

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

COLE BLASIER

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INTERVIEW

Q: Cole Blasier is an outstanding academic who started his career in the Foreign Service. Can you tell us how, and when and why you joined the Foreign Service?

BLASIER: My interest in U.S. foreign relations and in the Foreign Service began when I was a Supply Officer in the Pacific during World War II. I served on PT Boat Bases 21 (New Guinea) which launched attacks on the Philippines and PT Boat Base 17 in Samar, P.I. which prepared for the invasion of Japan. My Navy memoirs are contained in a book published by PT Boats, Incorporated Memphis, Tennessee.

During that time I read everything I could lay my hands on about U.S. foreign relations, and particularly relations with the Soviet Union. This reading stimulated my interest in the Foreign Service. In order to establish a firmer career base, I decided to work for a doctorate in international relations with a Russian emphasis. I interviewed Merle Fainsod at Harvard University and Professor Philip E. Mosely of Columbia. Mosely impressed me greatly and I decided to go there for graduate work.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1946, while I was finishing undergraduate work at the University of Illinois, I read an announcement about Rotary International Fellowships. At the same time I had become interested in news from Chile that the Communist Party had won its biggest electoral victory in the Americas and was participating in the President's cabinet. I applied and was awarded a Rotary Fellowship for Chile.

On the grounds that Eastern Europe was enough to master so early, Mosely advised me not to go to Chile; to come immediately to Columbia so I could work on central issues related to Germany and Russia. But I went to Chile anyway and spent a year in Santiago researching the Communist Party through pamphlets, newspapers, and interviews. When I came back to Columbia, that study helped me meet graduate degree requirements and I wrote an article for the Political Science Quarterly entitled "Chile: A Communist Battleground."

Meanwhile, some of my fellow students were going off to the Foreign Service, and I applied as well. I passed the written, but Joseph Green deferred my candidacy on the grounds that I did not know enough about American history. He was right, and I spent every spare moment during the next year reading up on American history, and passed the second oral examination. I continued graduate study in international relations and Soviet studies at Columbia, completing residency requirements and the oral examination for the Ph.D. in international relations and law. Now all that was required for the doctorate was the Ph.D. dissertation. However, I broke off work on the dissertation and entered the foreign service in October 1951.

Q: Do you think it was very difficult to get into the Foreign Service, in the early McCarthy period, or-

BLASIER: Yes, to a point. Though not necessarily because of McCarthy. There appeared to be a ceiling on recruitment of FSO 6s, that is at the bottom. Instead, the Department was hiring experienced officers from civil service and other lists. More young people wanted to come in and few FSO 6 slots were authorized.

My problems related to McCarthyism occurred not in getting into the foreign service but with respect to promotion during my second post in Bonn. In 1954-55 the State Department personnel office attempted to block a list of about a dozen officers from FSO-6 to FSO-5. No reason was given to me at the time but later I was told that Interpol was after me for having crossed from Chile into Argentina illegally. I eventually found my passport which showed an Argentine stamp for the border crossing. This was a threatening situation since we were all on probation. My unsubstantiated explanation is that somebody in State thought my interests in the Chilean Communists and the Russian language were suspicious. Late in 1955 that list of officers, me among them, was promoted on a separate recommendation to the congress. I was promoted two more times before my resignation.

Q: Well, we may be getting ahead of ourselves. When you entered the Foreign Service, your first post was Belgrade.

BLASIER: Yes. In preparation for Belgrade I was assigned to the Foreign Service Institute and Serbo-Croatian language training. My knowledge of Russian helped with Serbian.

At that time, January 1952, Yugoslavia was one of the most strategically important countries in Europe and in the middle of the Soviet-American confrontation in the Cold War. Tito openly challenged Stalin's leadership of the international Communist movement.

Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, once allies, were involved intermittently in sporadic armed skirmishes along Yugoslavia's eastern borders. Stalin had lost a hoped for a

window on western Europe and the Adriatic and faced an upstart political model threatening his control of communist countries in Eastern Europe.

Tito had to defend his borders and, potentially, the whole country from Soviet Bloc hostility, even attack. In 1952 he had not yet firmed up relations with the United States and other Great Powers and had territorial and political rivalries with his neighbors, Italy and Greece.

Our main job in Belgrade was strategic, to keep Yugoslavia and Tito from returning to the Soviet bloc. There was vocal opposition to this policy in the United States by minorities, partly on the grounds that Tito had a bloody record in consolidating his power, and that he was and remained a staunch communist. One of our jobs in the Embassy was to monitor Tito's foreign relations with respect to negotiations with foreign governments and their domestic repercussions.

The Ambassador and senior members of the Embassy did the monitoring, but negotiations tended to be conducted through Washington or by special envoys. I followed them quite closely, and my assignment was to report Yugoslav reactions, especially as shown in the local press or through contacts with foreign embassies. My most interesting work, however, was to report on Yugoslav domestic politics.

In order to refurbish his credentials as a Communist, symbolize his repudiation of Stalinism, and strengthen his hold on the country long term, Tito reorganized the nation's political and economic structure as a new form of Communism. We followed this with great, if some times skeptical, interest. The specifics included assigning the Communist Party with a mainly "educational" role (it was mostly window dressing), the decollectivization of agriculture (a form of partial privatization), and the establishment of workers' councils (workers "management" of industry) - all an anathema to Stalinism.

Q: And you were assigned in what capacity in Belgrade?

BLASIER: First, I was assigned as a visa officer in the consulate. After six months in the consulate I joined the political section in June 1951, and remained there for two years, the latter including a six months extension.

Q: And your ambassador was George Allen?

BLASIER: George Allen, that's correct, and much later James Riddleberger.

Q: And Jake Beam as Allen's deputy?

BLASIER: That's right.

Q: When you were in the consulate, you must have polished your Serbo-Croatian in visa

work?

BLASIER: Yes. With the help of my previous academic preparation in Russian and Serbian and two months experience with help from the consular staff in visa interviews, I was able to interview independently in Serbo-Croatian. I also hired a tutor and got up every morning before 6:00 A.M. for a two hour lesson. My wife joined me at first and then took up French. Actually she learned to speak Serbian quite well on her own, and dealt with our maids and tradesmen in Serbian.

Q: Well, can you situate this for us? It must have been at least two years after Tito's break with the Soviets and about the time of Tito's break with his most charismatic lieutenant, Milovan Djilas.

BLASIER: Yes. Belgrade still showed a lot of war damage in the winter of 1951-52. It was dark, unpainted, gloomy city, bullet ridden downtown, and very short on housing for everybody, including all the diplomats that were there. And, there was some mutual suspicion between the Yugoslavs and the western diplomats. My wife and I lived in the Excelsior Hotel for six months in a single room. We had a private bath and took our meals in the dining room. And then Peg Glassford, the future wife of Jake Beam, was reassigned and we moved into her house where we were very happily settled for the rest of our tour.

By this time a lot of the U.S. domestic political opposition to our collaboration with Tito had passed. The turning point in our relations with Tito and changes in Yugoslavia occurred during our assignment. Our warming relationship with Tito was fueled by economic and military assistance, as well as the political shift in the Yugoslav leadership and the construction of the new "Yugoslav communism."

Q: What was the opposition to U.S. policy about?

BLASIER: Some of the opposition had been defeated by Tito in a civil war. They had their own axes to grind. They used Tito's communism as a reason why we shouldn't support him. It was a pattern which we have also seen with respect to immigrants from other countries, where they hope to shape U.S. policy towards a surviving dictator. That happened with Cuba and elsewhere.

Q: How did you defend U.S. collaboration with Tito?

BLASIER: By the time of our arrival in Belgrade, Congress was appropriating funds to support Tito and collaboration with the Tito regime was beginning. Our policy was defended as an important way to contain Stalin. Many of us accepted that because even though Tito was a Communist and a ruthless dictator, he represented the best opportunity we had to split the international communist movement. Yugoslavia blocked the southwestern expansion of the Soviet bloc and Soviet access to the Adriatic.

Tito was more accessible to westerners than Stalin, less paranoid, able to delegate, and more flexible. Yugoslavs were less fearful and suppressed than the Soviet peoples, even after Stalin's death. The Soviet and Yugoslav communists were not the same breed of cat. Yet we had to live with the fact that Tito exploited his people, consistently overriding opposition and living like a king in a poverty stricken country.

Q: No doubt your graduate studies of Communist countries and your face to face experience with Yugoslavs in the consulate caused the post management to co-opt you into political work.

BLASIER: Yes, my work on Communists in Chile, Cuba, and Eastern Europe. Also I had studied Yugoslav issues with Professor Mosely at Columbia, a leading specialist on the USSR and Yugoslavia who participated in the wartime negotiations over Europe and Trieste. My experience helped me get the opportunity to work with Ambassador George Allen. It was his talents as an ambassador and as a person, that drew me to him - not his knowledge of communism. He was a colorful, warm, broad-minded person, an excellent diplomat who didn't fit the usually misinformed stereotypes.

And his deputy, Jake Beam, was a perceptive observer and a genial colleague. He gave his whole life to the service and was rewarded by many ambassadorships. Much later Henry Kissinger humiliated him by a high level visit to Moscow without informing Ambassador Beam in advance of his visit. Beam found out through the Russians. In his memoirs Kissinger expressed regret and said that he never visited Moscow again without having our ambassador participate in the meetings.

My knowledge of Serbian, useful within about six months of our arrival, was important for the political section and elsewhere. At one point, the station chief relied on me to make or take lengthy telephone calls with one of his sources, and on which my immediate superior, Turner Cameron, frowned. I was approached no more.

Q: I'm going to take you up on your offer to describe George Allen and his modus operandi...

BLASIER: Allen was a jaunty guy. He appeared on one fourth of July in a white suit, as Tito did on some occasions. In the winter he wore a rakish hamburg, with a broad curled brim. He liked to dance. His wife Kitty, was a great asset to him, especially kind to young people.

Unlike some contemporary ambassadors, Allen looked on the foreign service as a band of brothers where the older members bring the younger along to ensure the continuity and quality of the service. I think he may have been consciously training us younger officers. He occasionally invited some with their wives, like Peter and Pam Walker, to the residence for afternoon badminton. My wife and I were frequently invited to lunches with

visitors from abroad. One was Josef Korbel, Madeleine Albright's father and former Czech ambassador to Belgrade.

Ambassador Allen taught me some valuable lessons by doing, not by lecturing. Not long after I was moved to the political section, I was under the supervision of Turner Cameron, a conscientious foreign service officer, much schooled in protocol by Ambassador Jefferson Caffery in Paris. Not long before Christmas I got a note from Allen asking me to draft a Christmas message to the Embassy staff. Conscientious to a fault and under Cameron's influence, I sent a draft to Allen which might have passed muster by Amy Vanderbilt. That ended my exchange with Allen on that subject. He wrote his own warm, Christmas message, seemingly addressed to each one of us. This was a stern reminder to get my priorities straight.

When I was assistant to Allen at the summer capital in Bled, I was responsible for getting our "pouch" to the Embassy in Belgrade in the Embassy plane - we had no other secure communications. Instead of instructing the plane not to take off until I arrived, I got to the landing strip before its scheduled departure but just as its wheels were rising off the tarmac. A dumb gaff on my part, and I was humiliated. Allen did not make one word of criticism. Don't worry, he said, I'll get it there another way. Throwing caution to the winds, he asked his trusted friend and my acquaintance, Meyer Handler of the New York Times, to take it on the latter's return trip to Belgrade. After that I would have done anything for Allen.

When I was Allen's aide in Split for the visit of the Seventh Fleet under Admiral McCain (the Senator's father), McCain's staff officer informed Allen that there were only 12 places for Americans at the shipboard dinner, and there were 13 names on our list. Lt. Del Landry USN, the assistant naval attaché, and I were lowest on the list. Allen called Del and me aside and said that in cases like this he favored the officer in the service involved, in this case the Navy. That meant Del. This seemed reasonable to me, and I learned not only something about protocol, but graceful solutions to touchy questions.

Allen did virtually all of his work in English. He had used some French in the past and always spoke to his butler in elementary French. Previously, as a language junky, I had been critical of the foreign language skills of so many of our ambassadors. Then it dawned on me that many of our best ambassadors haven't spoken foreign languages fluently, Allen among them. This is not a reason to deemphasize foreign language training, but only to judge ambassadors on the whole range of their skills.

Allen spent many Washington assignments during the war, which paved the way for his first ambassadorship in Iran in 1946. Most of his posts since 1933 were, of course, in Democratic administrations. After Eisenhower and the Republicans won the 1952 election, he went to Washington to "consult."

Shortly after his arrival he got a call from the White House: "Is this George Allen?" He

said yes. "The president would like to see you." When he walked into the President's office, Eisenhower said, oh, there must be some mistake. I wanted to see another George Allen. [that probably was George Allen known as the court jester of presidents.] This provided an amusing introduction and the two had a good talk. Not long after Ambassador Allen's return to Belgrade, his appointment as Ambassador to India was announced.

My wife and I were also privileged to make the acquaintance of Jacob Beam, Allen's deputy who became chargé. Not yet married and alone at the post, Beam occasionally dropped by for a drink. On one occasion he broke the news to us that he would represent the United States in Moscow after George Kennan had been declared persona non grata. Another time he told us that he had been appointed to represent the United States at Stalin's funeral.

Jake was always interesting to talk with, especially when he told about his service in Berlin in the Nazi period under Ambassador Dodd. He described how he was able to prove mass deaths of Jews by visiting cemeteries and counting up inscribed headstones. He was a quiet, shy unassuming person, a keen observer and a steely analyst.

Jake was one of the most unselfish and loyal officers I have known and one would never have thought of him in terms of a party affiliation. When Foster Dulles, the new Secretary of State, sent us his infamous message demanding positive loyalty, Beam was cut to the quick. He said he had joined the service under Secretary Henry Stimson, a Republican.

Q: Were the ethnic antipathies that presumably always existed in Yugoslavia, visible during your time there?

BLASIER: Yes, of course we were aware of them. Yet, the people of Sarajevo, one of the most mixed populations, seemed to be living together peacefully. One of our best Yugoslav friends were a couple in Belgrade - he a Serb, she a Croat. They were always joking about this aspect of their relationship, but occasionally one would note an edge. My view has always been that these neighbors can live together peacefully provided the government is tolerant and magnanimous; otherwise, there can be big trouble. Trouble makers like Slobodan Milosevic must be denied the opportunity of capitalizing politically on ethnic divisions by promoting divisive and bloody conflicts. Tito followed the opposite policy, one of reconciliation, also for political reasons - to maintain his authoritarian controls. His policy was symbolized by the oft repeated slogan: "bratsvo i edinstvo" (brotherhood and unity).

Tito held the country together ultimately by brute force. Yet he preferred to use it as a last resort. He was more flexible and gave his lieutenants and the population more slack than Stalin. Tito was more self-confident than Stalin and lacked Stalin's paranoia. Tito tried to hold the country together by solving ethnic problems, if not that way then, by force; Milosevic inflamed them. Tito showed that with a viable political structure imposed on

these people, they could get along.

Q: Well, at that time Tito's lieutenants were Kardelj, and Rankovich, weren't they?

BLASIER: And Djilas.

Q: And Djilas. But Djilas was already beginning to show some signs of independence.

BLASIER: Yes. The publication of Djilas' heretical views in the magazine Nova Misao led to his expulsion from the Central Committee and the loss of his political and other positions. He believed that Yugoslav communism had spawned a new class, the country's leadership, which enjoyed much of the power, wealth, and privileges of the old capitalist class.

Djilas lived near us on Voje Vuchkovicha Ulitsa and I saw him several times on his evening walks. I remember once I came up behind him and greeted him in Serbian: "Good evening, sir, how are you?" He was very frightened.

Before his fall I went to a Communist Party youth congress, and was seated with Dick Harmstone, another officer from the embassy, in the front row of the balcony of a large auditorium. Everybody was waiting for Tito to come in. "Tito-Tito" they were chanting; it went on for nearly an hour. I clapped politely at the beginning and then stopped clapping. Harmstone stopped clapping. For the next forty minutes there were only two people in that huge room who weren't clapping. We were on the front row of the balcony where everybody could see us. I wanted them to see us; that we weren't clapping. At last Djilas came, substituting for Tito. He spoke with real panache. He was a favorite with the youth and they liked him. He made some sense. His biggest trouble came after I left.

Q: You left when?

BLASIER: I left in June of 1954. I was there when Stalin died, but before Khrushchev arrived. I heard many stories about Khrushchev's drunken performance outside the Majestic Hotel.

Q: Well, I understand there was a United States food program of some sort that had been set up and a military mission. Am I correct?

BLASIER: Yes, there were several missions. There was a large foreign economic assistance mission, a military assistance mission, and the United States Information Agency. There were also agricultural attachés, military attachés, and CIA representatives. We could only guess who the latter were - except for the Chief of Station. There were contradictions in the relations between the military aid mission and the military attachés. The military aid mission sought to build up the Yugoslav armed forces, and the attachés to collect information, some secretly, on the same forces. The military aid mission

disliked informing on their Yugoslav colleagues.

Q: So what was the work in the political section beyond reporting?

BLASIER: If I may, first a word about reporting. After I left the consulate and joined the political section, my duties were mainly reporting. I began by writing the WEEKA, a telegram sent every week to Washington summarizing the major political events. I also wrote short telegrams every few days on particular subjects. My main interest was writing fairly long analytical reports on major political and political-economic developments. Some of those topics included decollectivization, workers' councils, the Serbian church, the Djilas controversy, developments in the leadership, the Trieste Crisis, Macedonia, the Balkan Pact, Soviet relations, etc. Who knows whether these strenuous efforts were read by anybody besides the desk officer, Ollie Marcy, but he did write me a strong commendation.

My relationship with my immediate supervisors, the chief of the political section, first Turner Cameron and his successor, Edwin Kretzmann, was crucial to this effort. Both gave me my freedom to interview and write.

The relationship with Kretzmann was especially sensitive. He entered the service as an FSO-3 and rose to FSO-1 in Washington. He reported to the deputy Chief of Mission, Woodruff Wallner, an old European hand, only just promoted to FSO-1. Kretzmann, then 58 years old, had limited foreign experience. He did not know Eastern Europe or its languages. He was a facile writer but always working with unfamiliar subjects. His situation was professionally difficult. He was always generous and helpful to me and we became good friends.

My reporting responsibilities were not just a "desk" job. At one time or other I visited all six constituent republics. My wife and I entertained frequently and went to a round of cocktail parties. At those parties I would check with colleagues from various embassies about the major issues of the day and these conversations were often reported in telegrams or dispatches. Ambassadors occasionally invited us to dinner where a junior American was required; we were friends with many of their staff, the British, French, and Germans especially. With permission, we exchanged dispatches with the British. Duncan Wilson, the British Deputy, later wrote a major book on Yugoslavia. As mentioned earlier, I also acted as an aid to the Ambassador on various occasions, including at the summer capital in Bled and during the visit of the Seventh Fleet to Split.

The Ambassador was constantly on the prowl, especially in high Communist circles, and almost every morning he came in to send short cables on the previous days' findings. His telegrams were often a page or less. Something new, something important that he'd got from the top leaders or something they were feeding him.

George Allen was an ideal diplomat: knowledgeable, down to earth, sophisticated, and wise. Once he told me we shouldn't care whether Yugoslav communism succeeds or fails

- we just have to deal with it. Academic or ideological issues didn't really interest him much, but he was glad to have our political reports, which I suspect he skimmed faithfully, to keep current.

My wife, child, and I lived off our salary which started at \$4,600 a year. Our entertaining probably cost more than we could afford, but we did it anyway, keeping detailed records, and submitted them with a prayer. We followed that practice later in Bonn. In both Embassies we were reimbursed to the penny.

Q: A part from political contacts, what else was important in our relations with the Yugoslavs?

BLASIER: Our economic aid program was probably the most important. That was one way Washington hoped to tie Tito to the West and to us. The chief of the aid mission ran these programs and I suspect that decisions about the level and direction of aid to Yugoslavia was made in Washington with help from the aid mission in Belgrade. The chief of the Economic Aid mission appeared to conceive of himself as a special envoy to Belgrade, reporting mainly to Washington with independence and prestige of his own. The head of the military aid mission may have had similar but less pronounced conceptions of his role.

As far as I know, Allen got along with these missions somehow, supporting them sometimes, and checking them on others. Naturally the foreign service officers were under his direct purview (less those assigned to the aid mission). I noticed that he carefully cultivated the military attaché and the Press attaché, the latter acting as his press advisor and press representative.

Allen did not "command" all these disparate elements, but was in a permanent state of civilized negotiation. I think he considered this his job and in so far as personalities were concerned he could master most situations - maybe not all. Allen "ruled" by his presence, his public image and manner, his good humor, his humanity, and his ability to seize the initiative when decisive action was called for.

Q: As an observer of what was going on in Yugoslavia, what trends and developments did you discern at this time?

BLASIER: Tito was trying to build his own system which would have a validity and a viability of its own, and not simply be a poor copy of the Soviet system. He wanted this both for his own ego and because of his heritage as an ex-Soviet style Communist. He wanted Yugoslavia to have significance in the history of Communist movements. I doubt that he ever intended to give up his ruthless authority.

Tito claimed to be starting Yugoslavia off on a new kind of socialism which could be more humane, more democratic, more economically viable, etc. I first learned of a big

step in that process when George Allen returned from a reception where he learned, perhaps from Moshe Pijade, that the Yugoslavs were giving up Soviet style agriculture (the kolkhozes)-

Q: The collective farms?

BLASIER: Yes, this was really big news for us, for the USSR and for international communism. To this day, Putin has not yet been able to come to grips with the organization of Russian agriculture. The Yugoslavs also experimented with labor unions, workers' self management, and the workers' councils, much of which worked out more in theory than in practice.

Q: Well wouldn't an answer be a vital element of this desire by Tito to institutionalize his changes; wouldn't it be to prepare a successor to himself for when he died?

BLASIER: Yes, he did come up with some legislation and complicated organizational maneuvers, but it could only be temporizing. Facing a choice, Tito was prepared to risk Yugoslavia's future, but not his hold on power to the moment of his death. His elaborate arrangements to ease an eventual transition were mainly window dressing. But these arrangements lasted longer after his death than I expected.

Q: Weren't the Soviets, through their proxies, sort of nibbling at the Yugoslav borders; sort of incidents from time to time?

BLASIER: Yes, I kept totaling those incidents up, especially along the Rumanian and Bulgarian borders. Tito responded tit for tat on these encounters. If he hadn't done so, there might have been significant military encounters. After Khrushchev visited Belgrade these problems stopped.

Q: When Stalin died, what was the reaction? What did the Yugoslavs do?

BLASIER: This was big news for everybody, especially the Yugoslavs. They were glad not to have to deal with Stalin any more, but they were uneasy about what might come later.

Q: Did they send a suitable representative to his funeral?

BLASIER: That's a good question. I don't remember.

Q: There were major changes going on in the outside world. Can you describe a little bit how Yugoslavia figured into these changes?

BLASIER: Yes. Tito wanted to be sure that Moscow would be deterred from a Soviet attack to restore Yugoslavia to the Communist bloc. I don't think Tito was expecting one

immediately, but he could not be sure. Defense of Yugoslavia from Soviet attack was a long term objective. The members of NATO weren't going to let him into NATO. Yet strategic objectives could be met by the Balkan Pact, a mutual Defense Treaty between Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey. Since Turkey and Greece were both in NATO, membership in the Balkan Pact provided unspecified security for Yugoslavia. Tito had boundary disputes with his neighbors on both the west and south, Italy and Greece.

I followed closely Yugoslav press coverage of both. The most important was the crisis with Italy over Trieste. The American Embassy in Rome backed the Italians on the Trieste issue with heartfelt support from Ambassador Claire Booth Luce, whose influence with Washington was considerable. Our tactic was to smother Washington with full reports on the Yugoslav actions and points of view while minimizing direct confrontation with Mrs. Luce.

At one point there was risk of a war between Italy and Yugoslavia. Both countries mobilized, there were mass Italian and Yugoslav demonstrations. Mobs gathered menacingly around the American reading rooms, insults were exchanged and our press attaché got punched in his already large nose, which covered nearly a full page in Life magazine. As a young and relatively hefty member of the Embassy staff, I was called on to help "defend" the reading rooms. I did not advise my wife in advance of this assignment and put on an old gabardine suit, should tomatoes or other debris be hurled. The senior USIA officers and I marched heroically up and down in front of the menacing mobs, certainly some of whom considered this play acting. During these tense days several members of the Embassy staff approached me confidentially, to find out whether they should send their families out of the country.

The dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia was settled by negotiations in October 1954 after my departure from Belgrade. Italy got the city of Trieste and Yugoslavia got a good deal of surrounding territory.

Yugoslav relations with Greece were also intermittently stormy over the boundary with Macedonia, press coverage of which I also followed. In this connection I paid a visit to the capital of Macedonia, Skopje.

Q: As I recall you had not yet finished your Ph. D dissertation. Is that correct?

BLASIER: Yes. As my tour in Belgrade was coming to a close, I was forced to fish or cut bait on the doctorate. I had already completed all requirements except the presentation and defense of the dissertation. Most of the research and writing was completed. My only chance was to complete a presentation copy in Belgrade so it could be sent to Columbia University in time for a defense that summer during home leave.

I took two weeks leave in Belgrade, hired a full time secretary, and got a copy in the mail to the committee well before leaving Yugoslavia in June. My professors came to New

York from their August vacations for the occasion and approved my defense.

Q: In 1954, you moved to Bonn, after home leave. How did you happen to be assigned to Bonn?

BLASIER: When in Belgrade I filled out my next post preferences: Moscow, Bonn, and a third I've forgotten. Moscow was out apparently because there were a queue of officers, some of whom had already completed Soviet training at Department expense and had priority. My orders came through to Salzburg, then headed by Tully Torbert, who forty years later turned out to be a good friend and neighbor. I understood why I was turned down for Moscow but was disappointed not to get Bonn. Somebody must have intervened, possibly Woodie Wallner who was always supportive. My orders were changed to Bonn. That was great.

Q: What were the duties assigned to you in Bonn?

BLASIER: My orders were to Bonn with no job in the Embassy specified. I called on a personnel officer for my new assignment. She said that the Embassy had arranged for me to work as an assistant to Herve LaRue, the consul general. After a five second pause, I asked her: "Is there anything else?" She said she'd look into it.

Q: You weren't inclined to serve under LaRue?

BLASIER: Herve LaRue was notorious in the service as a leader who sponsored prayer meetings in his office. I've forgotten what they prayed for, but I associated him, perhaps mistakenly, with Scott McLeod and other McCarthy types.

Q: So what did they find for you instead of Herve LaRue?

BLASIER: They said they could assign me to the economic section headed by John W. Tuthill, the minister counselor who coordinated all economic functions. Tuthill asked me whether I might be interested in taking charge of the comprehensive economic reporting program (CERP) for Germany. That involved comprehensive quarterly (and annual) reviews, of the West German economy, editing contributions to the reports from various Embassy sections, and coordinating the economic reporting of the consulates and Berlin. I could write about almost anything on the German economy, but did not have operating responsibility. I was assigned to the commercial section with little or no direct supervision. We had a staff of experienced Germans who assembled statistical publications on Germany and supported their neophyte supervisor.

Tuthill probably had trouble filling this job. An "all but the Ph.D. dissertation candidate" himself, he concluded rashly, that I might do in the absence of anybody better. Actually, I was really not qualified for that job but by vigorous application I made do by at the end of a year. I was proud of my work and got my third promotion, this time to FSO 4.

A week or two after my arrival in Bonn and after I had escaped Herve LaRue, Woody Walner, one of my mentors, paid us a visit from Belgrade. We called on his old friend, Elim O'Shaughnessy, the chief of the Embassy's political section. Woody asked me if I would like to meet O'Shaughnessy. We went to his house and had a drink. When I walked in the door, Elim reached for the stud book (the Biographic Directory) and read my entry while talking to us. We stayed for a while and the next day, I got an invitation to join the political section.

My heart leaped; my dream had always been to establish myself in political work. It had been my academic training, my major experience so far, and my field work in Latin America and Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, I had committed myself to Tuthill, he had saved me from Herve LaRue and I couldn't walk out on him. Also I was convinced that I would be a better political officer later with more economics under my belt. And this particular job was in some many ways more challenging, if less comfortable, than political work on East Germany, Berlin, etc. I declined with regret. When Tuthill left for Paris eighteen months later, I transferred to the political section.

Q: Wasn't the U.S. mission in Germany called HICOG when you got there?

BLASIER: Yes, it became an embassy during my assignment.

Q: In 55, I believe.

BLASIER: Maybe, yes, although we were scarcely aware of the change.

Q: For all intents and purposes, you acted as an embassy throughout?

BLASIER: Yes.

Q: Well, it certainly must have been an active post. What particular areas did you feel you had the most role in?

BLASIER: Well, Bonn was probably one of our biggest embassies. My work was demanding and intense, and it involved working relationships with many other economic and political officers. Also I dealt with all the consulates and Berlin.

My central task was to ride herd on the German economic miracle, its relationship with various industrial, labor, trade, agricultural and other sectors. The economy was purring along at a 6% annual growth rate year after year, and everybody wanted to know whether this remarkable growth would be sustained. We were expected to make some predictions, and usually did so after rounding up forecasts in the press and leading economic journals. At first the German staff read many sources for me. After the first year my German was good enough to read them myself. Although dependent on the German staff initially in writing the survey reports, I was able in less than year to write them largely alone. I also

wrote dispatches on a few key current issues, like economic aspects of German reunification and rearmament.

Q: Who were some of the people you worked with?

BLASIER: Although respected and well liked, Ambassador Conant was a remote and little known to most Embassy staffers, including myself. Much of what I knew about Conant was through his special assistant, Allen Siebens. Tainted by his conscientious service in China, Siebens was a victim of the McCarthy period. His promotions had been held up years because of his association with the old China hands. Conant was protecting him. Some time after I left Siebens' promotion was effected and he resigned from the service the same day. He worked later, I believe, first with Carter Burgess and later Frank Pace.

James Conant spent much of his time traveling around the country by train making speeches in German to German groups. My guess is he thought that this could be his best contribution, and he liked the contact.

Speculation was occasionally offered that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was his own Ambassador to Germany. However many good traits he may have had - President Eisenhower admired him, Dulles was a self-centered, ill-mannered, and clumsy secretary. Some of the functions often performed by ambassadors at other posts, like maintaining morale and being an example, were performed in Germany by the Deputy Chief of Mission, Walter Dowling, supported by his conscientious wife, Alice.

Our Embassy in Germany had to deal not only with Foster Dulles but also with Eleanor Lansing Dulles. If you took off their glasses and cut her hair, these siblings could have been twins. From Washington she devoted herself to Berlin - was called the mutti or mother of Berlin. Nothing was too good for Berlin - don't spare the costs. She could get a lot of what she wanted brandishing the names of "John Foster," and at times, her deceased uncle and former secretary of state Robert Lansing.

While devoted to the rebirth of Berlin and of Germany in a United Europe, Tuthill was cost conscious, as demonstrated later in his Topsy campaign against overstaffing embassies. He felt we had done much for Berlin and the revolving fund (built by the repayment of former loans) would continue Berlin's healthy growth. To promote this approach he asked me to write a pamphlet showing how much we had done, and also reassure the Germans about our continuing commitment to Berlin. In what was a partial answer to Eleanor, I wrote an illustrated pamphlet on German American cooperation in Berlin, which was translated, published, and distributed throughout Germany East and West.

The Bonn Embassy was a great opportunity to meet foreign service officers of promise who would later play useful roles in American foreign policy. Many had good careers in

other parts of the world thereafter. Walter Dowling, Jack Tuthill, Bill Buffum, Gene Boster, Arch Blood, Grover Penberthy, Terry Catherman, Jerry Greene, Weir Brown, John Renner, and Peter Seip.

Q: Didn't you take advanced Soviet Studies in Oberammergau after Bonn?

BLASIER: Yes I did, at Detachment R near Garmisch, Germany. This was a Defense Department school which admitted a few civilian students, in that year, John Baker and myself.

The faculty was composed entirely of Russian speakers from the Russian and other Republics like the Ukraine. Many were bitterly anti-Soviet and profoundly prejudiced in their lectures about Soviet reality. It was not that they were always wrong - one can understand why they were so anti-Soviet - but that they spent too much of their time proving their anti-Soviet credentials rather than giving a many sided view of Soviet reality. There was one educated, thoughtful and creative analyst who was able to leave behind his cruel treatment as a former Communist and member of Agitprop during the Great Purges. Kunta was his pseudonym, A. Avtorkhanov, his real Chechen name.

Detachment R was a great place to learn Russian - the language of lectures, of class discussion, and examinations. Oberammergau also was a great place to charge one's batteries.

Q: When you finished in Germany in 1957, you were ready to go back to the delights of serving in Washington?

BLASIER: Yes. That's right. I had been abroad six years on three fine assignments. The department must and should rotate people back to Washington. Even though my dream of an assignment to Moscow had still not been fulfilled, I really understood completely and had no complaint about going back to the Department. My wife and I bought a house in Cleveland Park and loved Washington.

My assignment to the Soviet internal section of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), and my previous assignments in Belgrade, Bonn and Oberammergau qualified me for the queue for a posting to Moscow.

All my assignments came at a time of big moments in world history. In Belgrade Tito's break with Stalin reshaped world communism and the balance in the Cold War. We came to Bonn when Adenauer was rebuilding Germany after the defeat of Hitler, the German economy was a miracle, and German rearmament a major issue. We came to Washington just as Khrushchev was tearing down the Stalin myth, trying to strengthen the Soviet economy and society and open ties with the rest of the world. Washington was an excellent place to gain perspective on these developments, all of which I wrote about. At the same time my work in INR was confining with little contact with people outside

our division - the main job was to review and comment on Soviet newspapers and intelligence materials. I respected and liked my colleagues: Ken Kerst, Sol Polansky, Heyward Isham, Bob Davis, Jack Matlock, and many others.

My experience and that of my friends reinforced the view that I had long held regarding the Foreign Service, that the title literally means "service," that the interests of the service precede those of its individual members. I knew and accepted as fact that if I remained in the Foreign Service, I would never be able to control fully where I worked, what I did, and when I did it.

Q: How did you divide up the duties among the people you mentioned?

BLASIER: As I recall, maybe incorrectly, Polansky and Isham did top leadership, Davis had certain related matters. I did education, science, nationalities, Central Asia, and special assignments. I think Matlock dealt with cultural issues. He may have roamed rather widely over other subjects, too, as many of us did. I, for example, wrote an intellectual history of Khrushchev in preparation for his visit to the United States.

I was a member of the team that received Khrushchev during his visit to Washington in 1959. As mentioned below, I had already been in Russia and knew the Minister of Higher Education. I accompanied the latter on his appointments and was present at major functions.

All Russian subjects were interesting for me. But, analyzing the Soviet press in Central Asia was stultifying, repetitive, and usually unrewarding. We also had reports from U.S. government agencies who interviewed American visitors returning from the USSR. With some exceptions, those visitors knew so little of Soviet life and Soviet science and education that it was hard to squeeze much out of their testimony. We had access to most of the official cables going back and forth, including highly classified ones. That was fascinating!

Q: You had mentioned that you'd been to Moscow. What connection was that?

BLASIER: In 1958 the "thaw" was beginning to melt Soviet relations with the rest of the world. More westerners were coming to visit the USSR and had better access in many places. The secret police still tried to monitor and control their citizens' contacts with the populace, but conversations were possible. Many American delegations were scheduled to visit the USSR that summer. The Embassy had its usual business plus riding herd on these delegations, politically important U.S. officials, and influential Americans. This was an important moment when access for political reporting was better than ever, though still not good. The Embassy asked Washington for help in handling the heavy anticipated traffic. Having had extensive academic training and a tour at the Oberammergau Russian Studies School, I was a logical candidate for temporary duty at the Embassy. I lived in Moscow for about three months in the Metropole Hotel. This was the realization of a

dream of my life. Young people today who have long had access to Russia may not be able to understand how much it meant to aspiring Russian specialists to set foot on Soviet soil.

Since the end of the Second World War I had fervently wanted to visit the Soviet Union. During these months I visited Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkov. Delegations that I escorted took me to Tiflis, Alma Aty, Tashkent, Bokhara, and elsewhere. In Tashkent I met the Grand High Mufti. My interviews included ordinary people, students, university rectors, faculty, tradesmen, architects.

Many of my contacts took place in parks, on the trains or buses. In a park, for example, a Russian would come up to talk and we would end up having a conversation so intimate that you wouldn't have it with an American until you'd known him for five or ten years. Because they so wanted so badly to speak to somebody from outside, they had so much to get off their chest that and they spoke openly, very openly. You knew that when you had finished that conversation, you would never see that person again. I was almost sure that after such meetings, the police would interview them and order them never to see me again. I doubt that they ordinarily would have been arrested on just one encounter. These talks were extremely rewarding for me and gave me insight into the Soviet Union that I had never had before.

During that summer I served as an escort and occasional interpreter for three delegations: 1) the first delegation of University presidents to visit the USSR, headed by Chancellor Edward H. Litchfield of the University of Pittsburgh, 2) a delegation of American social scientists, including Frank Snowden, Dean of the College at Howard University, and 3) a delegation of U.S. veterinarians. All the rest of the time I was on my own to pursue visits and conversations with Soviet officials and citizens and to write a flurry of reports back to Washington.

Q: So your reward was in a sense this INR stint?

BLASIER: Maybe, but that was secondary. The Embassy needed help in this it's so far busiest summer. INR had the money and manpower and I was selected to go. Yes, I was grateful.

Q: That's high praise for you.

BLASIER: Well, whatever, I was grateful.

Q: So what were the main things you worked on, education and other aspects?

BLASIER: Education reform, which was one of Khrushchev's big things. I also looked after the Academy of Sciences. Higher education was another big subject; in addition to secondary education. My duty was also to read the five republics' newspapers from

Central Asia, an incredibly boring and repetitive task. More interesting were the personalities I was asked to follow.

It was about this time that I began to reevaluate my past and future prospects in the foreign service. At the age of 33 it was time for me to decide whether to remain in or resign from the foreign service.

Q: But before you leave, looking back, were you particularly prescient or particularly blind to certain trends? With the benefit of hind sight, did you see the end of the Soviet regime?

BLASIER: No I didn't, but I always bore in mind Kennan's belief in the late 1940s that the USSR would probably collapse from within. I knew that the Soviet system was grossly inefficient, that the Communists were totally unable to harness the creative talents and the energies of their people, and it was politically an ugly system known as such to many of its people. Knowing the faults of the Communist system is one thing, predicting its collapse is another. That takes political magic. Note that the USSR collapsed thirty years after I left the Department.

Q: When the Soviet Union collapsed so rapidly, some sharply criticized our intelligence for not foreseeing the collapse. This is of course a generation after yours, but...

BLASIER: I'm not sure that all the people who made those criticisms were really entitled to make them. After all, as mentioned earlier, George Kennan predicted such a collapse in the late 1940s. My view is that the main function of analytical intelligence is description and explanation - not prediction. Financial advisors often tell clients to be suspicious of salesmen who claim that stocks will move in certain directions. Investors, they say, should stir clear of such soothsayers.

The same might apply to intelligence. Our intelligence's main fault was not failing to predict Soviet collapse but instead overstating the strength of the Soviet armed forces and the Soviet economy. Sometimes exaggerations were often more the fault of politicians, who had axes to grind, than our intelligence people. The latter usually erred on the side of hedging their bets - on one hand this, on the other that. My view is that the problem was not that intelligence failed to predict the unknowable future; it was that some government leaders exploited intelligence, whether consciously or not, to support their self-serving interests.

Appraisals of intelligence need to distinguish between:

(1) collection (overt and covert), (2) analysis, (3) policy making, and (4) political action. The CIA, for example, is not supposed to, and often avoids taking responsibility for policy, and if so, should not be criticized for policy errors. Whatever the shortcoming of collection and analysis may be, I fear they are less at fault than errors in political action: Cuba, Nicaragua, Chile, Iran. CIA's covert assets have some times been exploited to

promote misconceived foreign policies and private interests.

Q: In your time did political considerations intrude on policy? You had the A Team, B Team, problems in CIA, or on policy towards the Soviet Union? Was there any of that in your time? Were there efforts to make them appear worse than they are, better than they are or any outside intrusions like that that you are aware of?

BLASIER: That's a huge question. Answering off hand for my years working on European affairs, I don't believe there were any policy errors under Truman and Eisenhower that compare with the disasters we faced under Johnson, Nixon, and George W. Bush. In general, there was unanimity on fundamentals in Soviet policy within the administration and in the public at large. By the early 1950s the far left had been largely discredited and the center tended to support the Eisenhower administration on foreign policy.

Secretary John Foster Dulles appeared to have feared greater disunity in the state department than in fact existed, especially within the foreign service. One of his first acts was to send to posts abroad his demand for positive loyalty from the Foreign Service. Jacob Beam, chargé in Belgrade, was deeply offended. He explained to us that he had entered the service when Henry L. Stimson, a Republican, was Secretary of State. Beam later demonstrated his loyalty to presidents from both parties, including Richard Nixon.

Q: And you didn't experience mistakes in policy?

BLASIER: Yes, but there must be more than I could mention now without researching the subject. We probably spent more money on Tito than we should have. Our policies towards Berlin worked. Claire Booth Luce, our Ambassador to Italy, was in love with Italy, and couldn't see U.S. crucial interests in Yugoslavia relating to the Cold War. There were tactical errors, like supporting the Hungarian revolution and then not following through when the Soviets invaded. Eisenhower's efforts at peace making collapsed when he bungled relations with Khrushchev over the Soviet shoot down of Francis Gary Powers. There may be many other examples, but this is too big a subject for this oral history. In any event, a personal answer to your question is that I did not resign because of policy differences.

Q: You said that this was the beginning of your disaffection from the Foreign Service or your inclination to go back to the academic world?

BLASIER: No, it was not disaffection from the Foreign Service, nor, as I've said, grave criticism of our policies in Europe. But my experience there did get me to thinking about where I had been and where I was likely to go. One conclusion was that I had had excellent assignments and the odds for duplicating such assignments of such quality in the near future were not good.

I realized my ambition to go to Moscow and had a good look at Russia from inside. Being cooped up in Moscow or in some other authoritarian eastern European climate, like Warsaw or Budapest, now seemed less attractive. And, of course, it took nearly thirty years from that time before Eastern Europe opened up.

The main thing was the FSO's total dependence on the Foreign Service for where one works, for whom one works, what one does, and when. I didn't want my whole future to be determined by a sometimes necessarily faceless foreign service bureaucracy. I thought if I got a job outside and liked it, I could stay and wouldn't move until something better came along. That's the way it happened.

Q: Do you think your personality is right for the Foreign Service?

BLASIER: Yes, fine, for a few years, say four to six. Not for a full career, as required of a professional. Perhaps, I'm not laid back enough.

Q: You had one final temporary duty as a Foreign Service Officer in Moscow in 1958?

BLASIER: Yes, while assigned to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR).

Q: Was this standard practice or was this unusual?

BLASIER: Not unusual, nor frequent.

Q: It was to avail the Department a particular skill on your part or was it to reward you? What was the motivation?

BLASIER: Somebody might have wanted to reward me but I doubt it. No reflection on me but things usually don't work that way. The Embassy had a pressing temporary need and Washington found me and the money to fill it.

Moscow was busier that summer than at any time in recent memory. Moscow embassy was being flooded by delegations from the U.S. and the Embassy wanted to take advantage of new political reporting opportunities created by the "thaw." I served as escort and occasional interpreter for three large delegations and took on a few other odd jobs. I spent most of the rest of my time writing political dispatches on a wide variety of subjects based on trips in Western Russia and Central Asia.

Q: What sort of delegations was this, congressional or...

BLASIER: The three main delegations were: the first for U.S. University Presidents to visit the USSR, a delegation of social scientists, and a delegation of veterinarians. I helped other visitors. My work led me to fascinating political, economic, and cultural topics beyond the scope of this oral history.

Q: Was that when Llewellyn Thompson was American Ambassador to the USSR?

BLASIER: It was. I could add a word about him if you want.

Q: Please, please. What can you tell us about Thompson?

BLASIER: Tommy Thompson was already an icon. I had followed his negotiations on the Austrian State Treaty from Belgrade. The Ambassador was thin and did not appear strong physically. I had the impression he was under great stress, had medical problems, and was caught between boorish leaders in Moscow and Washington. He had to internalize so much of the frictions and controversies that it was a very heavy burden for him to carry. Much of the management of the Embassy was in the hands of his deputy, Richard Davis, who I had met at Columbia. Thompson came into the Embassy to handle the most pressing business and then would leave. I didn't see much of him initially.

My first opportunity came at a smallish reception at Spaso house. During the course of the reception, he invited me sit down for a talk. I have met and talked with many famous people in my life, who almost without exception want to do all the talking. Instead, he wanted to learn about what I'd observed there, and had read my dispatches. His interest was not a compliment to me, but more to him. Few celebrities ask anything about you; they want to tell you about them. He made an indelible impression.

On another occasion I learned about Thompson's interview with the Soviet foreign minister - maybe it was Molotov. Discussing some controversial issue the latter went into a rage against the U.S. that went on for about ten minutes and then he stopped. And then Thompson just sat there in silence for maybe five minutes. Didn't say a word, not a word - just sat there. Silent.

Molotov didn't know what to do, became flustered. At last he said what about this? Thompson replied: "Are you finished?" The Ambassador gave him this silent rebuke.

Q: In your reporting or analyzing time there, what were your particular monuments? Did you do studies of education, studies of the internal processing?

BLASIER: Most of these dispatches are probably in the diplomatic archives nearby in Maryland which I hope to consult some day. Among the subjects I now dimly remember dealt with anti-Semitism, maintenance of public buildings, an interview with the Grand High Mufti of Central Asia, my treatment by the secret police including entrapment efforts and poisoning, descriptive pieces on living conditions, and visits to Central Asia. In order to answer this question properly, I would need to go through these dispatches.

Q: You had an advantage later in your academic career of going back to Moscow in different periods, which gave you a chance to notice changes from one period to another. What struck you doing this? Was change as slow as you thought it would be, or faster?

BLASIER: Many of the underlying aspects of Soviet public opinion and politics were pretty similar from the time of my first visit in 1958. During Khrushchev and the thaw, the USSR was much more open and rational and under Brezhnev authoritarian and bureaucratic themes became stronger again. With Gorbachev trends were in the opposite direction. About all I can say now is that many of the leading themes during Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev and Putin were similar but their weight and arrangement varied substantially.

The first time I returned to Moscow after leaving the service was in 1978. I arranged that second visit while on an inter-university travel grant in Warsaw. On that visit I laid the ground work for the U.S.-USSR exchange in Latin American studies. IREX covered the U.S. costs of the delegations of U.S. scholars and the USSR Academy sciences through its Institute of Latin America for theirs during the years 1985 to 1990. As chairman, I went to Moscow one or more times a year for the exchange, and on others for research on my book, *The Giant's Rival, the USSR and Latin America*. Until 1980 continuities in political attitudes and political organization were greater than the changes. After Gorbachev had been in office attitudes towards the regime and towards the U.S. changed rapidly. What has been wonderfully consistent since the last years of Gorbachev to the present is the free climate for personal and political discussion with Russian friends and colleagues. To answer this question properly requires more space and time than we have here.

The Exchange ended in late 1990. Since that time I have been to Russia every few years on various missions. For example, one was serving as a consultant for the International Executive Service Corps at the State University in Vladivostok. And in 2000 I was an observer for Putin's election as president for the OSCE in Kazan, Tatarstan. I continue to research Russian subjects, especially topics related to Germany.

Q: In 1958 when you were on temporary assignment to the Embassy in Moscow were you already more or less determined to go back to the great outside world?

BLASIER: My conversations with Chancellor Litchfield and other university presidents in 1958 started me thinking. That was probably the most difficult time in my life, a decision-making process that was having adverse impacts on my life.

Q: You discussed this with your chiefs in the INR or did you weigh some offers before you decided to...

BLASIER: No, I didn't. In the end I only had one offer. I looked around at various places. None of the opportunities appealed to me, nor I to them. In the end, I had only one offer that was acceptable and I took it. It was from Everett Case, the President of Colgate University, a former Harvard business school assistant dean, and assistant to the founder of General Electric, Owen D. Young. He was one of the most respected college presidents in the country. He later became president of the foundation of his father-in-law's

competitor, Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors.

Q: Oh, I meant offers within the Department of State.

BLASIER: No, I assumed that I would be in INR for some months more and then get another assignment. It seemed too soon to seek another assignment, and besides one assignment was not the issue. Meanwhile, Grover Penberthy, my personnel officer and by chance a personal friend, urged me not to resign and to take extended leave instead. This was good advice and I was touched by his and maybe the Department's concern. Convinced, however, that I had to make a firm decision, I declined and resigned in September 1960.

Q: The Department was the big loser in this, but you went on to a very distinguished career in the academic world, particularly in the field of Latin American studies and relating them to the Soviet Union in part.

BLASIER: Yes, thank you.

End of interview