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ROBERT DON LEVINE

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INTERVIEW

Early Assignment: VOA, Geneva, Paris

Q: This is Pat Nieburg. It is December 10th and I'm at the house of Robert Don Levine. Bob was the Deputy Spokesman for Jess Powell in Saigon during one of the critical periods of the Vietnam War. What we shall discuss today are Bob's experiences during that period.

LEVINE: Okay, I joined USIA in September of 1955 as a GS11 newswriter for the Voice of America. I spent five years writing and editing news for the Voice of America, in English of course, four and a half of those five years on what they call the overnight shift. In 1960 I joined the Foreign Service and went first to Geneva as an FSR-4. I spent about three years in Geneva first as the number two man of a two-man USIS operation in what was then called the U.S. Mission to the European Office of the United Nations. That's as far as I got.

Not too long after I got there I became the number one man in the operation. My boss was transferred, having been there for two tours of duty. My next tour of duty after Geneva was in Paris as Information Officer. I was there for only nine months 1964-1965. And I got caught in the build up in Vietnam and was sent to Saigon directly from Geneva as what wound up being actually the Deputy Mission Spokesman.

1965 Assignment to Vietnam as Deputy Mission Spokesman Nature of Work

Q: Bob, let me interrupt for just one minute.

LEVINE: Go ahead.

Q: Would you define a little bit what this job entailed?

LEVINE: With the build up of American forces in Vietnam in 1965, I arrived there in May of 1965, there was increasing interest on the part of the American media in what was going on in Vietnam and in following what was happening to our troops, what they were doing. And that required more work on behalf of the United States Mission dealing with these reporters.

Birth of JUSPAO

Also at about the same time that I arrived there, it may have been a little later, the normal U.S. Information Service operation in Saigon was transformed into what was called the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office or JUSPAO in Saigon which included both the military and the civilians.

By the time I left, the daily news briefings which were given at the U.S. mission hosted several hundred newspaper, television, wire service and freelance reporters. So the job was primarily one of helping my boss, Harold Kaplan, who was the mission spokesman, to get ready for this briefing at five O'clock, called the five O'clock follies, and find out what was going on, what activities the mission was involved in and what kind of questions he might have to respond to at the daily briefing. The during the day, of course, we had to handle other queries that came along from newsmen and also make some arrangements for them to visit different parts of South Vietnam where our troops were operating or where American civilians including USIA civilians were functioning also. Of course, State Department people were in the some of the larger cities in Vietnam.

The five O'clock briefing was a joint military and civilian briefing. I might say that the military handled their part of the briefing and the civilians handled the civilian part of the briefing but basically we controlled what happened there.

The So-Called Five O'CLOCK Follies:
Difficulty Mission Spokesman Had in Getting
Adequate Info to Satisfy Press

Q: Robert, let me interrupt with one question. Would you describe for me a little bit how does one get ready for that kind of five O'clock follies that you had to face everyday? In other words, where did you get the information? Where did you get the basic data that you had that you needed to prepare to answer the questions of the media?

LEVINE: Well, first of all we had cables to read, outgoing cables from Saigon, incoming cables from Washington. We also talked to mission officers, State Department people, JUSPAO, JUSPAO officers, military officers, to get them to explain certain things that were coming up in the news. We, of course, had the wireless file that we looked at, had some idea from that. I don't recall how quickly we got newspapers there. I don't think it was all that fast. But we did get reports on what the American press and also how the foreign press was playing the situation in Vietnam. And from these reports, press, media reports, we knew what issues were hot. We also knew based on our conversations with correspondents who asked us questions and wanted to know what was going on, what our attitudes was towards, I don't know, whether it was a cease-fire or what have you.

Q: Robert, did you or Harold Kaplan, for example, sit in on mission staff meetings which were either just embassy missions or joint missions with the military. Were you in at the policymaking discussions to get a readout of what was going on?

LEVINE: I never was. Harold Kaplan was to a greater extent than me but not all that much. Primarily it was Barry Zorthian who was then the Director of JUSPAO who sat in on those meetings. This made things a little bit difficult for us admittedly. Although we did find out things through other people at a lower level who were informed, either people in the military or in the civilian part of the operation. I'm talking about the whole entire mission, not just JUSPAO.

Q: Did Barry share the information that he had with you? In other words, did Barry Zorthian actually brief you and/or Kaplan and tell you?

LEVINE: To a certain extent, not as much as we would have liked. I think that he retained for himself a considerable amount of this information to make himself a better source and a single source for newsmen. That was one of the problems. I always thought that Kaplan did a marvelous job given the fact that he wasn't as privy to all the information that the mission had as Zorthian was.

I might also say that part of our work as I started to say earlier was arranging for trips, correspondents that wanted to go into the field. They were usually flown around on MACV, Military Assistance Command Vietnam Aircraft, and were able to get into the field quite a bit. Some of them were wounded. I don't know. Maybe some of them were even killed. I don't recall whether-- you may recall that, whether any correspondents were killed there. I don't think anybody was in my time. But I know some of them were involved in some pretty hot operations.

Q: You may recall Dickie Shapiro, Larry Burrows were casualties in Vietnam.

LEVINE: That's right. I remember reading about Burrows. I don't think that--that didn't happen when I was there. But he was always--he was a photographer for Life.

Q: That's correct.

LEVINE: And I can remember seeing some of his photos in print, particularly one very dicey operation which he miraculously got out of alive with helicopters being shot down one after the other.

Levine's Work Did Not Involve Much Personal Contact with Combat Operations

Q: What was the emphasis? As you remember during those years we had some very famous engagements in '65, '66 when you were there. There were such things as the battle of Ia Drang which was a major battle in the highlands. There was the question of securing the Delta. And then there was the question of pacification. Did you get into all these substantive areas?

LEVINE: I did not. I made a few trips. I read about the Ia Drang Valley battle and some of the other battles. But I did not get close to anything substantive insofar as that was concerned. I did make one rather interesting trip to the Mekong Delta with some Japanese correspondents early on. This was in about, I would say, July of 1965. And with two of our famous Vietnam hands, Ev Bumgardner and Frank Scotton who were then involved in a motivational training exercise which they did with the popular forces and regional forces trying to help the Vietnamese explain to them, the South Vietnamese government,

what they had at stake in the fight that was going on. A short part of that trip was by plane. And I don't really remember the names of the towns we went to. And then we proceeded by jeep almost up to the Cambodian border. Scotton knew a lot of Vietnamese along the way and was sure that the road was secure. And it included, I remember, a ferry ride in our jeep. We had to cross a stream or a river. I don't remember the name of it now. But there were no exciting developments on that trip. I was just intrigued by the fact that we could travel as far as we did by jeep in an area which I assumed had a lot of Viet Cong in it. Apparently they weren't around at the time because obviously we would have been easy picking if they had been.

By Early '65, Mission Had Lost
Credibility with U.S. and Foreign Press

So I didn't get into the big substantive decisions of the mission. I might mention one thing, that before Zorthian got there, and he got there over a year before I did, there was a situation with the reporters who were much less numerous then. The reporters just simply didn't believe the mission. The mission was putting out a lot of very optimistic information about the situation in Vietnam. The reporters didn't believe it. The reporters were guys like Neil Sheehan of UPI first and then later with the New York Times and David Halberstam who was with the New York Times and is now a freelance writer. He's written a number of books including a couple about Vietnam. And the basic thrust of what we were trying to do with the mission press center was re-establish the credibility of the U.S. mission which I think was done to a certain extent. In spite of what later happened, the fact that we really lost the war there.

Q: What were your guiding principles if you want to call it, or your modus operandi, in order to re-establish the credibility of the --?

LEVINE: Well, first of all it was to make it easy for reporters to travel around the country who wanted to, to view American troops in combat, in other words not hiding things from them. That was number one. Number two was to try to answer their questions as candidly as we possibly could given the requirements of military security. The daily briefing by us, and then there was another one by the Vietnamese, which was not held at the same place at least when I was there, the daily briefing was an opportunity for the reporters to ask us questions, if need be sticky questions, nasty questions about things that either they had seen in the field or that they had heard about in the field. And I think that this strategy did succeed to a large extent.

Visiting VIPs in Saigon, 1965-66

Q: In your tenure in Vietnam, Robert, did any of the Washington VIPs come to Saigon and then make themselves available at press briefings? Did you get involved in that type of operation?

LEVINE: Well, yes. Some came. I mean, Robert McNamara who was Secretary of Defense came at least once, maybe more than once while I was there. Secretary Rusk came once. Averell Harriman who was I believe then Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East came with Rusk. I'm trying to think of who else. There were some other VIPs who came there who were maybe somewhat lower down the line. Of course, even the ambassador, who was, I believe when I got there, Maxwell Taylor and later, Lodge on his second tour in Vietnam, were to a certain extent VIPs, Taylor having been Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Lodge very well known and having been U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, and known for other things too. They did make themselves available at news conferences. I don't recall the details of any of their news conferences.

But usually at this five O'clock news conference, we had the five O'clock follies as I mentioned to you earlier. Any activity that was unusually important and might interest the press was unveiled there. If there was a visitor he would show up there. Sometimes a visitor would give a background briefing to a smaller number of correspondents and instead of several hundred maybe only 20 or so of the key people there. This went on all the time even whether or not there was a VIP there. Then General Westmoreland who was a commander of MACV would see some journalists individually or talk to them on the phone. The ambassador would too occasionally. But I did not have any involvement in that.

Satisfactions and Frustrations of the Spokesman Job

Q: But as you look back over this period Robert, tell me a little bit what were some of your satisfactions that you derived from the job and some of the frustrations that you encountered?

LEVINE: Well, I suppose the chief satisfaction was being involved in what was a very big story. I was there in May of '65 to August of '66, about 15 months. And the story was a hot one all the time. It was on page one virtually everyday. And so you felt that whatever information you gave to reporters who asked you questions was going to be fed into a story was going to be used. That was a big satisfaction. The fact that you were a part, even though a very small part, of something that was big and important. The frustration was the fact as I mentioned earlier that we weren't always, well, we weren't often briefed enough to be able to answer questions. And we would have to send a reporter who quizzed us on one thing or another to Barry Zorthian who was pretty well wired in to everything that was going on. I think that was a major frustration. The physical situation there was quite pleasant. I shared a big villa with my boss Kaplan and living was comfortable. There wasn't any problem like that. Unlike the poor GIs who were out in the field, I'm talking about the infantrymen, who had a very rough and bloody time. There was none of that kind of frustration.

Q: What about some of the frustrations working with newsmen who are ever demanding and never satisfied?

LEVINE: Well, I suppose I was to a certain extent used to that. I had started doing it in Geneva. I didn't do much of it in that brief tour in Paris because it wasn't really part of my job, a little bit of it. But that goes with the territory as they say. When you deal with the press there is a funny two prong kind of relationship. It depends upon the individual journalist.

But on the one hand to a certain extent they are part of the operation. They hate to have this said. But in a case where you are fighting a war and they participate by going out on operations with American troops, they become part of the operation willy nilly. It's very difficult to take the enemy's side when you're with some guys who are getting shot at and you see some of them wounded and some of them killed. You take a certain point of view whether you like it or not.

On the other hand, of course, there was a lot of objection which was steadily growing in the United States and which I saw later on incidentally in a tour I did in the State Department after leaving Vietnam. There was all this opposition, a considerable amount of public opposition to our policies there, disbelief about the evaluations of how things were going there given by the top officers of the government from the President, who was then Lyndon Johnson, on down. And that created a certain amount of difficulty. But I don't know if you want me to get into what happened after I left Vietnam because I was still involved in Vietnam affairs at the State Department.

Varying Attitudes, Practices,
Attitudes of News Correspondents

Q: We might follow up on that after we go through the actual period. But there were stories, you must have had what you would call your favorite or more favorite correspondents. You must have had some that were gadflies or a bane to you. I'm thinking of one correspondent who shall remain nameless who used to wander through the offices and look at people's desk and look for classified material. Do you have any anecdotes and stories?

LEVINE: Well, yes. There was a case of one correspondent, I don't know if he's the same one you're talking about, who was totally obnoxious. I won't name him if I'm saying these nasty things about him. He was a totally obnoxious creature. On the other hand, his copy was very good. He supported us. He had a good relationship with General Westmoreland as a matter of fact. But he looked upon us--I'm talking about myself, Harold Kaplan, the civilians who worked in JUSPAO as sort of civilian hacks who were doing this because we couldn't do anything else. Nevertheless, his copy was always supportive of everything we did. As a matter of fact, the other newsmen actively disliked him.

On the other hand, there were a few correspondents who visited us. I remember one, I don't recall his name, who took a very anti-U.S. policy view. He was a visitor. He was not stationed in Vietnam. And Frank Scotton took him out on a trip to one of these motivational training centers. And he was, according to Scotton, completely turned

around and understood, felt he understood we were fighting the good fight and they were doing something very worthwhile in this motivational training. When he got back to the United States he flipped back again, or flip flopped again, and wrote some very nasty stories. So that's the kind of thing, that isn't something that I personally had to put up with. But I did deal with some correspondents, some of whom were very supportive. One Frenchman, for example, who had fought in Vietnam during the French war. He was a visitor. And I've seen him a number of times since then although I haven't seen him for many years now. I think his name was Pierre Darcourt, D-A-R-C-O-U-R-T. I'm not 100 percent sure of that name. And he went out to visit the first air cavalry division. Of course, if you take a division with 15,000 men you're going to find all kinds of people. Like they had somebody there who spoke fluent French. There were people there, he said there were people who even spoke, they had somebody who spoke Turkish believe it or not. They had somebody who spoke I don't know what. Anyway, other languages.

And when the first air cavalry division arrived, I don't know whether you knew about this or not, there was a massacre of a French unit somewhere on what Bernard Fall called the route without joy, somewhere Route One going up towards the north although it was still in South Vietnam, A French unit as ambushed and virtually wiped out.

Q: Where was it?

LEVINE: North of Tuy Hoa. The French put up some kind of a marker about this. And it was all overgrown. The first Air Cav found the marker and cleaned it up and, I don't know, presented military honors, raised a flag, blew a bugle, or whatever they did. And Darcourt who was really basically on our side anyway was terribly impressed by this. He just thought it was great. He could probably say no wrong about anything that we were doing there.

Relationship Between USIA and Military

Q: Robert, tell about the relationship between the civilians or the USIA staff and the military. Here you were in a way mission spokesmen, but you weren't really spokesmen for the military were you? I mean, how did this whole relationship and interaction work?

LEVINE: Well, Barry Zorthian, of course, covered the whole thing. And the civilians as far as the daily briefing was concerned, the civilians really ran it. And Barry organized it. You know what a dynamic guy he is. He organized all kinds of things. He organized backgrounders, backgrounders by Westmoreland as well as by the Ambassador.

I would say that the relations that we had while I was there in the mission in JUSPAO with the military the relations were very good. If a reporter came to us and wanted to go somewhere out in the field, we would talk to the military and they would see what they could work out, a plane, a ride, what have you. So I think basically our relations were very good. Now, Barry Zorthian being the kind of guy he was I'm sure he rubbed a number of the military information people the wrong way. They didn't like the fact he was

civilian even though he was a reserve officer, you know, a Marine Corps reserve officer. They didn't like the fact that he was the one who controlled everything. But I never found at least in my experience there, I never found any difficulty. I remember once when I occasionally did the five O'clock briefing, the civilian side when Kaplan was away. And I remember once I got into some kind of trouble. I couldn't answer a question. And the top military briefer jumped in and helped me out, you know, for which I was very grateful. In fact, I even got helped out once by a correspondent who pointed out something that I had overlooked that was favorable to what we were trying to say.

Q: But you also had, of course, to work with the military on logistics. In other words, you said they were flying in MACV transportation. So you had a continuous liaison with the military

LEVINE: We did. They were in that same building on--what was it? I can't think of the name of the street. I'll think of it in minute. Where JUSPAO headquarters were next to the Rex Theater and whatnot. So we would just go to them and say, look, I've got a guy from such and such a newspaper or whatever who's trying to get to this place and see if they can help. Sometimes a correspondent would go directly to them. But if he was a visitor who didn't know his way around too well then we would intervene.

Q: Were these military directly attached to the JUSPAO staff or were they separate? In other words, did they work as part of the JUSPAO team, let's say a transportation officer, a military transportation officer, assigned to JUSPAO?

LEVINE: I don't think they were part of the JUSPAO staff. But they were expected to cooperate with us. As you know we had many military people in JUSPAO. You asked me about the military-civilian relationship. My experience with it was good. But as you know the general idea of Barry Zorthian was to have an information officer on every single province. I think he almost made it. There may have been one province that didn't have one whose purpose was not to act as a spokesman really, but to beef up the Vietnamese, to give them some ideas about selling their own cause to their own people. What I'm saying now is really mostly hearsay. But it comes from these guys who arrived from all over the world in Saigon, knew nothing about Vietnam. Didn't, of course, know the language. But often didn't know much about the country at all, and had a couple of days of briefings in Saigon and then were shipped out to the provinces to work with the Vietnamese Information Service. All I know is that they had a very difficult time with it. They knew something about Information. But they didn't know anything about the atmosphere of the country, you know, where they were operating.

Majority of Correspondents Confined Interest to What U.S. Military Was Doing:
Only a Few Tried to Look at the Country--It's Background, Culture, Economy, Etc.

Q: What about this proposition? If you send a correspondent to anywhere in Vietnam, would you call up the province or wherever he was going and alert the JUSPAO

representative in the province to try and be helpful to that man? Or did you turn them over to the military?

LEVINE: Well, we basically turned them over to the military. Because unfortunately--I say unfortunately although it's normal. These guys are interested in what the American troops are doing in the battles that they were fighting. I am sure I have never seen anybody do this kind of a study. But if you took a survey of what was written, printed, broadcast, what have you, about Vietnam during the years when the fighting was really hot, probably 98 percent of it dealt with military operations, with U.S. military operations, maybe 95 percent. Maybe a few percentage points dealt with what the South Vietnamese were doing. But except for a very rare few correspondents such as Sol Sanders who worked for U.S. News & World Report, Dennis Warner who was an Australian whose copy I think also appeared occasionally in The Reporter which was still in existence.

Q: Shaplen of the New Yorker.

LEVINE: I don't recall him. Oh, Shaplen. Yes, Bob Shaplen whom I knew actually very well. But these there were almost unique in trying to describe what the country was all about, what the cultural background of the war, what the history was, what kind of a government the country had, what the social problems were. And now and then there was a Nisei who worked for the Christian Science Monitor, Takashi Oka. I don't know if you ever dealt with him. He did some of that too. But for the others, all they wanted was the military. As a matter of fact, I can remember--maybe you had this experience also. But I can remember groups of editors. I remember a gang from Time Magazine who came over, a bunch of their top editors. And I was at a luncheon talking to one of them. I don't remember the man's name. And I made this pitch. I said, why don't you guys write more about the country and stop writing just about the U.S. military operations. And he seemed very sympathetic. But obviously there was no change discernable in Time's coverage. As a matter of fact, some of the Time reporters that I knew there told me that they would constantly get demands, rockets from New York asking for coverage of this or that military operation and expressing very little interest in anything else.

Q: There weren't really in your experience any specialized people, for example, who covered the economy or the AID operation?

LEVINE: No. I mean, there was some writing about some of these things, but not very much. I mean, there was nobody specializing in the economy. With the exception of the three people that we talked about earlier and a possible fourth, I don't recall anybody even wrote about the politics, you know, who specialized in the politics and let's say ignored the military and decided I'm just going to write about the politics.

Q: Well, you know, what you say is fascinating. Because so many of the books that have since been written about Vietnam dealt very harshly and probably justly so with the corruption of the Saigon government.

LEVINE: Yeah.

Q: Did you have any experience even during the briefing that this subject was raised by correspondents? You mentioned Neil Sheehan whose latest book, of course, is very critical on this particular point. At that point did he raise any do you remember?

LEVINE: I don't recall him raising that issue. But that doesn't mean he didn't raise it. I'm sure he did. I mean, after all there were Vietnamese spokesmen and they talked to them. I think that when an issue really boils up--for example, while I was there at one point there was one of the perennial Buddhist crises. And it became so big, particularly I believe in Da Nang and--what's the other city?

Q: Hue.

LEVINE: And Hue, H-U-E, that correspondents had to cover it, you know. I mean, it would just impose itself on them. So there political moves became, got a certain amount of attention. And when there was a coup, just as you know there were many, the coup got attention. But then they quickly slipped back from that into the regular coverage of military operations.

Q: You mentioned in your past experiences that you had with Scotton and Bumgardner who at one time were rather legendary in USIA also for their counter terrorist programs, and ultimately I think were engaged in the Phoenix program probably after you left. What about some of the other colleagues that you worked with? Who was there? Who impressed you? Or did they know what they were doing? What was it like to have all of a sudden a big build up of many Americans drawn from all over the world and somehow being ignorant of what they were even supposed to do?

On Several Occasions U.S. Province Representative
Sent to Field Without Knowledge of What They
Were Supposed to Do

LEVINE: Well, it's kind of difficult for me to talk about this. I had some contacts. Most of my contacts were just absorbed full time with the daily briefings and dealing with correspondents. In other words, I didn't have too much contact with the other parts of the organization. Now, I did talk at one--I talked to a few province representatives, as I mentioned earlier, who confessed, as a matter of fact, at being chagrined because they were shoved out into the provinces without any knowledge of really what they were supposed to do, just a very general idea. I'm sure that some of them were good and managed to survive somehow or other. And others were not. But I don't have, I really don't have a good fix on what the other people in JUSPAO were doing.

Levine Arranges for Requisition of Communications
Equipment Permitting the Filing of Material
Directly From Saigon

At one point, for example, I had--I don't know whether this is amusing for this project's purposes. But believe it or not, even after there was an enormous amount of copy being filed out of Vietnam everyday with television and radio reporters there as well as print reporters, there was no way for them to get television interviews for example or any kind of film back to the States except by flying it to Manila or Tokyo or what have you. It would always come a day late. And I was given the job of trying to work something out.

I got a fellow whose name I can't recall now who worked for JUSPAO. He was a real ball of fire, an amusing guy, who was sort of an expeditor who used to try to get our pamphlets and propaganda and whatnot shipped out to the field.

Q: Bill Ford?

LEVINE: No, it was an Italian name.

Q: Dino Catarini?

LEVINE: No, it wasn't Catarini either. As a matter of fact he was from somewhere upstate New York I think. I can't think of his name now. It may come back to me. In any case I made the point to several of the wire correspondents, several of the TV correspondents that there's an awful lot of money to be made here if--not for them personally, but I mean their organizations, if they would be able to file their copy electronically out of Saigon. And we finally got something going. And this fellow whose name I can't think of now got MACV to bring in some equipment from Manila which was finally set up so correspondents could go downtown someplace, I don't know where it was, and file directly to the United States via, I think it was via air to Manila, via cable from Manila back to New York so the stuff could be filed immediately.

Q: Robert, just for clarification when you said file you mean written copy.

LEVINE: No, I'm sorry. I don't mean written copy. I mean video stuff. I mean video copy, audio or video. One of the things that was kind of amusing about that, after working like hell to get this thing all set up and getting everybody involved, the equipment supplied free, brought in to be paid for as a result of the fees that would be sent back to the United States. Because it was obviously an enormous amount of traffic. There wasn't any problem of it being paid for. The equipment landed in Saigon from Manila. And the minister for PTT, I've forgotten his name now, Vietnamese.

Q: For the postal service.

LEVINE: Yeah, for the postal service, postal, telegraph, whatnot. Called me up and said, listen, all this equipment has just landed here. He said, I don't know. There might be bombs in it, you know. After doing all this work--he spoke in French incidentally. He was an old timer. And I really got sore I suppose like many Americans did who were

frustrated by the Vietnamese after all I had gone through to try to get this equipment, number one, supplied, number two, transported to Saigon, we run into a roadblock because this guy was afraid to clear the material to be sent into town. Well, I finally did. I exploded. I've never done that before or since to a minister of any government. And the material came in and was set up and used. Whether it benefited what we were trying to do or not I don't know. I suppose some of the negative reports that came out like the famous burning of Cam Ne, I don't remember if that was before or after.

Sometimes Material Sent to States Via This Direct
Communication Equipment Was Detrimental to U.S. Position

Do you remember about Morley's--well, it was a famous incident that happened while I was there. Morley Safer who now works on 60 Minutes was a correspondent for CBS there. He was with a unit out in the field. And they had taken some fire from the village. I don't know whether they had anybody killed or wounded. But I know they'd taken fire. And the head of this unit which wasn't very big, it may have been a company. I don't even think it was a battalion, went into the village and with a Zippo lighter simply set fire to huts there. Safer got this on film And it was seen back in the States the same day or the next day, I don't know which, including by the President as a matter of fact. And all hell broke loose because of that. So I don't know that my getting that equipment in benefitted our cause or not. But it created a certain amount of good will, I guess, with the correspondents.

Q: Bob, do you have any comment--I think tours of duty for USIA officers were rather limited. They were 18 months without home leave as I recall or two years with a break in between and some people left.

Short Duty Tours, Rapid Personnel Turnover Hampered
U.S. Efforts, Both Civilian and Military

LEVINE: Well, there was a problem of continuity with this rapid turnover of USIS JUSPAO officials. It was also I think a bigger problem perhaps even with the military who had a shorter tour of duty, just 12 months. As a matter of fact I recall--you know, I hadn't mentioned this yet, but I had visited Vietnam in 1952 when I was a journalist working in Paris for International News Service. And the French were fighting their war at that time. They did not send draftees to Vietnam; they had draftees but they didn't send them to Vietnam. So all their people were professionals, whether they were noncommissioned officers or privates or officers. Their tour of duty was 27 months.

And I met French officers, and noncoms, who were there on their second tour of duty and some on their third. Obviously this gave them considerable amount of continuity and knowledge. They still didn't achieve what the French government sought to achieve there. But I think it helped them a lot. And we were hampered by this lack of continuity unquestionably.

Efforts to Bring Representations, Press and Otherwise,
In From Other Countries

Q: There was a great deal of world interest too. And you mentioned already you went out with some Japanese reporters. Did we do anything to attract or bring people from the USIS posts around the world? Did they send reporters or television crews to Vietnam? What was interaction between JUSPAO and now USIS post or USIA post around the world if any?

LEVINE: Well, I don't know too much about that. I know in several instances, for example, USIS Tokyo, for example, sent Nat Thayer, who was a fluent Japanese speaker. He's no longer with the agency. And he came down to Saigon to deal with the Japanese press. And the Japanese have media that are so vast, I mean, they have enormous circulation. All their big newspapers are nationally circulated, unlike the United States. And there was a sizeable contingent of Japanese correspondents in Saigon. And Nat came down to deal with them, talk to them, travel with them. So that was one example of it.

Now, correspondents did come in from all over the world. And there was a certain amount of contact between JUSPAO and at least some of the main posts around the world. I was not involved in that except when people arrived. Sometimes I would help to orient them and maybe fix them up with trips around the country, that sort of thing. So there was a definite attempt to influence public opinion around the world by influencing-- well, the attempt was made on various levels. But one level was to influence their media. I think that most of the media saw that this was a big issue. The war was an important issue even in countries that were not fighting it as we were. And so we got quite a few European correspondents, Japanese, Australian. Of course, there were some Australian troops there, not many, but there were some. Some Korean correspondents too because Korea had, I believe, a division there if I'm not mistaken. Anyway, they had a sizeable contingent. So there was contact with other posts.

Style of Living for Americans Stationed in Saigon

Q: Robert, let me just go a little bit to the lighter side. You just alluded to it earlier. You said you and Harold Kaplan shared a house and living was quite comfortable. Can you describe a little bit, were you assigned a house? And that also applies to the correspondents. Did you get into logistics with them like housing or transportation?

LEVINE: No.

Q: What was it like to live in Saigon? What was an average day like for you? Did you observe weekends? Was life normal outside of work? What was it like?

LEVINE: Let me say first of all, we did not get into logistics for correspondents. Aside perhaps from making hotel reservations for visitors. But the ones who were stationed in Vietnam did not benefit from our attempts to get housing for them or anything like that.

Q: But they had access to the PXs.

LEVINE: They had access to the PXs by virtue of being accredited to MACV and that's true. As far as living, those of us who were stationed there, who were members of JUSPAO, as I said, it was comfortable. Kaplan, who got there before I did, he'd been there I think since about February of 1965, had a villa assigned to him. And he asked me if I would like to share it with him. I didn't think it was too good an idea to be living with a guy who was my boss. But it worked out very well. And it was a nice big house on a street there, Phan Dinh Phung, P-H-A-N D-I-N-H P-H-U-N-G.

And we had, you know, several servants. There was a cook. There was what, I think they call a boyess, who sort of cleaned up, like a maid in other words. There were at least those two that I can recall now. Maybe there was a third person there. It was a pretty good sized house. And we were able to put up at least one visitor there. We had one spare bedroom which was used for visiting either USIS or State Department people who came through. We did a fair amount of entertaining. The cook we had was very good.

So I would say that, as I said before, that living there was pleasant. All the creature comforts were certainly there for those of us--at least it was my case. Maybe I lived in a fancier house because I was working for a higher ranked boss than would have otherwise been the case. But I think most of the homes that I visited there while I was there were comfortable. There was a certain amount of entertaining back and forth and dinner parties. And we held one big New Year's bash while I was there which was quite successful.

Q: How much business did you do at this famous, or rather infamous, whatever you might think of it, Cercle Sportif, which was the sports club, I mean, which was the swimming pool.

LEVINE: I don't recall really doing business there. I recall going there and swimming and having lunch. Kaplan who was an ardent tennis player played a lot of tennis there. I guess kept his weight down because playing tennis in the Saigon heat would do that. But I don't recall transacting much business there. Most of the business was transacted in the office. And incidentally, the office work was seven days a week. I mean, I remember it being seven days a week. Of course, when I was there I was single. I didn't have a family. So I didn't go on R&R anywhere. I took off at one point in the 15 month tour. I went back to the United States for about a week getting a free ride in one direction on the Secretary of State's airplane.

Effect of Saigon Assignments on Family Relationships

Q: Now Robert, in retrospect, Vietnam or service in Vietnam also had become a hazard to many USIA officer's families, not only because of family separation, but there were

also a lot of family breakups. Do you have any comment on what caused it or what might have been contributing factors?

LEVINE: You know, as I said to you I was single when I was there. So I didn't face that problem myself. I think anytime you have lengthy family separation that's going to put a strain on a marriage. So it certainly put a strain on marriages there. In other words, a marriage has to be pretty solid to be able to withstand that. And I don't know what the statistics would show about the relative stability of families who were separated in Vietnam versus those that didn't have to go through that. Of course, there were people who said that there were other places in the world where they faced family separation also. But the only thing I can say is if the marriage was solid it would probably endure. If it wasn't solid that would weaken it.

Saigon Scandals

Q: There were times especially in Saigon when even some of our military people seem to have gotten involved in various kinds of scandals. I remember a Navy person who was there. Did you have to deal with this in relation to the press? I mean, were questions asked about this? And how did you deal with these things? Or did you refer that back to the military or to other people?

LEVINE: Well, I can recall several scandals there. One was the military. And I don't see any reason not to mention his name because it was a public matter. Archie Kuntze who was a captain, a Navy captain, who was in charge of the PX. Now, that didn't break until after he got back to the United States. And it may have even been after he retired from the Navy. I don't know. But I know he was not in Saigon anymore when he was supposedly, I don't know, finagling money, changing money on the black market and whatnot. The funny thing about that is after that Kuntze left and they got a straight arrow in to run the PX, the stuff that you found there was much less attractive than when Kuntze was running it.

Now, there was another scandal when I was there that did take place while I was in Vietnam which involved one of the top officers in AID, who was having an affair with a Vietnamese woman. He was married. His wife was back in France, not in the United States; she was French. And I don't remember all the details of it. But it resulted in a murder. That's the reason it became a scandal. This Vietnamese woman who was beautiful had while this AID officer was away on home leave, extended leave that lasted, I don't know, a couple of months or something, quite a bit of time, took up with a younger officer, also an AID officer. When the big boy came back she left the younger man to go back with the older guy, and the younger man shot her and killed her. This became quite a cause celebre. I think we did have to answer questions on that. But then those are the only two scandals that I can recall while I was there.

Retrospective Look at What Vietnam Assignment Meant To and For Levine

Q: Bob, looking back on this experience that you have had, I suppose nobody in USIA at that time had much of a choice whether they did want to go or did not want to go. They were sent there. And that was about it. But how would you sum up your experiences? Was it professionally interesting? Was it rewarding? I mean, if you had a choice, I mean looking back now, would you have gone voluntarily rather than been ordered there? What is your summary impression of that year? And what did it do for you as an individual or didn't do for you as an individual?

LEVINE: Well, I suppose I would say number one I would not have gone there voluntarily in the middle of another tour. I had only been in Paris for nine months, a city I knew very well and loved and I spoke the language and all of that. I would have been willing to go there. I would have gone voluntarily if I had been asked at the end of the tour in France. What I got out of it professionally, I got a lot out of it professionally because I learned a lot about dealing with the press which I continued to do to a considerable extent in my career in USIA and even now when I work at the Treasury. I also deal with the press. Of course, the issues are much more low key. They're not hot like that one was.

But I suppose I got an abiding interest in things Vietnamese. I read a number of the books that have come out about the subject. You mentioned Neil Sheehan. I read his book just recently which I found fascinating, the biography of --

Q: Jean Paul Vann.

LEVINE: Of Jean Paul Vann, that's right. But it's the Vietnamese experience built around Vann's biography, on which I thought that Sheehan did a terrific job in that book. Obviously he did a lot of research on it. So I still have-- when I see something about Vietnam I read it, I grab it and read it. I don't think it did me any either particular good or harm as far as my career in the Agency was concerned. It did get me the press experience of dealing with a difficult subject.

1966 State Department Tour:
East Asia and Pacific Bureau

Then I went on. My next assignment was on loan to the State Department as first Deputy Public Affairs Advisor and then Public Affairs Advisor in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. So I used my Vietnamese experience in dealing with that. And I also made one trip to Vietnam in 1967 when I was still at State for the--they had national elections. I think it was around September of 1967. And I went with an observer team that went there that the President and the White House put together.

1971: Assignment to Phnom Penh, Cambodia

And then I subsequently also spent a tour of duty in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. So I was in the same area. And the Vietnamese experience first of all probably had something to do with my being sent to Cambodia, the fact that I dealt with that part of the world, both in Saigon and in Washington. And also the fact that I spoke French. Because French was still used a lot in Phnom Penh.

Q: Well Robert, let me just ask one more question. And that deals with Cambodia. Were you there during the Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia?

LEVINE: No, I left in 19--let's see. We got there in '71 and we left in '72. I was there just about a year actually because they had--families were there. Nevertheless, there were a number of incidents, a few Americans killed, not military, you know. There was one incident shortly after I got there playing softball a Khmer Rouge, I guess he was a Khmer Rouge, threw a grenade there and killed several Americans and several Cambodians who were watching a sandlot softball game. What was your question again? I got off.

Q: Were you there during the Khmer Rouge?

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. I wasn't there during the takeover. Because I left in '72. And I think--or what I started to say was that they finally ordered civilian dependents, minor dependents, to leave, children to leave. And my wife, I had two children then one, was just born and one was just about two. She could have gone to Bangkok. And I said this wasn't part of the deal when I came here. And so I left. And they said, okay, just get a replacement. And we got a replacement. But the final days of Cambodia didn't happen until sometime in '75 after the last days in Saigon.

End of interview