G: Was there pressure from Washington to try to make it better somehow?

Z: No, by that time we had the guidance. This was an open war whether we wanted it or not. I was always against the imposition of censorship there, one, in principle. You know, censorship the American people

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accept only for the protection of tactical military information. Well, that was never the beef out there. The beef was about the judgments, the coverage of the political side, the coverage of our strategy and impact and our effectiveness and so on. That you couldn't censor. If you were going to have censorship, we're dealing with a sovereign government. The sovereign government of Vietnam was the Vietnamese government, and they would exercise their censorship. You can imagine the screams there.

But furthermore, we had no control of the correspondents. To have censorship you've got to control the correspondents physically, you've got to control his movement, his logistics, you've got to control his communications. That was the case in World War II. In Korea they wore uniforms, they had simulated army ranks, the military controlled all the transportation and the military controlled communications. In Vietnam, hell, there were French correspondents covering Vietnam never accredited to MACV. We'd have anyone come in, be able to rent a car or fly--the Vietnamese airline was flying all through the war anywhere they wanted in the country, go anywhere they wanted. They'd take their life in their hands maybe, but there was no restriction on it as long as they had a Vietnamese visa. We never had a simulated military rank, military control of the correspondents. We provided them logistics but they could move on their own, and we never controlled communications. AP, UPI had their own channels to the U.S.; television was shipped out of the country. There was no way you could exercise censorship.

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So it was an open war, and the press had access to everything, to everyone. In that situation I always felt and still do, the only choice, the only approach is complete openness, complete access. Your story has got to be good, but you let the press at it. There's no sense in trying to control, because you can't control, even if ethically, morally you should be controlled. And that led to real problems. It called for self discipline by government personnel, both military and civilian, which wasn't always exercised. And it called for some judgment and perspective by the press so that the words of a private aren't given the same weight as the words of General Westmoreland, except insofar as the private knows what he's talking about. Right in front of the private he's the expert, but when the private talks about the broad strategy of the war, or a lieutenant does or some lieutenant colonel does, then he doesn't know what the hell he's talking about. He's not in the position to make--and the press has to avoid that temptation, which they didn't, obviously. The press will tell you all their sources were official sources. That's right. But were those official sources, one, either qualified to make the judgments they were quoting, or two, did they have enough self-interest so that what they were saying was tilted or slanted or distorted?

G: Was the war lost in the columns of the New York Times?

Z: No. No. I know Bob Elegant wrote this in effect recently. I just think that's wrong. I don't mean the media's coverage didn't have an effect. I think particularly the pictures of a Tet in a living room

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on television, on a front page of a paper, obviously fed the critics in the U.S. If it didn't destroy, at least [it] reduced public support considerably, and without that kind of support eventually the government had to make its judgment. In that sense the channel of the press, the nature of coverage affected but it didn't lose it. We lost the war in Vietnam in the way we performed. And I could almost make the argument we wouldn't have lost the war except for the final political decisions here in Washington to withdraw. Some of that, a lot of that, was the result of public attitudes affected by the press. But no, I just think it is a complete distortion of the facts to say the press lost the war in Vietnam.

G: Someone asked Melvin Laird not long ago why we lost the war, and he said he wasn't sure we did.

Z: Well, I think that might be an answer. I think there's a case to be made increasingly and some are making it, I don't want to overstate it, that the five to ten years we bought out there at a cost of fifty-five thousand lives and billions and billions [of dollars], enabled the governments of those countries to get their roots in place enough to withstand the pressure. Domino theory is too mechanistic in its implications, but the theory of pressures coming from a central point like North Vietnam throughout Southeast Asia backed up by the Chinese were very real, and we've seen that in Laos and seen it in Cambodia. But the challenge that was facing Thailand in the late sixties, early seventies, where guerrilla efforts were started in the Thai northeast, seems to be quieted down. The Thai government seems to have gotten

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its roots down. Malaysia certainly is pretty strong. Singapore is very strong. Taiwan is, certainly in economic terms. Even Indonesia seems quiet, and the Philippines, for all the headaches that [Ferdinand] Marcos represents, nevertheless doesn't seem to have an internal insurgency. So maybe in the long run we did win. Those five or ten years were critical. The ASEAN nations seem pretty strong. We don't look at Southeast Asia today as one of our problem areas. In many ways it's in pretty good shape.

G: Sure. To get back to the end of 1964, there was an interesting situation in December of 1964. There had been another rumble through the government, Khanh and Thi and Ky had just dissolved the High National Council. Taylor apparently was very irritated.

Z: God bless the High National Council. I was watching that TV thing, the Vietnamese thing last night on TV, and just as you talked I remembered the name of the head of that council, whom I saw last night. Suu, S-U-U, the one who wore the old Vietnam traditional hat and gown. The poor guy was a respected elder who was just never with it. Suddenly one day these young Turk generals said "Dalat with you" or wherever they sent them.

G: Taylor was pretty exercised about that.

Z: Because LBJ had put out the word, no more coups. And Taylor had just come back and delivered that message and then this happened right after and he was annoyed as hell. Taylor had an element of the pro-consul about him. So he called in four of the young Turks, the marine,

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the navy guy, Khanh and Ky, I think. Or it wasn't even Khanh. Khanh was sort of out of the picture by then. Ky and one of the others.

G: [Nguyen Chanh] Thi, I think.

Z: Thi. And just chewed them out, like second lieutenants. Said, "I had you all out for a dinner here the other day and I told you no more coups and I guess you didn't understand me. I must have wasted my dinner." They hit the roof on that.

G: There was something of a fracas within USOM about that time, too, that I've come across between Killen and I think George Tanham had been involved.

Z: George Tanham and Al Hurt. The fracas I don't know; there were certainly some differences. I think some of the people like Tanham whose bag was counterinsurgency and economic help for insurgency situations felt Jim was, one, he ran the ship with a very tight hand. But, two, they felt that Jim may have been a little too conventional, a little too insistent on safeguards on the use of economic aid, and a little too oriented towards pure economic considerations as though he were running a regular AID mission, of trying to help the economy of the country when these other fellows were saying "Christ, there's a war on, an insurgency, and all these normal ground rules have to go."

G: They must have felt pretty strongly about it. I think two of them resigned.

Z: Well, George came back, but some of George's departure was also his time was up, and he wanted to come back to Rand. The other one, who was it? Was it Al Hurt who--?

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G: Fraleigh?

Z: Oh, Fraleigh. That's right. I'd forgotten Fraleigh. Yes, he did resign.

G: I didn't know if you had any inside information other than that on what was going on or not.

Z: No. Not really.

G: That January, that would be 1965 now, USIS had some problems with crowds, rioters.

Z: With whom?

G: Rioters, I think.

Z: Oh. In fact, we lost the downtown library. As a matter of fact, we finally closed that up. I moved out of the PAO's house, which was a huge old French colonial home, and we made that into the library and finally made what had been the library of USIS into the briefing center and the press center.

G: Yes. What was behind that? What was motivating that activity?

Z: Oh, I think it was one of these flare-ups, the undercurrent of anti-Americanism which you'll find always and was present in Vietnam, of anyone who's as big and as dominant as we are. This was one of those sudden flare-ups and not unencouraged by the government, because Taylor had been chewing out some of these people. There was just chaos. Who was stirring up what was hard to know. But the library's always a handy target, and this one in particular, which was on Nguyen Hue right downtown.

G: Yes. Well, they're very accessible and very visible.

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Z: Easy to do.

G: Yes. Yes. How well did we handle the public relations--?

Z: That was a rough night. I also remember that night. There was a lot of awfully troublesome rioting, Vietnamese picking on Chinese. I remember a young kid, couldn't have been eight years old, who had a knife while someone was holding some Chinese, cutting him up, you know, that kind of thing. An awful lot of that. It was not one of Vietnam's better nights.

G: How did the introduction of U.S. combat troops affect the way the press covered the war?

Z: For a while at least, particularly among the more veteran ones, not the real youngsters, there was a feeling that when the Americans arrived, the show was going to be over. It was just a matter of time, and they got much more conventional and predictable and supportive in their approach. Here are the American troops. This is easier to understand. These are people we're familiar with. Forget covering the Vietnamese anymore, go out with the American units. To the detriment of the Vietnamese, there was a lot more focus obviously on the Americans. This was their audience. And I think [there was] a lot more confidence that the problems would simply be overcome in due time and it was only a matter of time. And that was a plus in our relations.

That gradually was diluted and eventually lost through 1967. The Harrison Salisbury stories out of Hanoi I think hurt. Some of the events in the South hurt, the way they were running the election which we had set up--impossible standards for them, trying to run a

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Jeffersonian democracy out in Vietnam while we were stuffing ballot boxes in Chicago. We can be very, very arrogant and pretentious, pompous at times about ourselves. I remember Brownie Reid up on the Hill saying, "That election has to be purer than any election ever held in the U.S." Why? They'd never held a democratic election before. Well, there were a lot of flaws in that process. The press [who] were covering the Vietnamese were conscious of some of these problems, and the coverage was quite critical.

And then came November, when Westmoreland and [Ellsworth] Bunker came back and gave what were well qualified but nevertheless interpreted as optimistic statements, and then Tet. We said right then, I've always felt the real target of the [North] Vietnamese, or at least a target, was psychological impact in the U.S. At maximum they would have gotten the general uprising, which never happened, and they would have had some military gain. But at least they expected the impact in the U.S. and they won that. And that was a tremendous victory, for support deteriorated from there on.

G: In 1966, to back up a little bit, Ky had some problems with the Buddhists up north I think, and there were some very touchy confrontations I think between some dissident ARVN people.

Z: There sure were, up in Danang. Well, Tri up there was kicking his heels and the marines were up there by then. He thought he had the marines support. John Chaisson, now dead, later lieutenant general, then I guess still colonel, who was the three of MAF up there, was a hero for stopping some of the Vietnamese confrontation that was about

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to take place. There were some demonstrations in the streets of Danang and so on. Phil Habib gave a briefing not many people remember at my house on that situation, in which we expressed our support for Ky, very strong support for him. Again, the effort to maintain some stability in the government, a government there we could deal with and have as a functioning effective government.

G: Would you comment on some of the themes that the press seem to play on a little bit, for its sensational value I suppose, and this was the torture of prisoners, atrocities and so on and so on?

Z: Inefficient Vietnamese military, corruption, torture of prisoners, inadequacies of the government, the failure to, quote, "win the hearts and minds," the inefficiencies of the American bureaucracy, the inconsistency, the overwhelming presence. However, not all of the press. It's wrong to talk about the press as a monolith, as a generalization, but in most cases the VC were pictured as peasant fighters fighting against big odds, being very shrewd, being very effective, really being much more responsive and sensitive to the peasants' needs and much more authentically nationalistic Vietnamese and so on.

G: Did you ever play the role in the mission council of pointing out that something had to be done about torturing prisoners while somebody is standing there with a camera?

Z: Sure. Constantly. Not that the other members were insensitive. The real thing is, what do you do? Do you tell the Vietnamese, don't torture anyone while there's a camera around?

G: That's a little cynical I guess.

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Z: And there's always a goddamned camera around and whenever that happened pictures would be taken. Then when the VC would strike somewhere, by the time you got there the bodies had been cleaned up or something. You're going to leave them out there twenty-four hours until you can run a crew out there? The practical problems were very real. Peer De Silva once said, "You know we really ought to record all these sessions we have of the mission council. The only trouble is, ten years from now when we read it, we won't believe they ever happened. We won't believe that they could happen." I went through seven ministers of information, not one of whom was at all effective. Most of them couldn't have cared less about the job. There was just a slot to fill as part of a junta. But with no aptitude for it, no training for it. You'd go up there, you'd talk to them, sure they'd say something. Occasionally they'd do something just to be responsive to you, be nice. But the real implementation with either enthusiasm or effectiveness was just not there. One of the troubles was we'd always do something half-baked. You could do things the American way, with our particular approach to things with our massive power, or you could do them the Vietnamese way. You can't do them in a compromise of the two, and we'd always end up trying to meld the two together and they never worked.

G: In the name of making it a Vietnamese operation?

Z: In the name of working together in a MACV and a Vietnamese operation. We never really came together. All the stories about all the surface cooperation, we were never really integrated. We never really meshed.

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G: Could you have, do you think?

Z: I don't think we could with five hundred thousand American troops and whatever billion dollars there was a year pouring in. You could have meshed at a much lower scale with a much smaller American presence so that it was much more equal in presence and effort. But by the time we got past those initial troop movements, it was too late. We shoved the Vietnamese aside and said, "We'll do the job. Go form your army and form your government."

G: In the interest of keeping the chronology more or less straight, you said that one of those White House meetings had an interesting story behind it.

Z: Oh, that one was fairly early in the game. Leonard Marks was still director--well, was really the new director of USIS. I was back on consultation, my very first presidential meeting in which I sat was a National Security Council rump session. Taylor came back for consultation; he brought me with him. He brought me into the NSC room. I was in the back row. Taylor briefed the group and gave a pretty honest evaluation of what was going on there, very critical of Vietnamese capabilities, political performance and so on. And then LBJ got going on the press. He said, "Max, who's handling the press out there?" Taylor--

G: He pointed at you?

Z: Part the waves. "You come up to the table." And he said, "What's wrong with that goddamned press out there?" As you know, he never held back the four-letter words. Well, I sort of opened my mouth to

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answer and I never got out three words I don't think. He just took off for about a half hour, chewed me up and down for all the sins of Halberstam and Mal Browne and anyone else he could think of and then sort of dismissed me. That was my introduction to this role, "You get them straightened out out there."

Well, this meeting was more of the same. Frank Stanton had been very close to LBJ.

G: Who was this?

Z: Frank Stanton, who was then president of CBS. Very close to LBJ. They'd done things together. Frank was a real friend. I happened to be in town for consultation. Well, it may have been the same trip. At any rate, LBJ got me in there, Leonard Marks, Frank Stanton, and John Chancellor, who had just been appointed head of the Voice of America. And it was a real the press session, and it was in that little room and he was having hot and cold running Fresca and Tab and other things in. And he took off on the press. This was right after that Cam Ne incident, the burning of the--the Morley Safer--

G: Yes. The marine with the Zippo lighter.

Z: That was Morley Safer's spot. LBJ said, "Frank, I'll tell you, I got that information, some of your correspondents are communists. If you don't take care of them, I'm going to take care of them. And I'm going to--" He worked poor old Stanton over. And you know, this is a very major guy to whom I always looked with awe, president of CBS for twenty years. He was being lectured by LBJ, and everyone else was embarrassed.

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I found out later, because I asked Walter Cronkite years later, I said, "You know, I sat through that and I saw Frank Stanton get really taken over the coals by the President of the U.S. about the caliber and loyalty of the correspondents and instructed to straighten things out. Did you ever hear boo from Frank? Did he come back and chew you all out?" This was particularly on Safer, who was a Canadian national. There were charges, Art Sylvester charges, that he'd married a Vietnamese girl. He wasn't even married then. Walter Cronkite said, "We never heard one single word. If we had, I would have been aware of it." Not one word out of Stanton, and I've always had a very high regard for Stanton for that. He took all that crap, never went back and bitched, didn't even say to those guys, "Look, I just want you to know the President's annoyed as hell and I don't want you to do anything about it but be aware of it, that I got my tail chewed out." Didn't even say that to them.

G: I've heard similar stories from Washington Post people, that the editors never passed anything down to the reporter level, they just took it.

Z: But LBJ could get very, very overwhelming when he wanted to. There's a big, big presence there.

G: Have you got any other particular memories about encounters with him?

Z: No. Just a fun little personal one. He was signing a photograph for me of him and me, and he called me in. Yoichi Okamoto, who was his photographer, was a friend from USIA days, and Yoichi made a point of taking a picture of us and then asked the President to sign it. The

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President called me out of some meeting I was in. He said, "I'm going to sign this. Now what's your name?" I said, "Zorthian." He said, "What's Zorthian? What's that mean?" I said, "Mr. President, Zorthian is just like Johnson in Armenian, it means son of Zorth." He grumped.

G: He signed it. That's great.

You left off talking about what has been called the progress offensive in 1967 when General Westmoreland and Ambassador Bunker came back and reported to--they went on "Meet the Press" I think and so on.

Z: "Meet the Press" and a speech at the National Press Club.

G: That's right.

Z: Which was qualified. Westy said at the National Press Club we're at the beginning of the end, and in another year or so we should see progress, in two or three years, you know, we may make it. All of those qualifications were lost. Same thing on "Meet the Press." Westmoreland and Bunker would say progress in Vietnam War, we're on the right track or whatever, very optimistic, and they'd cite the figures from the goddamned HAM statistics, [Robert] Komer's computers and so on. Tet was that much worse because this build-up had been taking place.

G: I was going to ask. We hear lately that the Tet offensive was not such a big surprise to people.

Z: Well, there were some alerts about it. There was certainly anticipation that something was going to happen. The details of it, the magnitude of it wasn't anticipated. [Nguyen Van] Thieu had proposed to let all his troops off for Tet. Westmoreland talked him into

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keeping half of them on duty just because of this reason. Now no one said they're going to attack in thirty-eight cities along the following lines and so on, but that they would undertake something dramatic to make an impact at Tet because they were being set back, because they were taking lickings, had been anticipated. I don't think anyone predicted it would be in the heart of Saigon, or hit the Embassy and so on. But sure, there was some intelligence indications and some gut judgments.

G: Do you think that a big flaw in our approach was that we didn't get the public ready for something?

Z: We didn't get the public ready for it. LBJ, as was his way, was emphasizing the positive. I remember a speech Harold Johnson I think was giving once that the war might last ten years. Christ! He got chewed out by LBJ for being so pessimistic. A lot of those precautions, a lot of the qualifications were simply lost, and that's one of the problems of communicating, you simplify messages for either television more so than for the press, but even for the press, and the qualifications, the fine points, get lost, or if you put them in people don't read them. The headline writers don't write them. I don't know how you work it out.

G: There's no human way to get around something like that.

Z: Well, there's certainly no easy way.

G: How long was it after the initial attacks that you were able to get some kind of clear picture as to what was really going on?

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Z: We didn't get a clear picture for a long time. By then John Chaisson was in Saigon as J-3, for MACV, and he was superb. We got him to do, as often as we could get him away, the briefings of the military. We brought in people like Fred Weyand from III Corps and some others. We gave a briefing, and this may have been an error, this exposure, openness to give out all the information. I don't think it was error, there were people who do. I called out Tet night to get people to cover. We gave a briefing. I asked Westmoreland to comment in the courtyard of the Embassy that morning.

G: That was a rather famous--

Z: That was a rather famous one, and I keep saying it's a classic situation where you can't compartmentalize audiences. He was talking to those marine Embassy guards who had fought all night, they'd lost some of their own people, they'd killed the VC. He said, "You've achieved victory" and complimented them. Well, that picture with the rubble of the Embassy behind him, around the world ten thousand miles away I keep saying made Westy sound fatuous in those comments. In the context it was in, it made a lot of sense. The trouble is, how do you talk both to that marine who had just been fighting and an audience in the U.S. sitting in their living room [watching it] on television, or in Moscow or wherever.

But Westy did that, and then I asked Bunker to brief the press particularly on our overall reports, because again, the press only had one or two or three men's viewpoints, vantage points. We in the embassy had a reporting structure. Well, we briefed then and I wrote

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the notes for Bunker. We said the VC have not achieved a military victory, they've been thrown back in most places, they've lost heavy casualties. If they've achieved anything, they've achieved a psychological impact in the United States, and maybe that was their primary target or only target. They certainly didn't have a general uprising as they say they expected, as VC prisoners say--prisoners, a lot of them were told there would be a general uprising. Go in the cities and the people would greet them. The press interpreted that as saying the embassy denies there's a military victory and yet look what happened. The whole thing was criticized. The press I think dealt with the whole story too much as a spot news story, too superficial, too much as a sort of off-the-cuff reaction, top-of-the-head reaction. By August, Charley Mohr had done a piece on the front page of the New York Times saying Tet was a military defeat at least.

G: But nobody paid nearly as much attention to that.

Z: No. Too late then.

G: Are you familiar with Peter Braestrup's criticism?

Z: Oh, sure.

G: What do you think of his conclusions?

Z: Well, I think it's been pretty much on line. A lot of what I say about the character of coverage is stuff that's borne out by Peter.

G: He was the--

Z: Washington Post.

G: --Washington Post bureau chief I think, wasn't he?

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Z: Yes, he was. He was an ex-marine, and I think he would say to some extent mea culpa himself.

G: Yes.

Z: But Peter was one of the more balanced writers of military affairs. I'll let others judge on his political judgments out there.

G: Yes. I wonder if that's cost him any of his old friends?

Z: I'm sure he's been criticized. Elegant sure as hell has been criticized by a lot of other journalists.

G: Yes. Did you see that piece he wrote in Encounter here a while back?

Z: Yes. And recently Kappy did one in Commentary, my associate, Harold Kaplan, who was press counselor.

G: What was the name again?

Z: Harold Kaplan.

G: Harold Kaplan, sure.

Z: In this month's Commentary [he] did one on the press and Vietnam. I'm not quite sure what the hell he was getting at.

G: I haven't seen that one yet.

Z: It was a little roundabout and so on.

How are we doing? Are we getting near the end?

G: We're getting there. Let me pause for a--

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III

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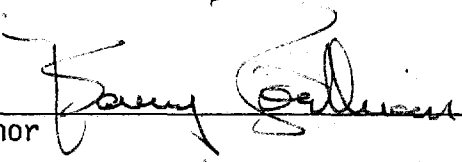

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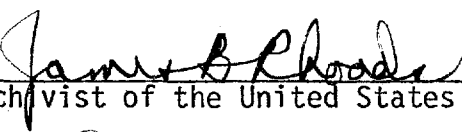

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