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ELLSWORTH BUNKER ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW II

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ELLSWORTH BUNKER

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Signed by John B. Bunker on June 23, 1995

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ACCESSION NUMBER 96-2

INTERVIEW II

DATE: December 12, 1980

INTERVIEWEE: ELLSWORTH BUNKER

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Ambassador Bunker's residence, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: I'd like to start this morning with your visit back to Washington. You went back in November of 1967 and met with President Johnson at the White House there. Then General [William] Westmoreland and Bob Komer also came back, I believe a little bit later than you. The three of you I suppose had a series of review meetings with the President. Can you recall this occasion?

B: We did have some review meetings, yes. I don't think we had very many, but we did have a fairly comprehensive review of the situation at the time in regard both to the military and pacification situation. I reported, I think, that the new organization of the pacification program was getting into gear, settling down, and we thought was making headway. The same thing was true with regard to the military situation. General [Creighton] Abrams, as I remarked earlier, had come over in May of 1967 and had started in on his special assignment, which was the training of the Vietnamese armed forces. Westmoreland reported that he thought that program was also moving ahead.

I think our reporting was quite upbeat as to the progress that was being made. This, of course, was all before Tet in 1968, but I think what happened at Tet proved that our reporting was fairly accurate because the Vietnamese armed forces did give a good account of themselves in Tet. Of course, it took far heavier casualties than we did, as a matter of fact. And Tet, as again I think I've remarked earlier, was a very serious military defeat for the North in Vietnam, although a psychological victory here.

G: Do you recall the circumstances under which General Westmoreland and Bob Komer were called back? Was this a spontaneous decision to want to review [the situation]?

B: Yes. The President simply wanted to review the situation, what had happened in six months, seven months, since [Nguyen Van] Thieu had taken over. And Westmoreland I remember did go on TV.

G: I think it was "Meet the Press" or something.

B: "Meet the Press," something like that.

G: The media during this trip back seemed to be inclined to press you and General Westmoreland for some sort of timetable for victory. I noticed that you were very guarded in your statement and said that it would be a long-term proposition and that you were not going to give a timetable. Did the President also ask you for an estimate of when we might be able to expect to start withdrawing troops?

B: No. No, he did not. I don't recall that he did.

G: Do you think that he understood the fact that it would be an extended involvement?

B: Well, I think he understood that it would be an extended involvement, how extended I don't know. None of us knew at the time. I'm sure we all hoped it wouldn't be as long as it was. But we did see it as a long-range problem.

G: On the other hand, did he brief you and General Westmoreland on the political problems that he was facing as a result of the war?

B: Yes, though those problems I think really reached a crescendo after Tet, not before. It was after the Tet thing where, as I say, the other side gained a very great psychological victory here when people got the impression that what had actually been a military victory was a defeat for us and threw up their hands. They wanted to get out. That's when the pressure came really. And I think that's what brought the President to make the decision not to run again for another term.

G: Anything else about that November meeting?

B: No.

G: Did you go to Gettysburg during that time?

B: No.

G: I thought maybe you might have met with former President Eisenhower.

B: Well, I met with him once when he was in the hospital, but just the date I can't quite remember. It may have been during that visit, because I did see him in the hospital. I think perhaps it was, yes.

G: Was there other discussion in the meeting about the Viet Cong's use of sanctuaries and what to do about this problem?

B: No. I can't say that there wasn't a discussion. I think there was always a discussion or a mention of the fact that the Viet Cong, the other side, did have a great advantage in having the sanctuaries. But there wasn't any discussion at that time that I recall about going into the sanctuaries. I mentioned in our last talk that I had recommended in June

going into Laos to cut the trail, but that was not approved. That was in June, this was in November. There was no discussion then at that time about going into either Laos or Cambodia.

G: What about U.S. intelligence? Did you discuss the inadequacies of our intelligence?

B: No. No.

G: I suppose the next matter, before we get to Tet, is the holiday truce, the cease-fire and arranging an extension thereof. I believe that you met with President Thieu right before New Year's at--what was it?--Bear Cat American base, twenty miles from Saigon.

B: Yes.

G: Do you recall the issues here?

B: No, not specific about it, this discussion of the Tet truce. No, I'm not very clear about it.

G: I suppose the New Year's truce--

B: Tet being the New Year.

G: Well, the calendar New Year.

B: Oh, the calendar New Year. No, I don't remember about that. I've forgotten whether we did--didn't we extend it? I don't remember.

G: I think.

B: I don't recall the details of that.

G: Let's go on into the subject of Tet. Let me ask you first of all if you had any significant warnings of Tet, of the offensive ahead of time?

B: Yes. We had warning that the enemy was preparing for an offensive, but we didn't have the timing pinpointed. The fact that he was preparing was well known, and we were preparing accordingly to meet it. But the nature of the offensive, particularly the timing of the offensive, we didn't have hard information on that. But we did know, we did expect an offensive was coming and did make some preparations to meet it, particularly in III Corps. General [Frederick] Weyand had command there and pulled back his troops in order to strengthen the defenses of Saigon and that part of the country, which is very fortunate that he did.

G: Weren't they being ordered away at just that time? Wasn't it almost a fortunate circumstance that--

- B: Well, he withdrew the troops, pulled back his troops, because we knew an offensive was coming for some time. I say, we didn't know the day it was coming, but we knew it would be coming. It was a matter of I think very good judgment on his part.
- G: What about the cancellation of the truce in I Corps?
- B: Well, after the attack?
- G: I thought it was right before the attack, a day or two before.
- B: I don't know, I've forgotten that.
- G: Didn't the Viet Cong attack a day early in some areas of I Corps?
- B: It's possible. I don't recall it now. I think it was. There was continual pressure on I Corps anyway at that time. I Corps and III Corps were places where there was strong enemy pressure as well as some up in the highlands in II Corps. Of course, with Tet the pressure came everywhere.
- G: Do you recall your first awareness that the offensive was being launched?
- B: Yes, I was in bed when it was launched about one o'clock in the morning, three in the morning, whenever it was. The marines woke me and told me that Saigon was being attacked, and took me out of the house in an armed personnel carrier to a safe house, the security people's safe house in Saigon, where I could keep in touch with Westmoreland and everybody else to know what was going on.
- G: Were you in touch at all with the Chancellery during this period?
- B: I don't recall that I was in communication with the Chancellery, except as I got information through Westmoreland or Colonel [George] Jacobson. He was holed up in his house in the compound itself. But I kept in touch with the military and with what was going on and the progress.
- G: Did most of it come through General Westmoreland's office?
- B: Yes, yes.
- G: Did you report back to Washington during the time of the siege?
- B: Not during the siege itself, not until morning. I didn't personally report to Washington until, well, I guess it was the morning of the [attack]. I suppose I got out of the safe house around nine or ten o'clock I guess, went back to my own house, found it full of tear gas.

G: Oh, really?

B: Yes.

G: Why was that?

B: Well, we'd let some tear gas go in case the enemy got in.

G: Oh, I see.

B: The marine guards were in the house and I had a safe there with classified material in it, and they burned up the material, burned my briefcase in the process.

G: Really?

B: Some holes in it, I've still got it; it's in the attic.

I came back. There wasn't much tear gas in it, it's enough just to smart your eyes and so forth. [I] changed my clothes and went down to the Embassy. Then we got word off pretty promptly to Washington.

G: Was there much damage done to the Chancellery?

B: No. Very little. They blew a hole in the wall, you know, got in through the wall.

G: You know, to me an amazing thing is that after they got inside the wall they didn't attack the main building really, did they?

B: They tried to get into it, but they didn't succeed.

G: Anything else on the attack on the Embassy itself?

B: Well, the attackers were killed. There were twenty-one of them.

G: Well, now I thought one or two were captured.

B: Yes, I guess you're right. I guess a couple of them were captured. Yes, I think that's correct.

G: That was going to be my next question. What happened to the one or two that were captured, do you recall?

B: Well, I don't know, other than their interrogation. You see, it was a very well coordinated and very well planned attack, but the enemy's expectations were disappointed because it

was clear that they had hoped for a general uprising of the people and felt that there would be defections from the ARVN forces as well as from the populace generally.

G: Do you think they also expected more support from North Vietnam than they received?

B: No, I think they got plenty of support from North Vietnam.

G: Really?

B: It was a combined North Vietnamese attack with conventional weapons and supported by the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong surfaced at that time for the first time really, generally all over the country, and were identified. And consequently it made their eradication much easier in the long run. Westmoreland's theory is that we won the war then in 1968. In a sense I think he's right because the enemy did get a very severe setback and had to recast their plans. It took them four years again to mount another major offensive; 1968 to 1972 was the next big offensive. I mean, they kept on trying in 1968 in various places, but never country-wide again until 1972.

G: Did you learn anything about the raid on the Embassy from the interrogations of the captives?

B: I don't recall anything specifically.

G: Did they have inside help?

B: No. Well, I say no. I think there was one instance of a driver who was suspected, yes, and was picked up. That's the only instance that I'm aware of.

G: Surely with all of the mobilization going on right before these widespread attacks more people knew where it was coming and when it was coming than seemed to have told. I'm just wondering why there was no more alarm sounded than there was.

B: Well, I think that probably it's because of the fact that there never had been an attack on Tet and it was generally assumed that the Tet truce would be observed. That even the other side would respect the Tet truce, which proved to be incorrect, of course. One result of Tet--a minor result--was the fact that I finally got a good secure bunker.
(Laughter)

G: The South Vietnamese were really charged with protecting the Embassy, weren't they? I mean, wasn't that a part of their role?

B: Well, we had security people there at the Embassy. We had our own security people, too.

G: I mean, in terms of the defense arrangements in Saigon, weren't they charged with the [protection of the Embassy]?

- B: Oh, with Saigon itself, yes. But we had also our own security people at the Embassy.
- G: Well, in [Don] Oberdorfer's book on Tet [*Tet!*] he describes the laxity of the Vietnamese police around the Embassy at the time of the attack.
- B: Yes. They were not very effective. That's right.
- G: Were changes made as a result of this to beef up the [security]?
- B: Yes.
- G: What specifically did you do?
- B: Well, the Vietnamese government shook up their own police outfit. Our security people were on the job, there was no problem with them, but the problem was with the Vietnamese and trying to get the police battalion commander, who had charge of the Embassy being in his area, as I recall, [and was] quite lax about reacting, slow to react and loath to react in a good many cases. I brought about a change in that situation.
- G: Was it a sustained improvement?
- B: Yes.
- G: What were the communists trying to accomplish in the Tet offensive?
- B: Oh, the collapse of the Vietnamese government. I think there's no question that they felt this was the major push, really going to bring them success and victory. I think there's no question, from prisoners, everybody else, the testimony that was taken, that they were convinced there would be an uprising of the people who would come over to their side, and that there would be desertions among the military and that the Thieu government would collapse.
- G: To what extent was the offensive a surprise? You mentioned earlier that you knew that it was coming but not when.
- B: Yes. It was the timing that was a surprise, really, not the fact of it. But certainly the timing was misjudged.
- G: Do you think the fact that they failed to be able to broadcast over the Saigon radio made a difference in terms of popular uprising. Or do you think that even if they had been able to gain control over the airways that there would have been no more popular support?
- B: No. No. No, I think, as I said the other day, there were no instances or very few instances where people on the South Vietnam government side went over to the North.

They voted with their feet and they ran away from the communists. That's why we had so many refugee problems to deal with.

G: What was the impact of the Tet offensive on the U.S. personnel in the Mission?

B: I think the impact of the Tet offensive was to make U.S. personnel realize that the problem was probably going to be bigger and more difficult than we had anticipated beforehand, that obviously there was a great deal of damage done throughout the country as a whole. There would have to be a period of reconstruction and repair. The effect on the morale, the attitude of the personnel was extremely positive. I mean, they were all more determined than ever to get on with the job and to get in to it and did with great energy and great vigor.

G: What sort of effect did it have on the minds of the South Vietnamese people?

B: Well, there again, I say there were no defections. I think the South Vietnamese people as a whole stood firm on the government side, and I think also set about the task of rebuilding with a great deal of vigor and a great deal of energy. There was a lot of rebuilding of course by the people themselves, it wasn't just a government project. The people were brought into it, were given supplies, roofing, siding, timber, [that] sort of thing, to rebuild their own houses and did in a very big way and in a relatively short period of time. We did set up a joint US-GVN team which was headed up for a while by [Nguyen Cao] Ky to get on with the pacification job and the reconstruction that was needed in that area.

G: How did President Thieu respond to the Tet crisis?

B: I think he responded well. He certainly didn't lose his nerve and set about the organization of the recovery program very well.

G: Do you recall your meetings with him during this?

B: Oh, yes. We met, and I recall particularly joint meetings we had with him, Westmoreland, Komer, our political counselor, our AID people, and with him and Ky and some of his own people, to lay out plans for the organization of the recovery program and the pacification program. We worked very closely together and very well together I think.

G: Weren't some of the South Vietnamese commanders replaced as a result of their lackluster performance in Tet?

B: I think some of them were replaced. I'd have to refresh my memory on that. They were replaced from time to time. I'd say there was no wholesale replacement certainly, and I think one or two of them may have been replaced then. But later as we went on, there were replacements made in the interest of greater effectiveness and efficiency. There was concern here--I remember in the 1972 offensive, the siege of An Loc and III Corps. An

Loc was out toward the border, surrounded by a much larger force of communists and put on a remarkable defense, but there was dissatisfaction here at the slowness of General [Tran Van "Little"] Minh in his relief operations and pressure to replace him. Minh was an able general but apt to be cautious, and we felt too cautious. I think he was finally replaced. But the siege was lifted. Our general who was in command in III Corps--I'll think of his name I hope before we get through--was quite a character, a very able fellow, but a great admirer of what the Vietnamese had done at An Loc. He said to someone, "It's the greatest victory in the history of warfare." (Laughter) He's living in Texas now, I must really find out.

G: He is in Texas you say?

B: He's retired and living in Texas I think. Oh, gosh. I'll get his name.

G: Apparently there were rumors of U.S.-Vietnam collusion during Tet and perhaps these were promoted by the Viet Cong broadcasts and whatnot. But you went on radio or television I think in Vietnam and refuted it.

B: Yes.

G: Do you recall the circumstances here?

B: No. I do not.

G: Well, first of all, do you think many South Vietnamese believed these rumors to begin with?

B: I don't think so.

G: Really?

B: No.

G: Did you ever get any suggestion from the South Vietnamese government officials that they suspected it?

B: No.

G: Someone evidently, one of our diplomats, in an interview with Thieu heard him say something to the effect that we had to have more knowledge ahead of time about it. Do you recall Thieu ever expressing this?

B: That we must have had more?

G: Yes.

B: No, I don't.

G: He never said that to you?

B: No. He never said it to me and there was no reason why we should have had more advanced knowledge than they. They ought to have been able to have as much or more than we, being Vietnamese, but they didn't have any better information on the timing than we did.

G: Well, how did you make the decision to publicly deny the rumors?

B: Well, I thought if the rumors were allowed to spread that they might have some effect, but I wanted to make it clear that as far as we had any knowledge at all, there was no truth in the report, and that it was obviously spread by the enemy to try to undermine our morale.

G: What was the President's reaction to Tet?

B: Well, from my vantage point, which was remote, I think the President's reaction was very strong. I'm sure he must have been disturbed by all the reports that he got about it, but certainly never gave us any indication of any wavering on his part as to what we were doing or the purpose of our being there. So I mean I would say that while I think the President like everybody else was concerned by what had happened, by the extent of the damage and also naturally in the first few days, wondering what effect this might have on the South Vietnamese, on their morale, and on their determination. But certainly I think all of us who were there were at pains to reassure the President and our people here at home that we felt, as I've said, that the enemy suffered a very severe blow, a very severe defeat, very heavy losses, lack of success anywhere. Of course, it took a longer time to get the enemy out of Hue up in the north, that was the toughest spot, up there. It did take a longer time, but in all the rest of the country within a few days the enemy were out of the cities and out of the towns.

G: Did you advocate any changes in U.S. policy or strategy as a result of the offensive?

B: I don't think so. I think I felt that we were on the right track as far as our program, the contents of our program went, on pacification, on the economy. We had problems, of course, as one has in wartime anywhere. We had problems of inflation; we had economic problems as well as military ones. But I felt that the course we had charted was a correct one, and if we stuck to it we could come through successfully, that of all, of course, the crucial factor there was whether the public here would support the war effort. But I felt that what we had laid out there was a good course, a right one, and could succeed.

G: There were reports at the time that after Tet you pressed for more bombing.

B: Yes, I think that's true. More bombing to cut down the flow of supplies to the South.

- G: Were you and/or General Westmoreland or the President surprised that the enemy could launch such a widespread attack, that they had the capability to do it?
- B: Yes, I was certainly somewhat surprised. I think we all were. Yes, I don't think that any of us expected the breadth of the attack. We expected it would be more concentrated against the cities. But it was much wider than just the cities, it included the villages and hamlets. So it had a wider range than we anticipated.
- G: Did General Westmoreland discuss with you his need for additional troops to deal with the Tet crisis?
- B: Yes. At that time he asked for a moderate increase--I've forgotten--amounting to about twenty or twenty-five thousand troops, and I did support that. I did not support his later request for a much larger increment of troops.
- G: Did he discuss the reasons for needing the troops?
- B: Yes. The needs were to meet the threat--his feeling that he had to move troops up into I Corps from the south to meet the enemy threat there where the pressure was building up. You see, the enemy, during the summer months, tried to follow up in specific places, and I Corps was one of them and he felt he had to move troops up north and therefore reduce his force in the south in III Corps, IV Corps, which made it more vulnerable to the enemy. He needed several more battalions and a brigade or two or something. The total would have brought the force up, with my recollection, to five hundred and twenty-five thousand, which was a ceiling we'd established. It didn't exceed the established ceiling at that time. It was later that he asked for a much larger increment.
- G: This was not part of the large troop request?
- B: No. This was separate, immediate, for immediate reinforcements.
- G: Do you recall the circumstances of the larger request that followed?
- B: I think that Westmoreland felt that with this additional request--which I think the figure came close to two hundred thousand troops--that he could really finish up the war more quickly and get it behind us. I didn't favor it because, and I said in my message back, I think that I felt that it would simply make the South Vietnamese feel that they didn't need to do as much. It would be a disincentive as far as they were concerned. It would relieve them of responsibility, which I thought was not wise.
- G: Was there evidence that the more we did the less they did, and did you have something to base this on?
- B: Well, I think that's human nature, yes. I think that if somebody else will do it for you, well, you let them do it. I think it's true of us, true of the Vietnamese or anybody. I

simply thought if we kept sending in another big increment of troops they'd think, "Well, hell, the Americans are going to fight this for us, so. . . ."

G: President Thieu has said in the last year or so in, I suppose, bitterness that we actually did more harm than good for this reason, because if we hadn't been there they would have retained the incentive and would have been able to [win].

B: Well, that's hindsight, of course. He wanted us there when we were there, no question about that. But he has a point, too. There's always a temptation to call the shots our way, and that's natural. The Vietnamese, Oriental way is not our way very often. Americans are can-do people and they can't envisage fighting a thirty-year war as the Orientals can and do and did.

G: During this period, I think it was late 1967 or early 1968, General [James M.] Gavin said that our involvement there would probably last or require ten years, and I think at the time you regarded that as excessive. Assuming that we had stayed in with the same levels, how long do you think it would have gone on? Do you have any speculation there?

B: Well, I'm not quite clear. Do you mean, if we had stayed in at the same [level]? You mean, if we hadn't withdrawn our troops?

G: Yes.

B: It's hard to tell. I don't know. I don't know what Gavin meant, whether he meant that we'd have to keep our full force there for ten years. The fact is, you see, my view is we didn't have to keep our force there. We did get them out, and we got them out in what I think was a reasonable way, correct way, and then we let the thing fall apart by our refusal to continue assistance. While the Soviets and the Chinese kept on supplying the North fully, we didn't. We made a commitment to the South to come to their aid in the case of a major violation, by the Paris agreements of the other side, and they violated the agreements from the day they signed them, which is normal communist procedure and which we expected. That's why we made a commitment, why the President made a commitment. But Congress, because of public opinion here, refused to appropriate money to resupply adequately the South Vietnamese. The Paris agreements provided that each side could replace on a one-for-one basis equipment used up, lost or destroyed, but we never did it, whereas the other side was being fully supplied. Well, the result was inevitable. The effect on the morale of the South Vietnamese obviously was catastrophic. If you know every day that you're going to have fewer weapons with which to fight while the enemy is going to have a full complement of weapons, what can you do? It's a sad chapter in our history.

G: Before that happened, was there a motivational difference between the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese, do you think? I mean, it seems to me that the Viet Cong has seemed almost fanatically committed, and the South Vietnamese didn't seem to have the same dedication at times.

B: Well, that's pretty hard to say. Obviously some of the Viet Cong were I think fanatical in a way, I mean, living as they did underground and all this sort of thing. But certainly give the South Vietnamese credit, once they got organized and trained, for being good fighters. I mean, as I've said, they turned back the 1972 offensive. They had help from our air force, of course, but we had I think thirty thousand troops in Vietnam, but no combat troops. They did the fighting in 1972 and defeated the North. That was a conventional warfare.

G: How did Tet affect the pacification program? You mentioned that for the first time the Viet Cong came to [the surface].

B: It set it back, yes.

G: Did it?

B: Yes. Because so much attention had to be diverted to just rebuilding the physical destruction.

G: Did it prove anything to you about pacification, that some adjustments needed to be made here or there?

B: I don't remember specifically.

G: Wasn't there a program to form civil defense groups after Tet, getting civil servants and whatnot to form local civil defense groups?

B: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. That was expanded. An interesting thing, too, about civil defense, regional defense forces, an indication I think of the fact that the government had confidence in the loyalty of its people. I think they distributed six hundred thousand weapons to the civil defense forces, which they certainly wouldn't have done had they not had confidence in their loyalty.

G: Did the Thieu-Ky rivalry have any manifestation during Tet? Did it cause any problems?

B: No. No.

G: Let's talk about the press and their coverage of Tet. Did American reporting change as a result of the Tet offensive? Or even during the Tet offensive?

B: Oh, yes, I think so. I think it changed.

(Interruption)

G: The press coverage.

B: Yes, I think the press changed, changed somewhat. They, I think, had a rather skeptical tone--many of them, not all of them--beforehand. But certainly Tet I think caused quite an important change in the way the press reported the war. I can understand this to an extent because this was obviously a very massive attack, well organized, widespread, attacked not only all the cities but the villages and hamlets, and caused a great deal of damage, physical damage, and casualties. And the press viewed it, as I say, reported it really as a victory. I think that was their first reaction, and having taken that position it was difficult for them to reverse it. A few of them did. I mean, a few of them did see I think that there was progress. But many of them of course got emotionally involved in the situation, just as people did back here.

G: Is that how you account for the difference between their view of the war and say the Embassy's view of the war, or even official Washington's view of the war, for that matter?

B: To a degree, yes. I always thought that the fairest, most balanced reporting on the war was done by the London *Economist*. Now, Britain was not involved in the war and they could take obviously a more objective view of it than we could. But I think they did report a pretty balanced picture, and by and large a favorable one, one of progress. I don't know whether it was the *Economist*, I think when the final end came coined the phrase, "snatching defeat from the jaws of victory," which is really what happened.

G: Let's talk a little about your relations with the press in general. My notes say that you would conduct a series of small lunches or dinners for groups of reporters.

B: Yes.

G: Was this helpful in bringing them around to your understanding of the situation?

B: I don't know how much it brought them around but I think it was helpful because I made it clear I wanted to be frank with them, and I had them around, not only did I have small dinners, but I also made a point of getting the press together every week and talking with them and leaving myself open to questions so that I kept in close contact with them, tried to give them a picture of what was going on, what we were doing and why we were doing it. And I think obviously there are a lot of them I didn't convert. On the other hand, it did serve to establish a good personal relationship with the press, which I think was useful.

We did have some exceptions to the reporting, some of it was very good. The *New York Times* had some good reporters there. You see, most of these reporters didn't stay for the duration. Well, it was much like the State Department I suppose, where they might come out for a year or two years, then somebody else would succeed them, some for longer. There were others there who were there for the duration, people like Keyes Beech and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Peter Braestrup was a very good reporter. Fox Butterfield of the *New York Times*, another very good reporter.

- G: Were they generally more inclined to accept at face value the information that they received from the Embassy as opposed to what they called the Saigon Follies or the military briefings that they received?
- B: I'm not sure. I think they may have felt that we were more objective than the military perhaps.
- G: So much of their doubting seems to be focused on military matters, body counts, this sort of thing.
- B: Yes. Yes.
- G: Were their criticisms here valid, do you think, or was this just a skepticism?
- B: Well, I think a body count is not a very good way of calculating progress in the war. In the first place, it's obviously inaccurate and subject to manipulation, and I'm sure most people, commanders, would like to report as many killed in action and so forth as possible. So, I think it was probably an unfortunate thing to get into, actually. I don't recall our trying to do that in World War II or World War I. We did sometimes mention overall losses of our side or the enemy's side, but where we got into a daily body count, it's another sort of thing.
- G: Walter Cronkite came out during the Tet offensive and I guess was in Hue. Didn't he reverse his opinion on the war at this point?
- B: You mean, as anti, from pro to anti?
- G: Yes.
- B: He may have, I don't know when this came about. I remember talking with him when he was out there.
- G: Of course, here's an enormously influential reporter.
- B: I remember, and I can't think of the specific thing, but I do remember that he did quote me, when he came back, in part of his broadcast, but gave a wrong impression, because he only quoted part of what I had said. I was quite annoyed by it, really. I never complained about it, because it wasn't worth it.
- G: Do you recall specifically what he quoted?
- B: No, I don't recall specifically.
- G: There were reports that one of the things that disturbed him was the signs of a massive base build-up to accommodate much larger troop levels there, and reportedly his

interviews with the commanders didn't yield any tangible, useful explanation of all this, and he just felt it was going to involve a larger build-up. Did he ever discuss that with you, or does that sound like a concern?

B: No, he didn't. Not that I recollect. That he thought our bases were so big that--

G: --that we were building up bases to accommodate much larger [troop levels].

B: No, I don't think he discussed it with me, but we did build a sizable base at Cam Ranh Bay, which unfortunately the Russians are able to use now. We did build almost a second port in Saigon, which was all needed, very useful during the war.

G: But were these done to accommodate much larger levels?

B: No, no.

G: Was the South Vietnamese government tolerant enough, do you think, of the U.S. press?

B: Well, I never heard much criticism, vocal criticism or printed criticism, among the Vietnamese press of the U.S. press. I think the Vietnamese government people were frequently disturbed about reports that our press printed about the war. There was one very--I've forgotten who it was, published an article called "Their Lions, Our Mice [Rabbits]," likening the North Vietnamese to the South Vietnamese. This happened to be published at a time when the South Vietnamese had put on a very good exhibition and had tremendous losses, fought extremely well, which incensed the people out there.

G: It was a *Newsweek* reporter, wasn't it? [Merton Perry]

B: I think it was. Was it Kevin Buckley? I've forgotten who it was.

G: I have it in my notes. How did you deal with a situation like this?

B: I tried to deal with it factually, and as I say, I had the press in every week to give them the facts.

G: Do you think there was a peer pressure for members of the press to see the war the same way that others did? I mean, that they persuaded their colleagues to become skeptical of progress?

B: That's possible I think.

G: Would it be fair to say that a majority of them viewed the war as a stalemate at this point?

B: I think it might be so, yes.

G: In retrospect, what have we learned about press relations in a situation like this? Is there some way to improve the accuracy?

B: The question arises in my mind whether democracy can fight a war successfully without press censorship, where it's open to the press and open to television without restriction, as this war was. [It's] the first time it ever happened. And where at the same time your adversary has complete censorship. Now we had censorship in World War I, we had it in World War II, we had it in Korea. Probably the reason we didn't have it in Vietnam is that it was never a declared war. If we had declared war we could have imposed censorship, I assume. But we didn't.

G: Do you think that we should have? Would this have helped?

B: Yes. Oh, yes, I think it would have helped, sure.

G: Did you ever advise the President to issue a declaration?

B: No, I didn't advise him to do it, because I don't think we could have done it. I think you have to have declared a war in order to impose censorship.

G: Did you ever advise him to ask for a declaration?

B: No. No, I did not. I didn't, This is pretty much in retrospect that I'm looking back now to see what happened and why it happened. I think one of the reasons was the fact that we had no censorship of the press, and particularly the television people are interested primarily in showing what's dramatic or sensational, and this is the aspect of war that came into everybody's living room. Well, these incidents, horrors of warfare, happen in every war, but has never been seen before by the general public. This time they saw it. Every night it was in your living room. I think it was bound to have an effect on public opinion here in the United States, and did have a very serious effect as far as the conduct of the war was concerned.

G: In retrospect also, do you feel that we were fighting the wrong kind of war, that perhaps we were not addressing ourselves to the realities of guerrilla warfare and employing the right strategies to deal with the guerrilla warfare?

B: I think that had something to do with it. What I think one has to realize is that this war was new to the American experience. We had never fought a war like this before. It was both a guerrilla war and a conventional war. It was a war in which the enemy had sanctuaries to which he could retreat, reinforce, re-equip and call the tune as far as his timing went, could raise or lower the level of hostilities to suit himself by retiring to the sanctuaries, coming back when he thought the time was right. It was a political war and a psychological war.

Now, I think that we didn't understand that when we became involved first, and I think particularly the military didn't understand it because they'd had no experience in it. They'd fought conventional wars in Europe, the First World War, the Second World War. Korea was a conventional type war. We tried to learn guerrilla fighting and guerrilla warfare, trained people in it. But that's a very difficult kind of warfare, difficult to train people for. So that it posed problems that we'd never had to face before, and I think because we didn't understand it our military thought we could get in and do the job and get out much more quickly than proved to be the case. Therefore I think that's one reason we were slow in training the Vietnamese, instead of starting really to train them in an intensive way when we first went in there. It really wasn't until Abrams got out in 1967 that we did it intensively as we should have done. So those are problems that you had to learn, and learn the hard way as we went along. And I hope we've learned them.

G: Did Washington give you pretty much of a free hand in the conduct of press relations out there?

B: Yes. Yes. In fact, that was true both of the Johnson and the Nixon Administrations. They did, after Tet, urge me to get out, I mean to give some talks for radio and TV and of course I had the press, conferences right along anyway. And I did urge Thieu to get out and talk.

G: Did any reporters act in a quasi-official capacity?

B: No.

G: I noticed that occasionally there would be visits by Joseph Alsop or someone else with close ties to the White House.

B: Oh, Joe. Oh, Joe came out many times. He was a great proponent of the war, what we were doing, a great supporter. Joe used to get in some serious arguments with his own colleagues.

G: Is that right?

B: Oh, yes, on the war effort. And the military knew that he was a strong supporter. Joe, unlike many correspondents, went right out to the front lines with them, and one criticism of the correspondents was that many of them just sat around the bar in the Continental Hotel and wrote their reports from there, the bar view of war. That used to irritate the hell out of Joe, of course.

G: Were there many indiscretions committed by the press leaking things that should have been held in confidence?

B: Well, there may have been some. I don't recall specifically.

- G: I gather, for example, John Carroll of the *Baltimore Sun* might have released prematurely a story about the evacuation of Khe Sanh.
- B: Carroll. Oh. Maybe he did, I don't remember it. What were the circumstances, do you remember?
- G: Just leaking a story about the evacuation of Khe Sanh.
- B: Oh, I don't remember.
- G: And Ev [Everett] Martin of *Newsweek* had his visa lifted.
- B: Did he?
- G: Yes.
- B: I don't remember what that was for either. Do you remember when it was?
- G: Fall of 1967.
- B: Fall of 1967.
- G: Do you recall I guess it was a USIA program of bringing foreign correspondents to Vietnam so that they could have a firsthand view of the war?
- B: USIA it was, yes, that's right.
- G: Was this a successful program?
- B: I think it was useful.
- G: How did it work?
- B: Well, they were brought out there, my recollection is, and of course given briefings by both embassy and the military, but then taken around the country to various areas where there was action going on, not only where they could get some look at the action militarily, but also see what was going on in the countryside, economically, politically.
- G: Did this result in more objective reporting abroad or more pro-U.S. reporting?
- B: Well, it's hard for me to say whether it resulted in more objective reporting abroad. I think it probably did. I think it was a useful exercise.
- G: Was President Johnson ever personally involved on the issue of press relations?

- B: Well, I don't recall that he was. I don't recall anything that he said to me particularly about press relations. I mean, he was involved of course in the character of the reporting that was being done and disturbed by it, as we all were.
- G: Did he have a formula for improving the situation?
- B: No, not a formula I think, but he did, particularly after Tet, urge us to do more speaking and more talking, which we did.
- G: Didn't he raise the issue with some of the publishers and editors?
- B: He may have, I don't know.
- G: How about the South Vietnamese press during Tet? Did they tend to cover the events objectively?
- B: Yes, pretty well, I think so.
- G: Anything else on press relations that we haven't talked about?
- B: No, I don't think so. As I say, there was some good reporting. Of course, Peter Braestrup's *Big Story* was very good, very interesting. And we did have some good reporters there, Bob Kaiser from the [*Washington*] *Post*, I've mentioned Butterfield, several others.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]