

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

HOWARD R. SIMPSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERNET

Q: Today is January 10, 1994 this is an interview with Howard R. Simpson on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. To start with, I wonder, could you give me a bit about your background, where you grew up and a bit about your education?

SIMPSON: Well, I was born in Alameda, CA in 1925 and I grew up in that town and went to high school there. And then in 1943 like everybody, most of the male population, was drafted in the army at 18 and went to Europe eventually and served in 3 campaigns there.

Q: What were you doing, could you give just a little feel on where you served?

SIMPSON: Well I started out, I did my basic training as a combat engineer up in Oregon, in the mountains, and then I went over to England as an engineer and landed in France, a GI the whole time I was there, Normandy, Northern France and the Rhine. I made the

fantastic grade of Sergeant only to be broken because I decided to go to Lyon which was off-limits at one point, but it was worth it. I came back to the States in 1945.

Q: What units were you in?

SIMPSON: I switched around a lot. I was with the 51st combat engineers to begin with, then I was temporarily in a medical unit. I was caught up in what was then the replacement depot waltz.

Q: The Repo-depot.

SIMPSON: The repo-depot swirl and being a young somewhat innocent type. I didn't take opportunities when they were presented to me and I ended up in an infantry replacement depo finally, just toward the end of the war. We were all ready to be shipped out to Japan and luckily we were in Marseille and the war ended in the Pacific. And they announced on the loud speaker that the units that are still on the dock, if they wish--this is one of the first ships to return to the States--and if they wish to stay aboard, they'll have to sleep on the deck. And of course we slept on the deck. But I got back to the States and I was discharged and still under 21. And imagine getting thrown out of a bar in my hometown when I came back, as many did. Then the GI Bill and San Francisco City College Journalism and I went back to Paris to study art on the GI Bill. And spent a little over a year there and finished it off in San Francisco. I then went to work as an artist on the old San Francisco Call Bulletin which was a Hearst paper at the time. And at that point, it was then that I started to get interested in the Foreign Service because somebody had come back from the MSA or whatever it was. You know, the information section of the economic aid operation in Europe. And he was telling me all about it and I had itchy feet like most of the younger bachelors at the time. And I heard about U.S. Information Service--at that time it was USIE in State. In fact, it really was a broadcast from Korea of a USIS correspondent jumping during an air drop somewhere in Korea during the Korean War, and he was recorded broadcasting while he jumped. I didn't know that they had that sort of thing in the government. So I applied and, after the usual waiting period, surprisingly enough, there came this notice that I was accepted and that was the beginning of the Foreign Service routine.

Q: So you came in, when did you come into the Foreign Service?

SIMPSON: That was 195...I guess it was 1951.

Q: I have you down here as '51. You came in basically, was it USIA at that time?

SIMPSON: No, it was USIE--US Information and Education program in the State Department. In other words, I went to the Foreign Service Institute as a State Department stiffer but not as an officer. I came in at a grade 13, I think it was about the lowest you could possibly be at that time.

Q: What were you doing in the State Department?

SIMPSON: Well, my first assignment was Saigon and I was assigned to Saigon as an information clerk.

Q: This was in '51?

SIMPSON: This is in '51 as an information clerk. I got there in '52 after the Washington training. And I arrived there and Lee Brady was the Public Affairs Officer and I was immediately caught up in this thing. The Foreign Service in those days was a little different. There were a lot of opportunities. It wasn't so stratified. And within a very short time I found myself Assistant Press Officer and then a short time later Embassy Press Officer. And with that situation in Indochina during the war. The French war. It meant that I was also assigned later as Official War Correspondent to the French, Franco-Vietnamese forces, fighting the Viet Minh at the time.

Q: I just want to nail down the dates, you came into the State Department in '51 and you went almost out immediately to Saigon. So you were there from '52 until...?

SIMPSON: I was there from '52 until '55.

Q: '55 okay. When you got to Saigon, in the first place, was our Embassy in Saigon? What did we have in Hanoi?

SIMPSON: We had a consulate in Hanoi and we had, when I first got to Saigon, it was an Embassy but it had been a Legation before that. But it had become an Embassy that was serving the Associated States of Indochina--Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Ambassador Donald Heath was the man in place at the time and there was the USIS organization as far as information. And the American Aid Mission had a big information operation and there was quite a bit of duplication, a little rivalry because they had all the money.

Q: Oh yes.

SIMPSON: And it was finally pulled together. It finally worked out all right. But it was a very colorful time. I mean Saigon in those days was a--you could say it was a bachelor's dream. It was sort of a Terry and the Pirates atmosphere, good food, good drink, the war at your doorstep. Strange things going on all over and you learned very fast the realities of intrigue and the variations of shades of gray.

Q: The war at that point was with the Viet Minh.

SIMPSON: That's right.

Q: And was this down in the Saigon area as well as up in the delta area, the Red River area?

SIMPSON: The fighting in the North was more structured, it was, Giap had produced and brought out his divisions and the Delta French had a lot of severe blows up there, they were struggling to contain. At the same time the war was going on in the South, more in a guerrilla mode with the railroads being blown up and land mines on the roads. Saigon closed down, I mean the roads were closed at about 5 o'clock and you couldn't travel on them, any roads leading out of Saigon, going or coming, you couldn't move. And the villages were all sort of buttoned down at a certain hour. Pillboxes and all that sort of thing, so the war was in the South as well as in the North but it was more guerrilla sporadic in the South.

Q: What were your impressions of the Embassy during this period. In the first place how did Donald Heath operate?

SIMPSON: Well I think that, looking back on it, I think it operated pretty well considering that it was a comparatively small Embassy to cover such a big spread of territory. Heath was a professional with a wry sense of humor and a great temper that didn't usually show itself unless he was provoked. He also wore a broad brimmed fedora all the time which was sort of his mark and we, the young Turks of the Embassy, sometimes accused him of being too conservative and following the French line. But I don't think we were aware at that time, one of our big objectives was to keep France active in NATO and on-the-line in Europe and that any slight problem in Indochina would reflect there too. The French were just beginning to tire of that whole war out there and they had lost a lot of people. And we were moving in to pay for a lot of it. So the Embassy was busy in a reporting mode in the field as well as in Saigon, politicians and all that and the attachés, military attachés were busy all the time and the military aid mission--MAAG--Military Aid and Advisory Group, was running what they'd call end-use missions out in the field. They would go check on American equipment to see how it was being used and the French would have these tactics where they would be using the new equipment brought in for Vietnamese units and they'd hear that an end-use mission was coming. So they'd rush this equipment back to the Vietnamese. So the Americans when they visited would see it and then the French would take it back again. I used to accompany these end-use missions from the information side, you know to show American aid was reaching the Vietnamese, etc. And often the French jeep that was suppose to arrive at 10 in the morning didn't arrive until 1 in the afternoon. The best ploy that the French had to keep us away from any real source of material was the big lunch, the big noontime lunch. Where you'd start with pastis, whatever, and then you'd go through a couple of wines under the hot tropical sun and then you'd have some cognac or armagnac and by the time you come from that you'd be practically prolapsed and it'd be too late. It'd be time to close the road so you'd have to rush back to wherever you were going.

Q: What were our military attachés doing--what was our military role at that time?

SIMPSON: We had decided that the French were fighting the good fight in Indochina. This was primarily because of the Korean War and we were trying--you know the Domino Theory--trying to keep Southeast Asia and that peninsula out of communist hands. So the American military had to liaise very closely with the French. In the field as well as in Saigon and all this American equipment was pouring in including aircraft, tanks, etc. So there was a lot of working together there and there were a lot of visitors. You know the usual VIP visitors from the Pentagon, from Washington or from the Philippines or from the American bases in Tokyo. And the object was to see that the French got what they needed and then hopefully that they were using it the way it should be used. We were supplying not just equipment but also the money. So in other words, they were holding the left flank in the Far East as far as Washington was concerned. And the French government, one government after another was falling in France often and the Indochina issue was hot. There was a lot of opposition to the war and the army was getting fed-up because they figured they weren't getting what they needed. So it was a constant crisis situation.

Q: What sort of contacts did you have with the French for example?

SIMPSON: Well we had constant contacts with them because we worked with their information service, we were involved in psychological warfare at that time. This was interesting because the Foreign Service Institute hardly prepared you for that sort of thing. And one of the first assignments I was given, being press officer, being in Saigon was, "Don't forget Tuesday is the meeting of the Joint Psychological Warfare Board. And you're going to be the American representative." I knew very little about psychological warfare as did most of the people on the board. This was a joint, there were Vietnamese, French and Americans who sat down and the presiding officer was a French colonel, a parachute officer, who thought propaganda was a joke, anyway. But we had these meetings. That was one way we were working with the French closely. Then we had contacts with a lot of French newspapermen, a lot of media representatives that we were in constant touch with. And also the French, let's see: there was the government information, the army information. They were both sort of competing, we had to touch base with them all the time. And then there were the French officials, who were on the scene. And then there was Hanoi, we'd travel up to Hanoi quite often and there was a different picture up there.

Q: What was the situation around Hanoi?

SIMPSON: It was, you know, Saigon is sort of a garden spot, everything grows, a beautiful city. At least it can be. But Hanoi is sort of gray. The weather can be very bad, you get gray skies, gray streets, rain, the people, some of them are dressed in gray, black. And it's just a different atmosphere altogether. Add to that the fact that the hot war was going on up there. It was altogether a different atmosphere. You arrive in Hanoi, there were tanks parked. Everybody driving in Saigon, officers driving in jeeps would be driving very slowly and probably well dressed. Up there they'd be whipping through the streets in camouflage outfits and mud all over their jeeps. So you had a different

atmosphere and the Tonkinese had been fighting in that war on either side for so long that there was a totally different picture. And you realized how serious the war was. It wasn't guerrilla anymore, we're talking divisions and artillery and all that sort of thing.

Q: What was the feeling about, at that time, the Viet Minh in the Embassy. How did we feel about that?

SIMPSON: Well there were, I suppose you could say there were, two schools of thought, in a way. There were those--Americans--who would specialize not so much in Indochina but in Southeast Asia who realized that possibly a golden opportunity had been missed with Ho Chi Minh. You know right after the war when we had helped his fledgling army fight the Japanese in Tonkin. The OSS, that had been lost because we'd gone ahead with the French and had followed through and yet there was still a possibility. There was always talk of a third force. But nobody knew really what the bloody third force was but everybody was looking for it! And then there was the other side that saw it more in black and white. That the Viet Minh were the vanguard of the Chinese armies that would eventually move down like they had in China and extend their power. And the Viet Minh would be their frontmen all throughout Southeast Asia. And so there was some confusion there and also the other problem was that the Viet Minh, placing them in the context of France's future, one of our great goals was to build up the Vietnamese National Army which eventually became the ARVN but there was no backbone there. I don't mean they weren't brave and a lot of them did fight well, but there was no cadre, no reason, no national reason. Whereas the Viet Minh were schooled and trained and believed so much in their cause that they'd take heavy losses and still keep coming back. As they always did. Whereas the National Army, they'd throw these units together, they'd have a French officer. They'd try time and time again. They'd go out on an operation and then they'd just get chopped to pieces because they just did not operate well. And that was our big goal. To build a National Army that would take over the role of national operations.

Q: Did you have a feeling that, we're talking about this time, and here the French were in charge and we're talking about this fighting in a battle that eventually they're going to lose. But the French and Americans have never mixed well together and I suppose we were full of ideas. How did this work together?

SIMPSON: Well it didn't. In a way, it's the tragedy of the whole thing. As I mentioned, this parachute officer, this Joint Psychological Warfare Board. One of the first things I saw, the French idea of propaganda leaflet was a photo of a French soldier with a submachine gun, standing over about 4 Viet Minh dead. And the words in French and Vietnamese were: If you don't surrender, this will happen to you. It doesn't take a Ph.D. in psychology to figure out that #1 it'll infuriate whoever picks it up or #2 it'll make them laugh and say what idiots these people are. I went to one of the first air drops that went on over so-called enemy lines, in an old Junkers just packed with these leaflets being dropped in the jungle, which was a waste of time. And we often would try to, okay we were naive, we were newcomers, we really didn't know Indochina, we didn't know the people and the French of course resented our presence anyway, particularly military. But

we would try to make our little contribution and try to straighten things that we thought were going wrong. And there were inevitable clashes. Particularly with journalists because as USIS officers we were there to help what we could as far as visiting journalist went, not just Americans, British, French and the rest. And there was censorship at the time and all outgoing dispatches would have to be censored so at times the French censor would lay it out with a heavy hand and block stuff that there were no reasons to have blocked. So there were those little irritations. On a higher level, the American military would often come in with what I could see were crazy ideas about what should be done. General Iron Mike O'Daniel was the head of MAAG at one point and before he became head of MAAG he used to fly in. And this was at the time of Dienbienphu. He used to fly in to talk to General Navarre, the French commander and at one point he suggested we should just enclose the whole of North Vietnam in barbed wire, the whole secure area. And that way the "Viet Minh can't get in and they can't get out." Well #1 this is a physical impossibility. Then he wanted to build pillboxes behind this barbed wire, a major cement contract, plus the fact he wanted to man these with Vietnamese troops. Well #2 you didn't have the Vietnamese troops to do it and the French were pulling their hair out every time he arrived because he was always coming up with such ideas.

Q: How did you find dealing with the press at the time?

SIMPSON: Well I didn't find it too hard, I was to find it harder later, during our period. But in those days, the old Hotel Continental Palace in the center of Saigon, was sort of the unofficial press club. Everybody stayed there, the New York Times, Bob Shaplen of the New Yorker had a room there all the time. There were a lot of Americans, Graham Greene was in and out. And all the French, Jean Larteguy and that crowd. But as I'd started my working life as a journalist, I found it a little easier to get along with them than some of the more staid State Department officers. I mean you say information and they run for cover. But we got along well with the press and our office was sort of open house. They were in and out all the time. We couldn't do what we did for them later, you know what I mean, during the American war. We helped them and we exchanged information. We often, let's face it, I don't care where you are, it doesn't have to be in a war situation, but a good journalist who knows the country and is working there, who is in and out quite often. Sometimes he has much better contacts than the officials. It's not just a question of guiding his American official friends, but comparing notes. That way you can get some very valuable information, background. But no, it wasn't bad at all most days.

Q: How about Graham Greene. There's a major collection of Graham Greene papers here in the library. You know thinking about the genesis of The Quiet American the novel which was coming out about this time, at least he was doing his thing. Did you have contact or did you have a feel where he was coming from?

SIMPSON: Let's put it this way. I first met Greene on the terrace of the Continental Hotel. A very cool reception as far as I was concerned. I wasn't trying to make any points with him. Cool fish handshake and a sort of "Gee I wish I wasn't meeting you," sort of feeling. And I saw him off and on, different press conferences. Just said hello. And it

became very obvious that everything he was writing...I'm talking about his articles, were being, okay he had his own point of view and he didn't particularly like Americans. Add to that, he disapproved completely of "American interference" in Indochina as he put it. And also, he was fed a lot of stuff by the French. He was very close to the French. He was very close to a fellow, a French editor, who ran a cultural magazine there and they were together all the time along with this fellow's mistress. In fact, he dedicates the book, The Quiet American, to them, René and Phong. But the amusing thing is, okay, Greene and I weren't the greatest of friends. And one New Year's or just before New Year's, the Viet Minh struck in central Laos, a surprise move that almost cut the country in half. And I got word of it and was to fly up there and join a parachute battalion that I'd known before, Bigeard's outfit, who were sent in there to try to block this move. And so I arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport at about 7 in the morning and there was this little grasshopper type observation plane, waiting, with a pilot with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. And I said, are you so-and-so and he said "Yes. We're flying to Laos?"

"That's right we're going up to Savannakhet." And he said we've got another passenger. It was New Year's day and I had a terrific hangover and along comes Graham Greene, the other passenger. And he has a terrific hangover. So here we are, hardly buddies and we both have these terrific hangovers, in this horrible observation plane that bounced all over the sky. We flew up to Savannakhet and we got out of the plane and we got in a jeep and they're driving us up to Seno. A town where the battalion was, it was hot, it was really hot and we were dying of thirst and we were looking and looking. The roads were empty, we forgot all about security. We weren't worried about that. All we wanted was a cold beer. Finally, like a miracle, we came around the corner of a road and here's this old woman sitting under a half-tent with some dried cigarettes and about 4 bottles of Tiger beer that wasn't iced, just lukewarm. So we bought the beer and we drank this beer. And I think that's the first time that Graham Greene and I ever spoke together but it didn't last long.

Q: Well do you have any feel for why he didn't like Americans, did it come out?

SIMPSON: I don't know. I didn't know that much about Greene's background. I really hadn't read that much of it. For instance, most correspondents would come in, they'd want to speak to Heath or you know, get the word from the top American, whether it'd be a General or Ambassador, just as background. And Greene never made the effort. And you just sensed it when you met him. Whether it was something that had happened earlier or whether he just decided we were going to ruin the whole show.

Q: Did you find that he was sort of immersed in Vietnamese culture?

SIMPSON: He was very interested in it. I must admit, people asked me what I thought of The Quiet American when it came out. I still think it's one of the best novels to come out of Vietnam, of that period particularly. Because he said a lot without too much effort. He caught the feel of Saigon and the period but I never got that close to him.

Q: Just a little feel. We're 2 gentlemen now in our 60's. You say Saigon was a bachelor's paradise. I mean what was the sort of social life like in Saigon.

SIMPSON: Saigon itself, the street in those days, was called "Rue Catinat" the main street stretching down to the river. And you had these hotels, the Majestic and the Continental, with their big open terraces and their tables out on the sidewalk. Because of the grenade attacks, the restaurants and many of the bars had anti-grenade netting on the doors. And the American crowd, the unquiet Americans, would go out, there'd be a number of cocktail parties, there'd be special dinners but mostly, for a lot of us, it was just getting to know the city. Eating in excellent restaurants. I found a little Corsican restaurant where I use to go all the time. And I used to get, it was sort of like putting your finger on the pulse of Saigon. Because the Corsicans ran everything. They operated the customs, they operated the smuggling, which was a very cozy arrangement. The Corsicans were predominant in the police department. And many of them were in intelligence. There were some in the army in various jobs and some of them were the old Corsicans, the settlers that had been there for years. They were hard drinking, loved good food and all that. And then there were the women, well. There were the Chinese, there were the Vietnamese, there were Laotians, Cambodians, there were a mix of all kinds and let's face it there were some unbelievable places in that town. There was a place called Buffalo Park where a whole block was an army bordello and it had a big sign outside. All weapons and grenades checked here and you'd have all these jeeps parked outside. It was one great big palace packed with all these girls and there was Mama's which was the officer's section and it was attached to this main complex and they were suppose to be a little more select. But when Mama's was busy, she was very busy, she'd run girls from the other section. And in my last book that came out in 1992, I mentioned an incident.

Q: This was the book you wrote. What was the title?

SIMPSON: It was called "Tiger in the Barbed Wire", my own reminisces of that period. Black-Jack Pickering was the Deputy PAO at that time, and he was a wonderful character, he had covered Lindbergh's landing in Paris and all that sort of thing. An old newspaper man with a gravelly voice. And he knew that some of his younger officers were spending a lot of time in Mama's because you could go in, you sit and you drink beer and then the women, and so he wanted to see it one night. And he had brought a Cadillac to Saigon as his personal car, a black Cadillac. The Ambassador was very upset about this because once Pickering arrived at an official reception and they quickly ran out with this guard of honor, presented arms because of his Cadillac. So when the Ambassador arrived in his beat-up old Packard, there was no guard of honor. So they arranged that Pickering always arrive later. Well, that night we were driving along and it was the rainy season, a terrific tropical downpour. As we came towards Mama's, I said let's get as close as we can because we'll get soaked if we don't. He said okay and just then he put his foot on the brake of his Cadillac and his foot slipped because it was wet and we went gliding majestically into the front of Mama's. The roof came down on top of us, the girls went climbing up the grenade net of both sides, all the French officers were running out of the place, it was a most undiplomatic situation. We had to get them to

hoist up the roof to get the Cadillac out. So from there on in, outside of the hearing of Black-Jack Pickering, we referred to it as the only drive-in whore house in Saigon.

Q: Did you find in the American community, the official American community, something that would certainly,,I was there '69-'70 and it had well developed, and these were people in the, richer marine terms, these were China coasters. I mean basically these were people who loved the orient, usually had a mistress or two and had settled in. Did you find that this was developing there?

SIMPSON: A little, a little. I guess it was, as you say, I experienced the same thing from '64-'65 as far as Americans go, much more so. But I guess we were just beginning, there were very few who were involved in Indochina or knew it at the time. There were some old OSS types. Not old but I mean former OSS types, who had been there just maybe before the war and during the war, '45 and all that, but there were very few Americans that you could call old Indochina hands. They developed, they became that after a certain period of time.

Q: You were there during Dienbienphu? Could you explain or give a feel for how we viewed this at that time?

SIMPSON: Well, let me say that, before I talk about Dienbienphu itself, let me make the point that I was at Dienbienphu itself. At the beginning, when it was taken and for a few weeks thereafter. And being, the privilege of being a so-called war-correspondent, is that you can move when you want. And there was no secret, it was time to get out. I did, but going back to talk about the American position. The whole plan at Dienbienphu was based on the false premise that the Viet Minh would attack over open ground and the French air force and artillery would chop them up and this would be a great defeat and probably the turning point of the war, etc. etc. And there had been a battle the year before in Nassan that sort of indicated this could happen, they took some heavy losses there. But from the very beginning, American observers began to worry about this situation because of, the Korean War had ended, and one of the great phrases of the Korean war was to take the high ground. While at Dienbienphu, although the French had argued that they were on elevated ground, they were still dominated by the surrounding mountains, you see. So in reality, they were still in the chamber pot, as they say. And American military people going there would mouth platitudes about--isn't this nice and strong fortifications and all that. But they were quite concerned. One of their concerns was that here are some of the best battalions that the French have in Indochina and they're sitting here immobile while all the Viet Minh have to do is go around them and not worry about it. And also, the Americans, an unfortunate trait that still goes on I think, we overestimate the importance of air power. And we thought, you know, air power is going to do this and going to do that. Well, it didn't. And it never has. It never will as far as I'm concerned. Anyway, this was another great fallacy and yet, once the battle was joined there, we did all we could as far as sending in stuff. The French kept requesting different things. Part of the problem was that at the beginning they were so confident that they didn't foresee the problem. The simple question of resupplying this base by air was a terrific strain. And they should have

had twice as many aircraft for what they wanted to do, but they didn't. At one point as you know, there was a question of Admiral Radford setting up contingency plans for an air strike. And there was great talk and contingency plans about using nuclear weapons, which as far as I was concerned would have been a great disaster, as you would have probably wiped out the French along with the Vietnamese. And politically as far as the Far East goes, it would be the second use of a nuclear weapon, by Americans against Asians. But Dienbienphu was the type of place where, it's easy to say now, but you didn't have to be a military genius to see the writing on the wall. And a lot of the troops, the good experienced officers that were there said, "You know this is going to be a real fight." You could tell that they weren't sure that it was going to come out right. They ended up, you know everything had to be supplied by parachute and that doesn't work very well.

Q: You were there at the fall of Dienbienphu in Indochina. How did this impact on the Embassy? What was the sort of feeling at that time?

SIMPSON: Let me correct one thing, I was on home leave when Dienbienphu actually fell on May 7th, I was in San Francisco as a matter of fact.

Q: But when you returned...

SIMPSON: When I returned?

Q: When did you return?

SIMPSON: I returned I think it was July and it was a big difference, there was a big difference in atmosphere. There was heightened tension between the French and the Americans. They'd lost, they were trying to readjust to this new situation. They knew they'd lost Indochina. A lot of them blamed it on us. That we could have brought in more supplies or done something, mainly supplied an air strike. And there was great confusion among the Vietnamese and there was a sudden swing of many among influential Vietnamese, who had been with the French, who could tell what was going on. Towards the American who were the new boys on the block. And so this was very difficult for the embassy to handle and of course this was a period where we were putting Ngo-Dinh-Diem into the prime minister's office. Ed Lansdale, you know, the CIA team, were there putting him in place and I worked for, with them, and worked as a press advisor for Diem for a short time. And it was a weird period, this king-making business. You know Americans are not very used to it.

Q: Again, not looking at it from the prospective of today, but at that time, what was your impression of Lansdale, the CIA operation, what were you doing with them?

SIMPSON: Well, what we were doing was, from the beginning, you see Lansdale had been coming out there, checking with facilities and newspapers and all that before the installation of Diem. He'd come out and he'd work with the French and he'd have a lot of

liaison with French intelligence, and then when this Diem thing came up, his team came in and set-up their operation, their office. I must say that a lot of people poor mouthed Ed Lansdale and what he did. But I think you've got to take into account that at moments of crisis there are certain men who can do certain things. Whether you approve or disapprove well that's another thing. And Ed was one of these people who just built loyalty among those who worked for him and he also had this quiet American routine where they all say, well the ugly American.

Q: Lansdale was considered...there's a book by Lederer called "The Ugly American." Burnett or something...

SIMPSON: And I think that people misread Lansdale a lot. Where they thought 100% this idea that all you had to do was go play some guitar and be nice to the local people and everything would be fine. Whereas Lansdale was not that naive. His point was that you're not going to get very far unless... It's not that old hearts and minds thing, but you've got to have some base in the villages. Not just in the cities. Our role, USIS, as far as the Lansdale team at that time, the Saigon military mission, we were on the ground, we knew the editors, Vietnamese, French, whatever, we knew the newspapers, we had the basic information, we'd sat in and worked with the French on psychological warfare. So therefore we were sort of adjunct, helping when they needed help. And as I say, George Hellyer, who was PAO when Lansdale came in. Hellyer had been with Wingate in Burma.

Q: Ord Wingate.

SIMPSON: Yeah. Hellyer was an ex, was an ex-tea planter and he spoke perfect French. And he and Lansdale hit it off very well. And so they worked together very closely. And one of the first things when Diem arrived--and they both came back from their first meeting with Diem--and they sent me over immediately to talk to Diem about the problems of speaking to the international press, because he was basically naive as far as that sort of thing went. So many of the people were out to get him. You know, the axes were out. And if he walked into a press conference cold without realizing how important it was, he could have said things that could undermine his whole government from the very beginning. So we spent quite a bit of time working with the Vietnamese and the Agence Vietnam Press and the radio and all this sort of thing.

Q: Well tell me about one, your impression of Diem and also how he took it because at least later on Diem had the reputation of either giving a long monologue or just sitting there like a Buddha and hearing things and apparently nothing connected. This is early Diem. Again your impression and how did he work towards your practical advice that you were sent to give him?

SIMPSON: Well I'll never forget, it was a very strange situation. I went into the palace, was ushered in, the palace was sort of a mess because all the French advisors and officers had disappeared and Diem was being protected by a catholic militia from up in the north

and they all had muddy boots and the marble was all...it was usually so brilliantly polished and the rugs had been removed. And there were rifles stacked in the corner, expecting trouble from all sides. And I was ushered in, told to wait, and suddenly a man came in without being announced, all by himself and it was Diem and he had, he was chubby you know, lacquered hair somewhat long sort of like an American Indian appearance. And we shook hands and we sat down and started talking French and I explained who I was and why I was there and the importance of the international press. And that what he says, at anytime would be in the New York Times, the London Times, and you know, the Figaro the next day. I knew that he was aware of this but that there're so many pitfalls, on and on, and that we were willing to help. And he sat there chain smoking cigarettes with his head sort of down, you know, listening to this, and I finally paused and waited and he looked at me and started to talk. He gave me a lecture about the evils of communism, what he was going to do for the people in Vietnam, etc., etc. To the point where I began to wonder if he didn't realize that I wasn't a journalist out to get a story. That I was there to help him in any assistance he needed as an official. And after 20 minutes of this, I noticed some of his assistants pacing back and forth and waiting and they dared not come and break it up. And finally he stopped and the interview ended. And he went off with the cigarette smoke trailing behind him. This was an early symptom that he developed later. Number one that he didn't listen and he tended to lecture. He tended to lecture like a professor to important people who were not Catholics, the Buddhists and Cao Dai, all those sects, as if they were little children. And this went over like a lead balloon. I think at the very beginning he was a sincere enough man. But his brother you could see was already moving in, hanging on the edges of everything.

Q: This was his brother who was later assassinated.

SIMPSON: That's right.

Q: Was Madame Nhu...

SIMPSON: She was there but an unknown quantity. She was charming, at least visually, and she was fluttering around, flirting with all the French and American officers. The first cocktail party in the palace, she was there in her tight ai-dao. But she hadn't come forward as a power at least as far as we knew.

Q: Well did you have anymore contact with Diem or...?

SIMPSON: No it sort of...Well of course there was the Binh Xuyen revolt that took place shortly after he was in...

Q: The what?

SIMPSON: This was a revolt of the sects, the religious military sects. The Binh Xuyen were leading the revolt. They were the river pirates whom the French had used to fight the Viet Minh. Who had supplied the French with a lot of intelligence information. And that

was a very strange situation. Because Diem was our man in Saigon, we were trying to secure him in place. And the French intelligence people--who were run by a Corsican who was a very tough character--decided that despite the agreements between Paris and Washington, despite the handshakes with the French high ranking military and the Americans, that they were going to supply the Binh Xuyen and the Cao Dai and all their old intelligence contacts with the arms and equipment to screw up the American plan to put Diem in place. And this was a very hairy situation because you know there were assassinations, there was fighting in the streets, they shelled the palace, there was a counter attack. And at one point... I don't know if you want me to go into detail on this or not.

Q: Well, I'm really interested in how we saw it at the time and what you were doing?

SIMPSON: Well, we saw this as possibly the end of any hope in Vietnam. Because if this revolt had succeeded it would have been the splintering of the South. And under pressure, despite the agreement, it divided temporarily the country in two. With the success of any revolt in the South, it would have meant splintering, the whole chance of having any viable government down there. And so we were doing our best to try to discourage any of these sects. Lansdale was very active in this. It's all on record that money played a big part in persuading certain units and leaders of these sects to come over to the government and not take part in things and yet a number did fight. Diem had a very difficult 24 hours there where it was a question of one or two parachute battalions...whether they would stay loyal to the government. Fortunately they did and they fought well without any advisors. Without any French or American help. But one little side light on this--in the past we were always getting these calls from these mysterious little men in white suits who wanted to talk to you about something important and one of these turned out to be the political advisor to the Binh Xuyen who knew me and he knew I'd been there since 1952 and I'd been with the French quite a bit. So he asked me to come to General Bay Vien's headquarters which was across the river, the Arroyo Chinois, and to talk. What it came down to, General Bay Vien was the river pirate chief and here again he had his own private zoo with its boa constrictor and a tiger and the rumor was that when his officers went bad he would feed them to the tiger. And so I went over, we drove over, myself and Bob Gildea who was Assistant press officer, and we went through these road blocks. There'd been a sort of temporary truce between both sides, we drove down into the headquarters with a big tall aerial, radio aerials there, and we walked in and sat down and started talking and I was looking toward the door where obviously this aerial was at the end of that building. And as I watched this door, out comes this French captain with some papers and he's making marks and he looks up and sees me sitting there and he swings around quick and slams the door and disappears. And a little bit later, in charges this French dispatcher rider. Jumps off his motorcycle, rushes into that back room with the radio. And so I came out and said to Gildea, the French are running this whole operation. He said I saw, there've been 2 dispatch riders since I've been parked out here so we went back to the Embassy. I won't go into details as to who, what, when, where. So I went back to the Embassy and reported what had happened and created quite a flap. The Embassy checked with the highest French source and were told that those were members of the

Good Offices mission working with the Binh Xuyen to stop the fighting. Well that just doesn't wash as far as I'm concerned because these officers were obviously in a tactical situation and not working to stop the fighting. They were right there in the Binh Xuyen headquarters. But that just shows you the differences in attitudes and reporting. But anyway the revolt was crushed and Diem became Prime Minister for good, and after that, not too long after that, I left Saigon. He gave me an autographed picture when I left in August. So that was the end of that period.

Q: Before we move on to Nigeria, would you talk about the fall of Hanoi and that whole business and also the move, I mean the whole evacuation of the northern Vietnamese down south.

SIMPSON: Shortly after Dienbienphu, when I returned, I was ordered to go up to Hanoi and start preparations for evacuation of the USIS staff. And to find out how many dependents would be involved and all that sort of thing. The consulate was undergoing the same thing as was the American aid mission up there. And here again you have the problem where some of the staff wanted to take an extended family down south. On one extreme you had an old man who was a cleaner of the building who had timidly suggested that he and his wife might be included in a flight to the south and even offered a gift that cost him money to the American in charge which was sort of heart rending. The other extreme was a sharp operator who spoke both English and French who had several mistresses whom he tried to list as cousins or nieces or whatever. Needless to say, he managed to fly down on his own steam. And I made sure that this cleaner got out too. It was just a question of cleaning everything up, and getting ready to go. At the same time I was told to stay there and to cover the arrival of Giap's divisions in Hanoi. There were a whole group of newspapermen who had come from all over and were staying in the Metropole hotel to cover the big day. It was Oct. '54 and it was a rainy day and it was a strange thing because it was a great victorious parade for the Viet Minh but because they were all wearing sneakers there was a sort of shush-shush-shush sound. It was one of those silent victory marches. It was very impressive and it was interesting because the French withdrew street by street as the Viet Minh marched in. And as the Viet Minh marched in all the windows would open and out would come all these red flags, yellow starred red flags that had been under preparation for weeks behind closed doors. So I was there taking photos with a velleflex and I must say I got some pretty good photos which USIA used quite a bit, I put some in my book on Dien Bien Phu that's coming out this year. And I was supposedly--for the purpose it wasn't a question of cover so I wouldn't have any problems--but I was supposedly a Polish press officer and the only problem there was the truce commission also had some Poles on it so I had to stay clear of the Poles, not speaking the language at all. And finally, John Mecklin of Time-Life, who later joined USIA and served in Saigon years later, tipped me off. The French had passed the word that the Viet Minh military police were looking for an American official posing as a journalist. And so it was time for me to leave. But I might mention during that period I shared a jeep with Lou Conein, who was Lansdale's man in North Vietnam, and Lou Conein, quite a character, he was a Colonel, quite a colorful character, he was known by various names-Black Luigi, 3 Finger Lou. He'd been in Vietnam before the Franco-

Vietnam war, he'd been with OSS, he'd been parachuted into north Vietnam, he had saved a lot of prisoners. He'd received a Legion of Honor from the French for saving their men in prison camps. And he was later to surface during the Diem assassination as Cabot Lodge's liaison man with the generals of Saigon. This is much later. But in any case, I left Hanoi that evening in a truck of Senegalese troops for Haiphong where this big refugee movement was being set up. The French at first thought that they could handle the refugees but they just didn't have enough ships so the American Navy had come in and the American flagship was lying off shore, Admiral Sabin was in charge. We were preparing to sail all these refugees south. Most were Catholics from the Catholic delta regions and they were moving along with their priest, with their militia, etc., etc., to the south. And being Diem was a Catholic, you had the situation where it wasn't going to do him any harm to have that many voters from the same religion in the south. And Lansdale and his people were very much involved in this moving people. And it was a very difficult job. It was done well but a tragedy because these people had been living in these villages for hundreds of years and they had to leave their ancestors graves behind and even if they were Catholics there was still that sort of thing. I traveled down from Haiphong on the flag ship to Saigon. And one little vignette, in Saigon, when we pulled in, it was a hot sunny, very hot day and we pulled in and all these refugees had put on a little weight because they'd been well fed by the Navy on the way down but a lot of them were sick and a lot of them had different diseases and they needed care. So as we pulled in there where all these trucks were drawn up to take them to refugee camps and I noted that at the end of the gang plank there's this little gathering of American women. I looked closer and sure enough it was the American Women's Club of Saigon and they were there to greet the refugees. And I must say, I don't want to appear anti-women's club but it wasn't their place to be there in that squalor and in that situation. Here they were in their bright summer dresses, some of them with hats on in the old diplomatic mode. I won't say some had gloves on though I wouldn't doubt it and they were there to hand out a hunk of plastic wrapped American cheese that had been donated by an American cheese company. A hunk of American cheese and some bananas to each refugee as they came down off the gangplank. And of course I looked real hard and saw that one of our best photographers had been mustered to shoot them handing these things to the refugees. And I was furious about it but couldn't do much to stop it as it was under way. But the sidelight on that was that a couple days later word came from the refugee camp that all the refugees were complaining about the American soap because no matter how hard they scrubbed they wouldn't get much lather--it was the American cheese. So when they found out it was cheese they sold it on the black market to street vendors who in turn sold it to the servants of the American diplomatic community and for months thereafter, your hors d'oeuvres at cocktail parties were melted American cheese.

Q: Shall we move on to your next assignment then or if there's anything else. I'm talking about your personal experiences, let's get them, I'd rather get them now and we may have to do this next year.

SIMPSON: Well I think just in general on the war, the Franco-Vietnam war, it had quite an impression on me being that I had been out on the field so much. In fact one of the last

battles of the war, after I had returned, I was at a place called Huny Yen and this Viet Minh Regional battalion attacked what they thought was a Vietnamese National Army unit. And they thought it was easy pickings or whatever and it turned out to be a French army unit that was dug in. And I arrived the morning after the night attack and they had just slaughtered them. The attackers had been slaughtered as they came on and even the French who were there, they were telling themselves--why did this happen because the war was almost over and these were peasants, regional peasants, who'd come on bravely in the face of impossible fire. And it just became a symbol of the whole war, really, because I'd seen it in different situations. I'd seen the Moroccans take casualties and the Algerians and I'd seen the Senegalese, and I'd seen the Viet Minh and the Cambodians and the Foreign Legion. And it became the sort of thing where I'd leave the field, I'd go back to Saigon, take up my job as a press officer at the embassy and find a certain unreality at the conference tables in Saigon or at the social events. That the war, that Saigon was really untouched by the war and that what they were talking about was a lot of myth. What I had seen and come back and reported on was accepted up to a point, I think. But let's face it, I was a young officer, I was inexperienced, I was not a military man and a lot of it was they were buying what they wanted to hear from certain sources. They were accepting what they wanted to hear, a human tendency. And when I'd come in and say look the French aren't doing this or they are doing this contrary to what they told us. Or that the Vietnamese light battalions were disasters, they're not working, this battalion's been ambushed, that battalion's been decimated. I'd come in and say the French parachutists are the only people who are doing anything worth while and the use of French armor is usually a joke...little things like that. The reason I'm bringing this up now is that when I left Saigon in '55 I'd had it. I was burned out...so much so that I quit the Foreign Service. I resigned and we left Saigon, sailed out of the harbor and went to Mallorca to live for six months. I met my wife in Saigon on the terrace of the Continental Hotel. She was a secretary working for MSA and we, it's one of those things where the courting went on for some while. Then I went back to the states on home leave and I finally sent her a telegram from Boulder Creek, California saying will you marry me and answer c/o Johnny's cash store, Boulder Creek California. And she finally flew in and we were married in Las Vegas which is her hometown, and then we went back together, I mean we went back to Saigon together. But when I did resign in '55 the idea was to write the great novel on Saigon. And we went to Mallorca. We figured we had enough to spend a year there and shortly thereafter I was hit with an IRS bill for a substantial sum. Because in those days there was some confusion about paying income tax on your hardship allowance. I ended up owing the government a lot of money on that hardship allowance. That shortened our stay in Mallorca to 6 months. The other blow was that I went down to Palma and found a Newsweek review of Graham Greene's "Quiet American" and many Americans in that setting were what I was working with, you see, in my novel. So we went back to the States from Mallorca and I went on to California to Sausalito and went to work on the San Francisco Chronicle. Writing and illustrating for them but that only lasted a short time. It was an ideal job...48 hours in 4 days and we had Friday, Saturday and Sunday off. It was a weekend sheet that you did but the whole thing was that, like all foreign--ex-Foreign Service, whatever, after a certain amount of time I'd ride across the Golden Gate bridge and say, "Isn't this pretty, but what a bore." You know the old

commuter bus and all this. I think we were sitting there finishing off some French after-dinner drinks, we're sitting there and I say listen, I've been wanting to talk about something and my wife says you want to go back in the agency and I said how'd you know and she said, oh I know you. Fortunately for me I was given the Distinguished Service Award before I left and on the note accepting my resignation, Theodore Streibert the director of USIA at the time had written, "come back to us once you get this year out of your system, we'll take you on at anytime." So I had that as ammunition. And I called George Hellyer who was then back in Washington in charge of Far East operations. And he said look, it's not going to be easy because USIA is not going to like someone who jumps out and then jumps back in. Particularly since I'd gone from FSS 13 to 8 in a short time. And one of the reasons I had quit was that I had been promised another promotion and that didn't come through and I had turned down a job with Time because of the promise. But in any case, George managed it and brought me back in and I was given the choice of Kathmandu, Nepal, or Lagos, Nigeria. And I looked at the post reports which I shouldn't have done because anybody knows that post reports don't necessarily tell the truth.

Q: For the record, these are reports that are written supposedly to tell you what a post is like but often they're also written to help explain why extra money should be paid to people going to them so that there's a built in bias to make it look more difficult than it is.

SIMPSON: Well the post report on Kathmandu mentioned that you should bring Coleman lanterns and rat traps and as we had a new born child that didn't look too good. And the post report on Nigeria went to great lengths to talk about the Yacht Club and the Island Club and this, that, and the other thing. So anyway we ended up going to Nigeria.

Q: You were there from '56-'59. What were you doing in Nigeria?

SIMPSON: Well I was the Information Officer, there was the PAO, the Information Officer and the Cultural Officer and at that time Nigeria was still a British colony so it was a Consulate General in Lagos, and a lot of our work was just seeing that official American press releases and speeches and visitors were exposed to the Nigerian media and met Nigerian leaders in various fields. And we also produced a monthly magazine that was aimed mostly at students on education and culture and things like that. We contributed to what was known as the African newsreel which meant that each post in Africa was tasked to contribute footage on specific subjects that was produced in Washington and sent back to different African posts. And I directed a couple of features on that and traveled a lot. And Nigeria was a difficult country because you could see once again that things were not working out as well as they might. The Muslim north was one thing and you had the southerners, the Yoruba and Ibo, none of them really got along very well. And the army was a big problem because most of the combat troops were Muslims from the north and the officers were Yoruba or Ibo, much better educated and this was the beginning. You could see what might happen when independence came.

Q: In the first place you came with obviously considerable baggage coming from Vietnam which was a colonial country going down the tubes. I mean how did that...were you sort of looking at things ala Vietnam in a way to begin with to see ...

SIMPSON: I guess I was, because I'll tell you one thing, we had very grave doubts whether we'd done the right thing in coming back to the government when we got there because of the living. We'd moved 6 times within a one year period. The housing just wasn't available and we occupied these little government flats and had to move out and the heat was very rough. And having a baby was another thing. And there were, almost all the officers at the Consulate were bachelors, so my wife was on her own more or less. But one thing that I immediately noticed when I got there was that I made a lot of good contacts with the British, with the police, with the Army. And it became obvious that if anything was going to hold Nigeria together when independence came, it would be the Army. Not only because it had the power and the strength but also because it had a cohesiveness that didn't exist among the various tribes. At least these people were serving together and if that could be strengthened then that would be something to build on and we made a great effort. This was probably a fall-out of the Vietnamese experience, doing some films on the army in coordination with the British and the Nigerians and showing these films. Not only to the army but to the general public: the fact that Yorubas, Ibos and Hausas could serve together, that sort of thing. And I think a certain cynicism was there too, watching the British prepare to depart, hating every minute of the thought, and hanging on to some of the old colonial traditions that we at the time, not only thought antiquated but, you know, so outdated.

Q: What were some of these things?

SIMPSON: Well there were things like the governor's house, the garden, the parties and all that where certain things were expected and women were suppose to dress in a certain way and you're suppose to arrive well before the time. Of course the Americans, well some of them, rebelled against this sort of thing. Some had a more tolerant attitude, you know, the sun sets on the empire and all that rot and why create a problem and a lot of the British, who could see more of the future, who could see Africa, well it didn't bother them too much and they didn't really take part. But there were some really hard back old colonial types who just didn't want to admit that it was all over.

Q: When you went out in '56 was it an accepted thing that Nigeria was going to be independent that time as far as the British were concerned. Was there a sort of a time table?

SIMPSON: Yes there was but I can't remember what it was exactly.

Q: It was in the cards, did we have a Consul General there at that time? Do you remember who it was? What was sort of the attitude of, before you went out whatever briefing you had there. I mean were we looking upon this as, boy this is going to be fun, boy we're going to be in a sort of new nation and we're an ex-colonial group coming out

there or was this: God we're a people sort of absorbed in a colonial atmosphere and whites getting certain perks.

SIMPSON: I think there was a little of that when we first got there, some of the officers had a strange attitude, a sort of paternal attitude towards the Nigerians and a great sort of, you wouldn't call it an inferiority approach, but the British impressed them very much. Their uniforms and being king of the hill and some Americans, very few, but some, almost became as if they were British themselves. But that began to change after a short period of time and I think a new African specialist group was developing and coming out there and so you had people coming in who realized that a big change was taking place in Africa and we had better be in on the roller coaster as it got started. And that handled right, and I think a lot of these people were very naive, but they thought innocently at the time that Nigeria would be one of the great leaders of Africa, as a symbol of what could be done by Africans.

Q: But what about contact with the Nigerians themselves how did this work?

SIMPSON: It was fairly easy. Well particularly if you were working in information because you had the...automatically you immediately had the press contacts, a local Nigerian media. Then the social side, for instance there was still a British club in Ikoyi, it was called the Ikoyi Club and when I first got there you'd never see a black face. It was the usual thing, you know the parasols out on the lawn, and golf, and pints of bitter, all that sort of thing and the men in the bar, the women at tea. The Island Club was a Nigerian club where any non-Nigerian would have to submit his name and have Nigerian sponsors and all that. These were Nigerian lawyers and officers and people in business and that sort of thing. And if you were voted down, or voted against, you were white-balled not black-balled. This was a raucous, fun club because the lunches started at 12 and table after table were loaded with chilled Beck's beer in the large bottles and curry and palm nut stew. This luncheon would go on with all this chatter and discussions and there were a lot of good contacts made with Nigerians there because it was their ground. And of course there was a lot of back and forth between different American and Nigerian homes.

Q: At that point, there wasn't as there were in some other places where the colonial power...I'm thinking of some of the francophones and some of the British colonies, you get the feeling that until the last minute, it was sort of a white only thing in which only the Americans were included. I mean you were able without a problem to get into the Nigerian...

SIMPSON: There was no real problem and even the British had a wide spread of Nigerian contacts. Granted most of them were officials, chiefs and Emirs and things like that or officers that worked within the British civil service.

Q: Were we playing any kind of a role other than just being there. Is their gate ready, I mean were people asking how did you do this or how did you do that, or was it a British system such that they automatically accepting that.

SIMPSON: I think it certainly didn't come close to anything like Indochina. It was, I think the Nigerians knew what the Americans were going to, or at least they thought we were going to, play a large part in the new Africa and they hoped that they would play a positive role as far as supplying funds and banking setups, new openings in the world market. But the British in Nigeria in particular had already set up a strata of people who were well educated, who knew their way around, had international contacts. And from our side working information, we were helping for instance, I was giving lectures on American journalism that I found very popular because this was a new world to a lot of these people. And it was the British press influence there was very strong and a lot of it was tabloid.

Q: You were saying that the British press influence was mainly tabloid. I mean the British press as a whole even today is not impressive.

SIMPSON: No, and therefore a lot of Nigerians, particularly the younger ones starting in the media also knew and saw that they were going to have a lot of new opportunities and they wanted to broaden their knowledge outside the British era. To absorb and see what things were going on in the States whether it be radio or whatever. So there was always an open door as far as we were concerned and we had a lot of people, and of course we sent a lot of people to the States too, you know on study grants and things like that. That was a very popular program there.

Q: Did you see, was there a venality in what was beginning to be the Nigerian press or was it in other words did you have to sort of buy your way into favorable treatment or...?

SIMPSON: It wasn't too bad, I think that the British being still there there was enough control of law and police alertness. I'm sure it was going on but we didn't notice it that much. Lagos has always been, you know, you have your Lagos Mafia there, certain people control several businesses plus the newspaper plus the shipping company and all this sort of thing. And usually with a title of chief or whatever. But we didn't get involved, we didn't get into that too much. We were aware but we didn't...

Q: Was there much interest in the press to what was happening in the United States? I mean this was still a difficult time. I mean we had Little Rock and the integration problems were really beginning to become apparent in the United States at that time.

SIMPSON: Yeah, well I think that there was a lot of interest and they were trying to understand, it was very difficult for them to understand this. And therefore we made a special effort. We brought a lot of people over, no, not a lot, but we brought people over to try to talk of their own personal experiences, teachers, black leaders, sports figures.

We'd discuss the racial problem in the United States and try to explain it so that these people would have a better idea what it was.

But there was that whole new thing of American officials flying into African countries that hadn't existed before. And showing a great deal of interest. And insisting that they be introduced to Africans and not just the usual colonial governor-general and his entourage.

Q: What about Nkrumah who was just getting cranked up on what had been the Gold Coast and became Ghana. And was taking what we would consider a left-ward not left-ward but basically an anti-American course. Were you feeling any of that and was there concern about that?

SIMPSON: Ghana was a sort of a model at that time. Everybody was talking about how...well when we wanted to get out of Lagos a little and stay in a decent hotel we'd drive up to Accra. I forget the name of the hotel, we'd stay in one of the hotels there and we'd have conferences and talk a lot with the people at the Embassy. I think a lot of people were saying that this was the new Africa. This was the way it was going to be. It was going to teach a lot of lessons. At that time things hadn't turned sour yet. And excuses, anytime things weren't quite kosher, then excuses were made...like you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs and all this sort of thing. It was seen as sort of a model for Nigeria in the future at that time.

Q: Were there any other events that we might talk about in Nigeria before we move on?

SIMPSON: We did this one film on the Nigerian army that I told you about and we traveled to the north and down. Myself and a Nigerian cameraman. And we traveled down through the center and to the south too. And that was interesting because it not only showed me the army but the strength of tribalism. And my contacts with the Nigerian colonial police also showed me the realities of juju and witchcraft and how important it is in that culture. This is something, this is interesting, because the new breed of American Foreign Service types coming out were all for Africa. Africa could do no wrong and this was going to be a great new experiment. They didn't want to hear about the dark side you see, and as far as I was concerned they were doing the Africans a disservice when they acted like that. Because they were denying reality and as I say, juju doesn't have to be a negative thing but it has to be understood you know, if you're going to understand people. And a lot of incidences, not a lot, but simple things; like a cook that suddenly went to pieces and we finally found out that there was a bee following him everywhere he went, and this was because he thought a spell had been put out by so-and-so. And he wouldn't ride his bike anymore as he was sure that this bee was waiting for him outside and you know little things like that. And a friend of mine who was driving, one of our officers, was driving cross-country quite a ways and I told him to check in with me. Because there were a lot of road accidents with trucks driving like crazy down the middle of those roads, check in with me before the evening. And he went through an area known for a lot of ritual murders. They'd found 50 bodies without heads. And so he calls in real late that night and he was practically out of breath and I ask him what's the matter. And he relates

this story. He came to this place and there was this car parked. And his driver stopped driving and said that's a ghost car. He told him don't be silly. All right just go, let's just go to where we're going. So they start out and he puts on the brake again and across the road there was a torso and intestines and what not, sort of spread across like that, an arm or whatever. And so I said what did you do then? And he said, oh I just got behind the wheel myself and drove like hell, drove out of there and I said, well, you did the right thing. And he said, what do you think? I said, who knows, but it sounds to me like a warning, like they don't want someone in the area or something like that. It certainly wasn't an auto accident. And he was one of the officers who criticized me, like oh you're being too hard. He didn't want to believe that this sort of thing went on.

Q: This is always a problem and all of us have gone through this, the mind set of trying to think the best about a country and basically we're suppose to be disinterested observers and there are things you'd rather not know about, I mean, talk about or you discount when they're very important. I came out of Yugoslavia, was 5 years there and we tended to discount the nationalities problem. Right now it's become a world problem. So we move to your next assignment which is basically France where you served from '59 to '64, what were you doing there?

SIMPSON: I was the Regional Public Affairs Officer for USIA working out of the American Consulate General in Marseille, that gave us responsibility for the public affairs programs, the information programs and the cultural programs throughout the whole area of Provence from the Italian border to Toulouse and up into the mountains and some of the other provinces including Toulon and Marseille and Montpellier and some of the other cities. The Consulate General was a fairly small operation but even in those early days it had its DEA contingent, I don't think it was called DEA then, the narcotics agency or whatever.

Q: Particularly because Marseille and the Corsican Mafia and that whole business.

SIMPSON: And it was quite a change from Nigeria, because very soon after I got there I was assigned as a member of the official US delegation to the Cannes festival. Which meant I would go over there and be sort of the official working staff for the delegation. Because the delegation was a political appointee who the White House would come up with, someone at the last moment who sometimes knew nothing in particular about films, so it was sort of a pay-off deal. But I'll tell you a strange thing happened on my first assignment to this job, I was not informed by either the Embassy in Paris nor by the Motion Picture Export Association that there was a big freeze in relations between the French government and the Motion Picture Export Association and that the MPEA had blocked all the American films that they controlled, that were going in. Because of this dispute I was thrown into this as a sacrificial lamb. I arrived at the Carlton hotel in Cannes where we were housed courtesy of the French government, with a station wagon full of duty-free liquor for a cocktail party with the intention of making contact immediately with the Motion Picture Export Association representative in Cannes...who was not available. He was part of the freeze out on this thing and he was playing hard to

get up in Paris and wasn't going to come down until later in the game. And so innocently, because everybody else was doing something, the Russians, and the Mexicans and the Italians and everybody. I decided to throw a small cocktail party in my room including Van Johnson, who had been invited there, and Tina Louise and a few other Americans and all the American pressmen; people from Variety and all that. Well the amusing thing was the night before I had gone to a film, sat in the official delegation seat and come out of the showing and I'd seen Van Johnson standing on the curb. And I thought, well here's another American and I thought I'd go over and introduce myself and I walked up and I said: Mr. Johnson my name is Simpson, Howard Simpson and I'm one of the official American delegates. He turned to me and said "so what?" Well the reason for his attitude was that he had been invited by the French, and he too was unaware of the freeze that was going on. He had arrived and there'd been no ticket waiting for him and he'd been forced to buy his way into the showing and he'd been totally ignored, hadn't been invited to anything so the two of us went back to the Carlton terrace and had a drink together and discussed our joint misfortune and that's where this idea for this little cocktail party started. And in the middle of this cocktail party up in my room, there was this knock on the door and somebody came in and said there was somebody who wanted to see me. So I went out and it was a representative of the Motion Picture Association of America, Fred Gronich, who later turned out to be a close friend of mine, but he was furious because this is not in the tactical operation that was going on. The Americans were not to give any parties or to show that they were actively involved in the festival. And so it was amusing, we didn't have a clash but he said you shouldn't have done this and I'll explain everything to you tomorrow. And so that was my initiation to the Cannes festival but I ended up going to 6 of them. And believe it or not the last time I was in Paris and the offer came up again and I turned it over to my younger assistant because your liver and the tension and everything else that builds up...the 6th fleet comes in. Every time there's a festival you can be assured that the flagship and a couple of carriers are going to arrive, and your phone will start ringing, the admiral's aide will be asking for tickets, you know all this other sort of thing. But that was just a sidelight of it.

Q: Was this De Gaulle's France at that time?

SIMPSON: No, not quite. I'm not sure I'll have to check the date on that.

Q: Well it'll have to be because '59, De Gaulle was...

SIMPSON: I'm just trying to put it in context with the Algerian war. Yes it was, yes it was. And I'm trying to remember when he pulled France out of NATO, do you remember?

Q: It was during Lyndon Johnson, it might have been a little later.

SIMPSON: But, the whole Marseille, this was the beginning of a long time relationship with Marseille, not only because of future assignments but it came as sort of a favorite spot of mine, of ours. In fact we're going over there in 3 weeks time. And it's a unique

city, a lot of people will bypass it because you know it's a tough sort of dirty port town. It's got a lot of guts and a lot of charm.

Q: It reminds me I was Consul General in Naples and it's the same.

SIMPSON: That's right, a lot of people don't appreciate it.

Q: How did you find that area of the French press dealing with them we were getting involved slowly into Vietnam at that time, just getting the American story to the French.

SIMPSON: That was very difficult because number one the French, particularly the regional press in cities like Marseille, don't have that much space to play with. And as far as international news or policy things like that, very little even of their own things, they kept to a minimum. So it wasn't a question much of placement, it was more a question of talking to people and making sure they were exposed to certain visitors if they were interesting and had a certain authority. There was a, you had to be very careful if you didn't realize that you were always considered an official, some people tend to relax and talk more freely with their friends in the media. Only to see it appear the next day as an official statement or something. Marseille being one of the main cities of France, you had the usual visits of the ambassador which would call for a whole new setup and different appointments. And as I say, part of the public relations responsibilities there would be handling the 6th fleet relations with the local press and getting them to visit the ships and all that sort of thing. And, in fact, the local newsmen were very helpful on a number of occasions because at one point, I didn't find out from the Embassy but I found out from a newsman who called me from Nice. He said, Simpson, I don't think you're aware of what's about to happen here. And I said what's that, and this was in August and that's a bad month in France or anywhere else.

Q: Oh yes, everything shuts down.

SIMPSON: You know the beaches are full and I said what's that and he said, from what I hear your 6th fleet Admiral is planning to land marines on the beach at Nice in August as a sign of American readiness for America Day. I knew we had been working on this America Day which was a fairly simple sort of cultural thing but somewhere along the line, after a few drinks I guess, somebody had agreed, or had given the Admiral the idea that they agreed, that it'd be a great thing if the marines came ashore in full regalia on the pebbled beach of Nice as a sign of American readiness to defend Europe and all this sort of thing. You can just imagine, I blanched and immediately called Paris and called the attaché and said what the hell is going on? Well the Admiral wants to do this. I put down the phone and then called Chip Bohlen, who was ambassador at the time, and I got in touch with his office and passed the word of what was going on and I gave my arguments that #1 this was uncalled for in the context of this America Day and #2 it would be a disaster on that beach because the French authorities would have to take everybody off the beach and people had paid their money to come south for their vacations. So, anyway, the upshot of it was that Ambassador Bohlen agreed, the word was flashed to the flagship

canceling that. And as luck would have it 3 days later I would have to make an official call on the Admiral in Toulon. To say it was glacial would be an understatement because he wasn't very happy with the beach thing. He knew who was behind it. But as I say that was an example of a French pressman tipping me off to something I hadn't been told. It would have been a major disaster, I'd have been carrying the can on that if it had happened.

Q: I'll tell you because of time constraint, unless there's something we should cover here I'm going to do a little skipping around. Why don't we go back to Saigon you were recalled to Saigon '64-'65, which is a whole different world I suppose, how did that assignment come about and what were you doing?

SIMPSON: That takes us back to Cannes in a way. I was on the beach in front of the Carlton Hotel with George Stevens Jr. (director of USIA film programs), Arthur Schlesinger (historian) and Gore Vidal (writer), at about 10 in the morning and it was after a film had been shown the night before and we were discussing this film. Suddenly the beach boy that handles the beach and the chairs came down and waves to me and he says, they want you on the phone. So I pick up the phone in the beach hut and it was my wife calling from the hotel and she says you better get up here right away. I didn't know what that was, maybe one of the kids were sick or something. So I left and went to the hotel and she said there'd been a very strange message from Paris. I said what's that? She said I don't know but they want to talk to you and here's the number. The duty officer was calling from Paris so I got the duty officer on the line. I said what's the story? Well there's a classified message and you'd better get back to Marseille soon as you can to read it. I said I'm sure you can tell me what the story is. So anyway he's some young officer there and he didn't want to say anything so I called Marseille knowing that they would have a copy. I got someone I knew on the phone and I said, what's the story? And they said well it's about an assignment somewhere you've been before and he said it's classified. And I thought they sure as hell aren't sending a classified message about me going back to Lagos. So anyway we packed up and off to Marseille and there was this secret telegram from the agency from Carl Rowan, saying that (you say the agency you mean USIA) I was assigned as the Information Advisor to Prime Minister, General Nguyen Van Khanh and giving me 2 weeks to get to Saigon and specifying that I was to stop at Pearl Harbor for a major conference that was going on, on my way out. So this, as you can imagine, was a great turmoil because my wife was pregnant. And we had the 3 young girls already and she was pregnant and she'd have to stay behind while I went on ahead. It turned out that this was a great project that had been hatched in Washington. President Johnson had decided that the Vietnamese just couldn't cut it on their own and that therefore we had to send people. He said, send a brain trust in on different levels of skills and expertise to run, in so many words, to run the Vietnamese government for the Vietnamese. Even then on the face of it, it's ridiculous but that's what it was. And strangely enough I don't know how it happened, but USIA was the first to respond and I was the boy that was sent out there and arrived in Honolulu for this famous conference and here was Maxwell Taylor, Secretary Rusk, McCone of CIA. You know, the whole upper level there. I guess I was the lowest ranking man in the room. I sat there over these 2 days of conferences with

Barry Zorthian who was in charge of the JUSPAO operation in Saigon which was quite an enormous thing. But the idea was that this was a review and new planning and all this and we were really going to take over things there. And to me it was a revelation. I sat and listened to all these reports and these high level briefings and these secret reports. And I had this ominous feeling that we'd gotten no further than we had when I'd left. Even when I'd been there, the French, just because of their experience, had their feet more on the ground than what I was hearing in this conference. This sterilized, sound-proof, air-conditioned conference room full of young colonels, who had stainless steel pointers, were discussing Vietnam as if it was the moon. So anyway, I went on from there to take on this job in Saigon.

Q: What was the political situation when you got there? This would be in '64?

SIMPSON: It was very tenuous. There had been, before Diem had been assassinated, the generals had taken over, the military were running the country. Suddenly General Nguyen Khanh, who was a great manipulator and a behind the scenes operator, found himself or put himself in the catbird seat. And Khanh had a good war record as a young officer with the French, he'd gone through French military schools and all that. But he was a type of person who thrived on intrigue and playing different sides against the other. He was facing a big problem, the Buddhist were strong, he had to take care of them. The Catholics were strong, he had to butter them up. He was worried about the Sects...who still had the fragments of their original armies. The Viet Cong were getting stronger and we had this weird situation where although Cabot Lodge was still there he was getting ready to leave and Maxwell Taylor was coming out to take over along with Alexis Johnson as the two ambassadors. And Khanh had to walk lightly or try to walk lightly with the Americans because we were supplying everything, keeping him in power. At the same time he resented the Americans telling him what he had to do. It was a very strange situation. In fact, Cabot Lodge took me when I arrived...he took me over and introduced me to the Prime Minister in his armored checkered cab and we walked into the palace and we sat down. And Khanh came in...a chubby fellow in sharply creased military trousers and polished boots. And he went through this routine; how glad he was that I was there to help him on this important thing and all this. Lodge was preparing to return to politics and his mind was back in Washington, and suddenly the Prime Minister said well I want you to meet the man you'll be working with in my office. And the light was sort of in my eyes against the window there and I could see a Vietnamese walking in like that and as he came around the corner, he said, ah Simpson! And I looked at him and it turned out to be a fellow whom I had worked with on the French Psychological Warfare Board. Who had been in government jobs through every regime--managed to stay on top. And who I knew had worked with French intelligence. And here he was the right hand man in the press office of the Prime Minister! And so I was to work with him which was a great twist. But in the long run what it turned out was that Khanh had no more idea of using me for anything. He considered me a plant in his office to watch him and he quickly moved me as far away as possible into another building. And this whole idea of a brain trust to help the Vietnamese get their government moving fell apart completely. You know, people lost interest in it or something changed. And it just so happened that I was the only one

who arrived out there. So I was sort of stranded in this office trying to do a job. Succeeding on certain things, getting him to go out of the country. Lodge was pushing this quite a bit and I continued it. Until he almost got caught in a mortar barrage and he didn't speak to me for some time. And then gradually whatever effective curves I had went rapidly down and I became more involved in JUSPAO things and field trips and all that. And my Prime Minister counseling or advising just tailed off. And then there was one coup after another. And the man I was working with at one point was Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao who was famous for his participation or setting up of coups. And he became a very good friend of mine and he was a very funny type. He and I got along fine. We had adjoining offices and we went through these coups together. He always disappeared. I knew a coup was coming when he disappeared. And I did a lot of reporting via phone back to the embassy because I was in the Prime Minister's office surrounded by hostile tanks. And to cap off the story on Thao was that in '91 I think...no '90 Stan Karnow was back in Vietnam. (He wrote a very good book on Vietnam history.) So anyway he went back and he established without a doubt that Colonel Thao was a top, North Vietnamese agent operating inside South Vietnam. So much for our counterintelligence operation! When I went back to Vietnam in '91 I found his grave. Because the Vietnamese were claiming his body was moved north and then when I was up north, no no no we don't know where it is. And finally an ex-Officer in the Viet Cong came up to me and asked, do you want to see Thao's grave and I said yes, and he said he'd pick me up Sunday morning and he picked me up in his little car and took me out there. It was one of those strange things. Okay he was "the enemy" and yet he was a good friend at the time. And I wanted to see that grave because I wanted to confirm in my own mind that this was true and it's true enough he's in the Patriot's Cemetery with a big red star on his tomb.

Q: Well how was our embassy doing? I mean you were in the Prime Minister's office area and these coups were happening which was really one Prime Minister succeeding another wasn't it, and all generals, it was a revolving door. How did you find our embassy was reacting? Were they always trying to see, well this one might be better than the other. I mean were they able to deal with it, or was it just resignation or what were you thinking?

SIMPSON: Well it was disarray really. I don't know, I'm sure this may have happened in other countries but maybe not so often, and not under such serious conditions. Where the whole country is threatening to go down the drain. Because here the North Vietnamese were pouring in, you know, along the Ho Chi Minh trails. There were shipments of ammunition along the coast from the North, that sort of thing. And for instance Maxwell Taylor, you know he'd never been faced with anything like this before. I'm sure I can't speak for him, but I would imagine in his mind, as a military man, that these people were generals therefore you could expect a modicum of performance and logic and honesty from them. And when they started this coup, counter-coup, coup-ette, and all this, one after the other, where you couldn't tell what division was moving onto what town, who was on who's side. Whether the Rangers were with the Prime Minister or against him. Taylor just couldn't figure this out. And he had the famous, I can't put a date on it offhand, but he had this famous situation after one such coup he called in the young Turks

as they called them, a group of generals including the Air Force general (Ky) who was like a cowboy. And chewed them out like you would a sergeant and just gave them hell. Which was very bad news because I saw them come out of that office and they were white faced. A marine guard saluted them and they didn't even return his salute they were so upset, they just took off. And immediately thereafter Khanh tried to do all sorts of anti-American things and Ky was there with the same thing again. But it was just two cultures that didn't work together. And these generals, they had been, how could you put it, they had been spoiled in a way, it was a different life. Some of them hadn't been in the field for a long while and people were buying their way out of the army or into non-combat roles and making fortunes on the black market and there was a lot of corruption. And the sad thing is that some of the very good officers died fighting at the end.

But from my view point over there, one day I walked into my office and I saw a lot of tanks outside and I thought, good they're here to protect the government. Only when I walked into my office I thought, wait a minute, those turrets are pointed the wrong way, they're all facing the presidential palace. And I walked into my office and there are a bunch of Vietnamese Rangers. Those were real cowboys with dark glasses and tattoos on their arms. They'd just taken everything off my desk, thrown them on the floor and broken everything. They'd urinated in the corner of the room. The captain had his booted foot on the desk, he had a swagger stick. And there's this moment of silence and I didn't know how it was going to turn out, you could never tell with them. And I looked at the situation, I looked at the desk and automatically I said, "Oh merde!" He spoke enough French to realize what I said and he laughed and that broke the tension. And so he asked me what are you doing here, and when I told him that I was an advisor to the Prime Minister they thought that was the funniest thing they'd ever heard. They all started laughing, laughing. Then I asked him what are you doing here? We're here to protect the Prime Minister. Why? Because his office has been taken over by the communists. I said no, that's ridiculous. Oh yes, we've been told. Just about then an American Ranger officer walked in, tanned and fit. I said, "Do you realize what's going on here?" and "We were told to come into town because there's a communist revolt or something and we're suppose to protect the palace." I said, if you look closely you'll see these Rangers are getting ready to assault the palace with all these tanks out here. He thought about that for a while and he raised some people on the radio. And I said, I don't know about you but I'm leaving here because, just about then, Barry Zorthian was on the phone. I'd called him at the office. And General Ky had threatened to start bombing these coup forces, there's a certain time limit. So I told this American Ranger, look I'm leaving, I don't know what you want to do but it'd be silly to die here with a bunch of characters that are trying to overthrow the government. So I took off, and I saw him as I drove off, I saw him walking fast in the other direction. But that was the kind of thing that was going on at that time. Very weird.

Q: Did you work with Barry Zorthian that much?

SIMPSON: Yes.

Q: He became quite a well known name. How did he operate?

SIMPSON: Well Barry was a very unusual and he hadn't had experience in the Far East before, and he was suddenly put into this job. But he was a real pro as far as public information or whatever you want to call it. He had a gift of seeing a situation and realizing what the government's interests were and yet putting it in succinct enough phraseology that it would come across clear to whomever he was briefing. And he realized that the 5 o'clock follies, the briefings that went on downstairs everyday for the general press, were fine in their way but, in reality, those newsmen in the know didn't pay any attention to them. And so therefore he had special briefings, you know one on one or three or four regulars that he knew and all this sort of thing, depending on what the situation was. And we worked. I was tasked out of his office to work with the Vietnamese Information Service as liaison on certain projects. And time after time, Barry Zorthian and I would walk up and down these stairs in the Ministry of Information because every coup that came along you'd get a new Minister of Information and we'd go through this same routine about the polite chatter, the tea, and the table and a cigarette or whatever. And then talking about what we planned to do or what we hoped we could cooperate on. And you could see this veil of disinterest fall over their faces as we talked. And Barry would sit there trying to explain what should be done. But he fit that particular job and I think in general...okay, there were clashes, as there always are, between somebody like that and the press. In a situation like that but I think on the whole most of the pressmen and the professionals appreciated Zorthian. Because he gave it to them straight, what he could. And he didn't hesitate to let them go where they wanted to go. And he got a lot of flack from various generals and some of the ambassadors about, you know, why are you encouraging them to go to such and such a place; I mean two of them are there already and they're going to come back and give a briefing that shoots down whatever the Army wants to say.

Q: Well, what was your impression of the American press at that time? We're taking about the '64-'65 frame.

SIMPSON: Well it hadn't developed into the real press corps that it had later on. This was a period where people like Neil Sheehan and, well I can't think of the other names. There's a whole new breed of pressmen out there, there's still some of the old hangers-on from the French war that would come and go where they were trying to get. One of the problems we faced was that they were only interested in the American participation. Really most of them, not exactly hometowners but still: Is it true that the American Rangers were attached to such and such and as advisors were actually in the combat area. You know this sort of thing. And is it true that American Air Force pilots have done such and such? We hadn't really gotten into the war officially but they were well aware that we were close to it and they're following all this closely. And they had little interest unless there was a major defeat or major victory. As far as the Vietnamese national role in the fighting, I think they were doing a pretty good job of reporting and that's what made them so unpopular with the officials there.

You know Johnson was blowing his top. He was a great telephone practitioner and he'd be on the phone to the Embassy to Taylor and the others. On the little, the slightest things that would come up. Why can't you do this or why can't you do that? He didn't understand what was going on out there. And what it came down to, because of the wide open, you know, no censorship deal, that was unique to Vietnam at that time. We would fly them anywhere they wanted to go and fly them back again. I mean chopper them in and chopper them out. So that they were often on the scene of the action, they'd come back and they'd arrive in time for the 5 o'clock follies and here's some Army major briefing on the same battle from second-hand news that was all wrong. He'd be briefing on, reading off the official report he'd gotten through radio or something. "And such a such a unit was attacked and the Vietnamese fought bravely and so many dead Viet Cong were found on the ground," and somebody from the back would shout, excuse me major, excuse me major, but I just came from there and that's all bullshit. I was there, the Vietnamese lost so many people, the Viet Cong pulled out and they only left two dead behind. Blah, blah, blah, this sort of thing. So it was this sort of problem that went on constantly.

And some of the correspondents, the American press there, I must admit there were some funny instances. General Westmoreland was a very straight arrow, serious type, and he'd give these briefings occasionally. He'd come over and give these special briefings. And there was a correspondent, Joe Freid of the New York Daily News, and Joe was the old school, very perceptive, acerbic correspondent, and one day, Westmoreland gave this whole story, I forget what it was but it was something very positive. And everybody sort of you know, yes, yes. And then Joe said, are you finished General? And Westmoreland said, yes Joe, I am. And Joe said good, now let's get serious. And he started asking his questions.

Q: Well, was there anything else that we should cover around this time when you were there? I found your time in the Prime Minister's office fascinating.

SIMPSON: Oh, one little sidelight to show you how the two periods sort of blended. One day I got back to the office and on my desk was a telephone message. A Mr. Anh or somebody was calling me, to get in touch with the Hoa Hao. So I got in touch with them and he was a representative of the Hoa Hao, one of the military sects that had revolted against Diem, and asking me if I would come to dinner etc. I didn't particularly want to do this. I was in a very difficult situation there. It was ridiculous in a way. My assignment had been classified. Well, how the hell can you be an information and press advisor if your very presence is classified in the palace? They'd done that I think, primarily to preserve, I mean the Vietnamese didn't want people to think that they needed advice and all this sort of thing. Or that we were, or they didn't want the American press to know that we were sending people into the Vietnamese government offices. But anyway that soon blew over and everybody knew, I mean there was no doubt about it. So these people got in touch with me and it turns out that I was being invited to dinner to one of the best restaurants in Saigon, an old French parachute hangout, by the widow of Bacut who had been the head of the Hoa Hao, a real character who had cut off some of his fingers. He said he'd cut off one every year until the French left. He was eventually captured by the

Diem forces and executed. He was betrayed in fact. But anyway, in 1965 here I am in the situation where I'm invited. So I check with the political people and what do you think? They say any bit of information we can get now is gold. The situation being what it is, so go ahead and have a good meal, see what's going on. Well it wasn't hard to figure out what they wanted. They wanted, they gave me all this stuff--you know Vietnam, you were here when the French were here, and all this routine. Incidentally, his wife was a knockout. She was a little teenager when I knew her before and she developed into a beauty in a black ao dai, a form fitting ao dai. And so this little political advisor was with her. We had this very good meal and what it came down to was...they wanted American arms, American money and with that they would form once again a hard fighting anti-communist force, etc. They didn't say that they would support the government at all. And I, all I could do was say well that's very interesting and I will report everything that you'd said and onward and upward and all this sort of thing. And then just as we were leaving, and I look back on this often with mixed emotions. This dream in an ao dai said, "Can I drop you off at your home?" And in a few split seconds that it takes a brain to work, I said, "No thanks, I've got an Embassy car." I thought to myself, you fool. But it wouldn't have been politically smart, I think.

Q: No, no, no but still, there are moments. Why don't we stop and break off for lunch now?

Q: I just say because of time restraints we're going to leave a big gap here for the time being which you can fill out when you get the draft transcript. And I'll leave you with a copy that you can play around with. But you served in Paris in '65-'67. You were in the War College from '67-'68. Then I have you in East Asian Affairs for part of '69.

SIMPSON: I stayed in the War College an extra year as an advisor to the President, after graduating from the School of Naval Warfare. From Newport I went to Washington...my first Washington assignment. I was Deputy Director of EA/P in State for about four months. I hated it. Preparing briefing papers each day for the Department spokesman and mouthing platitudes about Vietnam to visiting journalists. I'd joined the Foreign Service to work overseas. Washington wasn't for me. I let it be known I'd take the first overseas assignment to come along. That was as Counselor for Public Affairs at the Canberra Embassy. Australia was with us in Vietnam but we had anti-war protests to deal with there. Shortly after I arrived we had a visit from Vice President Agnew. A disaster. His advance team wanted to bar Australian newsmen from a wreath-laying ceremony at the Australian War Memorial! We finally straightened it out but it cost us some goodwill. I traveled to Papua-New Guinea and back to Vietnam on a USIA "orientation" tour. Visited the Australian infantry detachment while there. Also, lectured at their Joint Services College in Canberra. The Australian press were a hard-drinking crowd with no qualms about printing off-the-record comments. I learned that in a hurry. The Ambassador was Rice, a political appointee who worshipped Nixon. He meant well but had a very naive view of the world. Oh, after my arrival I was listed on the Australian diplomatic list as Counselor for Public Affairs. Unfortunately a typist in the Ministry dropped the l in Public. I became the 1st Counselor for Public Affairs in the history of our Canberra

Embassy. The Australian media loved it. I served two years there and then returned to Newport to use up almost a year of collected leave and write another novel.

Q: I'd like very much for you to comment on that Vietnam as an issue and what your impression was, and then you had a major assignment in Canberra from '69-'72. But again we're going to skip that because I'd like to pick up where you're going to serve in Algiers from '72-'74. Is that all right? What were you doing in Algiers from '72-'74?

SIMPSON: Well I was assigned to Algiers as a Public Affairs Officer and at that time it was an American Interests Section under the Swiss flag. It was the American Embassy building, the only difference was that we flew a Swiss flag. And we had the normal set-up as you do with any diplomatic post. And the program was very different because there was very limited access to Algerians. And the Algerians watched us very carefully. Relations, there were no diplomatic relations as such. So we had to tread a very soft line. And it was when Boumedienne was President, trying to build a great socialist industrialist complex there that didn't work. But we still managed to send a certain number of Algerians to the States and I had my contacts with certain Algerian media people but mostly government media people. They were all government media people.

Q: You know for some reason or not the Algerians have a reputation of having the most professional and skillful diplomatic services. Did you find this?

SIMPSON: Yes, I can say, yes that's true. We went to a number of meetings with them on different subjects usually having to do with radio programs or film. Once again the Motion Picture Export Association was having problems with the Algerians, the Algerian government in relation to American film imports there and I'd sat in on a number of these meetings. And you're right, the professionalism was much different than a lot of African countries. They had the French polish on top of their own abilities. And they did very well. It was a time of growing terrorism, coming up as a real threat all over.

Q: We're talking about all over the world, PLO, Red Army, Bader Meinhof gang in Germany, the Japanese Red Army, etc., etc.

SIMPSON: And the Algerians, as far as security for our establishment for the Embassy there, were very good and seemed to have a very good line on everything and kept us informed. I didn't travel, we were allowed to travel, but I didn't travel much because everything was centered more or less in Algiers. And a lot of people, a lot of Foreign Service Officers didn't realize that in a way Algiers, despite no diplomatic relations, was a little gem of its own. I had officers come from Tunis, come over for the weekend or come on business. And I'd take them to lunch at the Algiers Yacht Club which is down in the harbor, a beautiful old 1930's building, that the French had built of course, and that the Algerians had taken over. And where the menu, Rouge Brillat, and Rosé Wine and all that and it was just like in the old days. And it was being used by, there were yachts there, Algerian yachts, but there were mainly Algerian businessmen who used it as a lunch time spot. You had to drive through the Naval base to get there and when I think back it was

amusing, because you could drive by, of course we had CD cars. But the Navy security was not the greatest.

Q: Who was running the Interests Section at that time?

SIMPSON: Bill Eagleton was the Chief of the Interests Section and Bob Pelletreau was the political officer. And at one point when Bill had to go off for quite some time I, being the senior officer after him, was acting Chargé d'Affaires but Pelletreau ran the political section and the contacts there. And it was ah, the embassy was well located, it's still the same place, I'm sure in the old building, but it's above the hills overlooking the city, with a pool and a view of the bay.

Q: What was our impression of Boumedienne and his drive towards having a socialized economy?

SIMPSON: Well I think, our operation was mainly a sort of a holding operation till diplomatic relations returned. At the same time it was a reporting operation where we tried to keep track of everything that was going on in the country. Particularly of Algerian contact with other nations, particularly, you know, the communist bloc nations, even the Black Panthers were there, Cleaver's crowd. And I'm just trying to think. There were many Eastern Europeans that we used to run into in all the hotels all the time. But we also spent a lot of time, as much time as possible, with Algerians who were in business or in government business who had a lot of foreign contacts. Whose job it was to go out of Algeria, make contacts, and make deals and they were more open to talking to Americans than the average. Because most of the government was still old ex-FLN guerrilla fighters against the French. They were still living on the old glories and the memories of the war against the French. They weren't really looking ahead and Boumedienne's great plans for building an industrial complex of course, turned out to be a disaster. But at that time he was pouring a lot of money into that and letting the great wine production centers fall apart. That could have meant a lot to the Algerian economy. Because Algerian wine has always been not bad, some of the wines from there. But unfortunately that was all jettisoned when these farms were taken over and the emphasis was put on factories and plants to build.

Q: Was the feeling that Algeria was in the pocket of the Soviet Union on the block, that they were using it or what?

SIMPSON: It wasn't so much that it was in the pocket but there was a lot of influence there, there was a feeling that there was a lot of Soviet influence. That there was a lot of training of the army and what not, the Soviets were helping them, Soviet equipment. And yet the Algerians were feisty enough, and let's face it, difficult enough to maintain their own thing. So you didn't get the feeling that anybody was really telling them what to do.

Q: People I've talked to who served in Algeria say that they're basically a rather dour people. I mean, not the livelier people of some of the other Arab states. Did you find that?

SIMPSON: Not so much. I think it was mainly just the regime that brought that on. I mean, when you drove down near the University of Algiers, and the students outside, there'd always be police watching the students and all this sort of thing. And that put a damper on what would normally be a relaxed situation. But I've been to Algerian weddings and various feasts of different kinds. And they were quite wild affairs you know. And one of my sons-in-law is Algerian born, he's a French citizen but he's a Kabylie. And I got to know his side of the family. In a way his family is sort of typical of the torn fabric of Algerian society. His father was a doctor and became a doctor in the Foreign Legion during World War II, Algerian but still a doctor in the Foreign Legion. And then he became a doctor in the FLN, fighting the French and unfortunately for him he was captured by the same Foreign Legion regiment that he had served with in World War II. So he underwent a lot of very rough treatment and he survived that but he still talks with a certain nostalgia about the Legion. Yet they're the people who beat him up and tortured him.

Q: What was the view of Libya at that time? I don't think Qadhafi had come in yet.

SIMPSON: No, it's sort of, well I can't recall. Let me think about it.

Q: What about Morocco?

SIMPSON: Well there were little clashes on the border and the Algerian army was always moving tanks around and there would be rumors of this and rumors of that. The government-controlled press would have all these stories, you know, anti-Moroccan stories.

Q: But the post-Syria movement hadn't really gotten on the way.

SIMPSON: No.

Q: What about fundamentalism?

SIMPSON: That also, maybe it was seething under the surface but you didn't notice that at all. Once again one of the big problems there, when we were there, large numbers of youths, unemployed youths. Hanging out on the street corners of Algiers, getting into all sorts of trouble, with nothing to do. And the idea of the regime from time-to-time was to get as many into the army as possible to control them. But there were always clashes on the campus and some confusion about which way they were going. In fact, my oldest daughter was in the French Lycee there and she and her husband-to-be got involved in a strike. And they were striking about some silly thing. The school had insisted on keeping a fence up that the students wanted down so that they could go in and have lunch in this place, in this forest nearby. And it got so bad that I had a call from somebody in the Algerian security that I had to get my daughter out of there because if they didn't shape up in the next 4 or 5 hours then they were going to send in the riot police and crack a lot of

heads. And so the strike petered out. But also it meant that the last French Lycee in Algiers would be closed down. And so that was straightened out but it was sort of indicative of the atmosphere because these students were reading about things that were happening all over the world. The student protests and all that.

Q: How about your dealings with the papers there?

SIMPSON: Very few. The only time we dealt directly with them was when they needed something specific, a text or something like that. They didn't like to see you around their office. There wasn't a question of dropping by to see your friend and chatting over his desk. They preferred it if you have a messenger deliver the stuff. And the same applied to radio and TV. They were just starting their TV operation there. And it was a typical state TV thing. Talking heads and long speeches and different official political parties. But no, our contacts, sometimes we had more contacts with the Chinese and the Russians than we did with the Algerians. I remember I had met this Chinese general, a military attaché at some party. And I had invited him to cocktails at our house to meet Bill Payeff, Deputy Director of USIA, who was coming through. I thought it'd be quite a surprise for Bill to walk in and see a Chinese General waiting to greet him. And the general came along with his 2 or 3 aides and the Russian cultural affairs officer came in and was quite shocked to find a Chinese there. He couldn't quite figure this out.

And I tell you there was something funny that happened while I was there. The Russian cultural attaché, or whoever ran their cultural center, was a big bear of a man with a huge beard, and he always made a great point of coming over and shaking hands and all this sort of thing. And he invited me to drop by his center one day and I did, and it was the usual ordeal by vodka routine. And we sat down and we had these thick, greasy paté sandwiches and vodka. And we were drinking and eating. We got involved in conversation and before you knew it, it was noon, time for lunch. Have a last couple of drinks! And we got up to leave and his assistant had left and locked us in. So he was put in the untenable position of having to call his own security people at the Russian Embassy, to have them come over and let him and an American officer out of his office. I thought that was a unique situation.

Q: Well, was our policy favorable towards Israel, sort of a burr under your saddle while you were there?

SIMPSON: Yes. You didn't notice it that much. I think the Algerians took it all with a grain of salt. They understood pretty well what was going on. It wasn't something that you would find yourself in an argument about. The Algerians were very diplomatic. Not like, for instance, if you were in a French diplomatic thing and there was a certain contention between the two parties it would come to the surface. There'd be a give and take. Whereas if the Algerians were at a social affair or something, they would very seldom get into a discussion of what the problem is, they'd rather save that for the office. Or exchange notes or something like that.

Q: What were American interests in Algeria at that time?

SIMPSON: Well there was a certain amount of oil interest. There were other business interests. It wasn't great but there were certain companies, mechanical, tractors, equipment, mining equipment, drilling equipment. And different contracts with the oil exploration, natural gas, things like that.

Q: Part of it was just maintaining the contact.

SIMPSON: That's right. And there were certain things going on between Algeria and the United States, both in Washington and on the international scene. That either took place in Geneva or Paris or wherever. We weren't part of it really. But the people who were directly involved would come whipping into Algiers and they had a base. We provided the base that they could operate from. And support for whatever they were doing, which Ministry they were dealing with.

Q: Well then you left there in 1974. Was that right? And you went back to Paris. You were there from..., well maybe you were back in Washington for a bit. But I've got you from '75 to '79 in Paris.

SIMPSON: Well, I tell you, there was a big gap, wait a minute, we're missing something here. Because, no, I went from Algiers to Marseille as Consul-General.

Q: Oh, I see.

SIMPSON: After 2 years in Algiers, they appointed me Consul General in Marseille. Which was sort of a surprise because you know, USIA types don't normally go into that kind of thing. But I had heard that the thing was coming open and I made a few soundings and some people had been favorable of the time I had spent in Marseille and all that. So that worked out and it was very nice. There's a nice residence there and I was back in my element and coming back as a Consul General was good because I had all the press contacts, the cultural people, and I knew the politicians, the mayor and all that sort of thing. So it was a natural assignment and lasted a little over two years. Once again, it was one of those administrative hiccups. It was suppose to be a 2-2 (years) or something like that or at least 3 years. And State, I didn't know it, I didn't realize it, was going into this economic mode. In other words, saying this Consulate General is now going to be Economic not Political. Well, unfortunately for me, they decided that Marseille was going to be an Economic post so I was replaced by somebody who specialized in Economics. And that was the time when I didn't know where I was going from there. But fortunately, I heard about this Paris possibility coming up. And in the interim, I went to the University of South Carolina as a so-called Diplomat-in-Residence. But this wasn't the State Department program. This was a deal through USIA. And it only lasted for about 3-4 months.

Q: Then you went to Paris about...

SIMPSON: I went back to Paris as the DPAO and I must say I didn't really enjoy it that much. Because everything had become so set.

Q: Well, I must say, it sounds like a huge Embassy.

SIMPSON: That's right, and not much flexibility. And all these problems. I'll tell you why I left in '79. I was suppose to do 2 years there at least, maybe 3, and I wasn't too happy with the job. And then the Director of USIA came through and we had a luncheon for him at the house, at the apartment. And at one point, he said, and how long have you been in France? And I started to tout up the number of times I'd been in Paris, Marseille or vice versa. And he looked quite shocked. And so the next thing you know, about a month later a telegram came through giving me a few weeks to get ready to go to Zaire as Counselor for Public Affairs. I had 2 teenage daughters at the time and 2 young ones and Zaire was sort of tottering, as it always is, and I'd led an inspection team to Zaire at one point and I thought: Is this really worth it? So after an evening's discussion with my wife I had the pleasure of sending a telegram saying, rather than appearing in Kinshasa on such and such a date, I'd like my retirement to begin on such and such a date and etc., etc. So that was when I bowed out.

Q: How did you find, in Paris, actually you were there 2 times, one time we haven't covered. How did you find dealing with what you'd call the intellectuals there? They seem to be a major force in France, they identify themselves as such and people know who they are. And I assume they were one of our target groups.

SIMPSON: That's right.

Q: How did you find them and how did you deal with them?

SIMPSON: Well, this was a problem because all Embassies develop their own lists, their own favorites over a period of time. And every new officer, every newly assigned officer comes in and after a while he adds his. But unfortunately there's not much shedding of these people. And so you build up a crustacean; an endless list of regulars at the Embassy. And this is particularly true of the Paris Embassy where reception after reception you find the same people. So there was a sort of limited, a difficulty of breaking into the real world outside the Embassy circle. And often when you would try to do that, things didn't work out. Now the French intellectual, whether he be on the right or the left, usually considers himself vastly superior to anybody else. You know, thinking things out and his education and all that. And so there was more a meeting of the minds in things like music and theater and cinema than you'd get in philosophical discussions or literature or whatever. And I myself wasn't too involved in the cultural side. But on the side of the journalists, information and the media, TV and all that, I found it fairly easy to operate in Paris. Because this was a worldly crew of sophisticates. And they knew what you could do for them. There's no doubt about that. And what you couldn't do for them. And they knew, you know, what we might be interested in as far as programs and things they were

involved in. And we tried to help them where we thought it would work out as far as covering American events and developments. But myself, I'm probably wrong, but I think the time has come for the Agency, USIA, to stop worrying about the cultural side so much. Culture takes care of itself.

Q: It spreads like wild fire.

SIMPSON: You don't need government to fiddle in it. The very fact, this whole idea that you send some cultural leader to the States on some sort of leader grant and you're gaining great ground from this. It's not necessarily true. Some people go to the States and they hate it. We never seem to recognize that.

Q: Yes, might as well, particularly it's not as though we're talking about--if you're working out of the Ukrainian culture, you've got to work with people to come and learn about yourself.

SIMPSON: That's right.

Q: The American culture is all pervasive and people are going to make up their minds one way or other about it. I mean sometimes we're trying to prove ourselves to be more couth than we think other people perceive us. And we actually do have ballet or something like that. Well, I'm not sure it makes a hell of a lot of difference. It's a little bit pretentious. Somewhat nouveau riche. Just before we quit on this, you had 2 Ambassadors while you were there this last time, Kenneth Rush and Arthur Hartman. Can you just give me, how you felt they operated?

SIMPSON: Well they were completely different of course. Kenneth Rush was a political appointee, a businessman, a very personable fellow. And with a certain founding in foreign affairs and he knew his way around. I can't remember what his job was before that but he traveled a lot, been on international...

Q: I think he'd been Under Secretary of State or something like that.

SIMPSON: That's right, he'd been in the business before, but always on the political side. Then of course Arthur Hartman was a professional, a long time Foreign Service officer. Rush delegated a lot, you know. And I remember he came down to Marseille when I was there as Consul General. And I introduced him to Gaston Defferre who was a socialist mayor, and a Chamber Deputy, and a former resistance leader. He was very outspoken and often accused of being anti-American. But he was just an independent cuss, that's what he was. And I'd always, not defended him, but I always tried to explain this to people in Paris. And so there was a little, well they weren't afraid, but there was a little worry about his meeting with this new Ambassador who wasn't a professional. And so as it always happens, as it often happens, here are these two outspoken men, self-made men, meeting in the Mayor's office and they hit it off just perfectly. Now whether that would have been the same with Art Hartman, I wasn't Consul General when Hartman was there,

I'd moved up to Paris. Hartman was, as I say, a true blue professional. Presided over all the staff meetings, scanned all the telegrams, was involved in a lot of the negotiations with the French, but talking about culture--he had great hopes for the cultural side of USIA in Paris. To a certain extent I think he was disappointed that we didn't get more into that because you know he'd have cultural soirées at the residence and all this sort of thing. In fact we finally had to bring in somebody to handle this, to be a Cultural Attaché. But they were altogether different people. To sum it up, I wasn't sorry to leave that big post.

Q: Well then why don't we stop at this point and I'm leaving room for you to fill in later. Thank you.

Ed Note:

Howard R. Simpson has published 10 novels and two non-fiction books. His second non-fiction book "Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot" was published in the spring of 1994 by Brassey's (US) Inc. At this writing he has been commissioned by the same house to write a book on the 2nd Foreign Legion Parachute Regiment based in Calvi, Corsica.

End of interview