LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

LBJ Library
2313 Red River Street
Austin, Texas 78705

http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/biopage.asp

PETER R. ROSENBLATT ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW I
PREFERRED CITATION

For Internet Copy:
Transcript, Peter R. Rosenblatt Oral History Interview I, 7/26/84, by Ted Gittinger, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

For Electronic Copy on Compact Disc from the LBJ Library:
Transcript, Peter R. Rosenblatt Oral History Interview I, 7/26/84, by Ted Gittinger, Electronic Copy, LBJ Library.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of

PETER R. ROSENBLATT

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Peter R. Rosenblatt, of Washington, D.C., do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted with me on July 26, 1984, in Washington, D.C., and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Peter R. Rosenblatt — January 23, 2006

Donor — Date

Allen Weinstein — 3/3/06

Archivist of the United States — Date

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 26, 1984

INTERVIEWEE PETER R. ROSENBLATT

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Ambassador Rosenblatt's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. Rosenblatt, when did you first become involved with Southeast Asia affairs?

R: Well, when I came to the White House, which was just after Labor Day in 1966, I had absolutely no background in Southeast Asia, in Asia, or any part of the Pacific. And I don't know if you want me to get into how I got there, but--

G: Certainly.

R: I had come from New York and was fed up with the practice of law in a large firm there. I wanted to get out and get into government. I had been coming down to Washington and had arranged interview after interview in the foreign affairs agencies over a period of months and finally came up with an offer to be deputy assistant general counsel of AID [Agency for International Development] for the Near East and South Asia. But my family and I were on friendly terms with some people who were close to President Johnson and the administration who arranged for me to see Marvin Watson, who was then the President's appointment secretary, and Jim Jones, who was his assistant. I was about to become Marvin's number two assistant when Marvin told me that the President had yanked out the

money for his second assistant. Marvin therefore encouraged me to accept the AID job, which I was very happy to do. That was in early July. Then Marvin called me just before Labor Day 1966. He said, "Come on over and talk to Bob Komer." I did and Bob hired me for his office, which had been established a few months earlier. He knew that I was certainly no expert on Southeast Asia. I had not had any direct--I had never worked for the federal government before. I didn't have any specific foreign affairs experience other than the academic and a deep interest in the subject. So he said to me when he hired me that one of the reasons that he wanted me to come on board was that I had been an assistant district attorney in New York County and he wanted somebody that wasn't going to get hung up on clearances and bureaucratic garbage. He wanted me to go and get stuff for him and not be put off by form and stuff like that.

So that's how I came in, but I had no background in the subject at all. Indeed, when I first came in I found myself in very distinguished company, not only with Bob Komer, but with Bill Leonhart, who was a senior foreign service officer, his deputy; and Dick Holbrooke, who was a foreign service officer who had spent four years in Vietnam; Bob Montague, [who] was at that time a lieutenant colonel, had spent four years in Vietnam; Chuck Cooper, an economist from the RAND Corporation.

G: Was it Chuck Cooper?

R: Yes.

G: Not Chet Cooper.

R: Not Chet. Charles Cooper, Charles N. from the RAND Corporation. He had also background in Vietnam; and Dick Moorstein, who was also a sinologist of some standing,

spoke Chinese and [had] considerable experience in that part of the world; an economist, also from RAND. So this was fairly intimidating company for somebody who didn't have any background in the subject.

G: What were you supposed to do exactly?

R: Well, I think what Bob had in mind initially was that I was going to be the person who was going to track particularly AID. He had Bob Montague, who was tracking DOD [Department of Defense], had Dick Holbrooke for State; he had the economists who were working across the board on economic issues. But he didn't have anybody who was looking at what AID was doing and USIA [United States Information Agency] and a few other agencies, as circumstances required. The function of his office for the President was to track what the agencies were doing in Vietnam and to oblige them, when necessary, to cooperate, and to make sure that nobody was going off the tracks or off the reservation with respect to the President's policy. AID played a very big role in the area of our office's responsibilities.

So the first thing that he had me do was to go every morning to the staff meeting at AID, find out what they were doing, give him a report on it, and then he would tell me to go follow up certain subjects that emerged from those meetings or give me other assignments. And then, of course, as I got into it, other things developed and I began to track interests of my own. In addition, I was to serve as his special assistant in that it was my task to cull all the cable traffic for him and route the stuff around the office. So when I first came in, I was--you might say I came in in a sort of inferior capacity. I wasn't dealing with State and Defense where all the big action was for the office, because I didn't have the background.

The way he had me working with AID and doing the cable traffic and from the cable traffic, he would send stuff back to me to track for him and do other things. I got into it gradually and in a very intelligent sort of way I think.

G: What particularly was Mr. Komer showing an interest in, from your point of view? What did he particularly put you to doing in terms of what AID was doing? Were there programs that got his particular attention?

R: I don't think he held a very high opinion of AID or of their people who were doing much of the work over there on Vietnam. I think that his main interest was to have me energize them. He would send me these notes written on the corner of a cable. I would send something in to him and point out that thus and so wasn't exactly consonant with the things that they were telling me over there, and he would say, "Needle them, push them, explode them," you know how he expresses himself. It was constantly an effort to energize them, to push them, to move them, and to force them into conformity with the President's policy and into coordination with the other agencies.

G: Coordination is the key word I think in this whole business of what we call pacification for want of a better word. Who was coordinating pacification? Was it being coordinated?

R: Well, when I first came in in 1966 nobody was coordinating pacification on the other side. We were coordinating it on the Washington side. Our brief didn't extend to Saigon formally though in practice the two ends were inseparable. We were the Washington end. Komer I think did a fantastic job in knitting these agencies together, but on the Saigon side there was no one. Indeed when I took my first trip there in December and January of 1966-67, while I was there the issue arose of the establishment of a new Saigon-side agency

to coordinate the pacification program over there. I got very much involved in the establishment of an agency, the name of which I can no longer remember, which lasted only for a month or two.

G: OCO [Office of Civil Operations]?

R: OCO, that's right. I worked with some of the staff people on the other side, particularly Frank Wisner and Len Maynard.

G: What was the second name, sir?

R: Leonard Maynard, who was a senior member of the AID mission in Saigon. We worked on putting that one together and then several months later it was phased out in favor of CORDS [Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support], which was simply OCO with the addition of Defense.

G: Right. Ambassador [Bill] Porter, I think, headed OCO, didn't he?

R: He did.

G: Why was that given such a short time to succeed?

R: There were doubts from the very beginning as to whether any organization could function meaningfully without the participation of Defense. The Defense presence was so overwhelming and Defense so obviously had the necessary resources to make anything work that leaving them out just didn't work. Of course, there were other problems bringing them in. I think everyone was pretty well satisfied that bringing them in with all those problems was better than leaving them out.

G: Did you go to the Guam conference?

R: No.

G: Did Mr. Komer know at that time that he was going to Saigon to head CORDS?

R: I don't know exactly when he found out about it. And anything I would say about it would be pure speculation. I wouldn't want to attempt that.

G: Why send Mr. Komer out to head it when you already had Ambassador Porter on the spot? Was he due for rotation or something?

R: I think that Bill Porter left within a matter of months of the time that Bob Komer got there. I suspect that the reason the President wanted Komer out there was because he knew and liked Komer, knew that Komer was a dynamo, terribly energetic and active and so forth, and I think that's the kind of guy that he wanted there. He wanted his man in Saigon, somebody that he knew and knew was loyal. Loyalty was terribly important to him. I think he wanted to have his own, quote, "eyes and ears" in Saigon, a guy that he knew; he didn't know Porter. I think Porter was extremely good.

G: Was there independent communication between Mr. Komer and the White House after he went to Saigon?

R: I'm sure that there was.

G: Well, this, it seems to me, would be a drastic change in function for the office that you were in, when Mr. Komer went to Saigon. What substantive effect did it have on your operation?

R: Well, I think the guts came out of the operation when he went over there. The decision was made to leave the office in the hands of Bob's deputy, Bill Leonhart, and Bill did not have the energy, the drive, the determination to get things done, for whatever reason, that Bob Komer did. And the office really, to all intents and purposes, substantially stopped

functioning when Komer went over there. Although to a certain extent, all of us were still in contact with Bob over there, Leonhart did not, at least to my knowledge, ever attempt to impede the communications between the staff and the White House and Bob Komer. Many of us found ourselves doing things for him directly in Washington.

G: How would you communicate?

R: Telephone, cable, frequent telephone communication.

G: Some people have expressed an opinion that Mr. Komer was engaged in a little White House espionage for LBJ, that he was LBJ's, as you used the term, eyes and ears. And then he got caught at one point. Did you ever hear this?

R: I don't know that story.

G: Okay. You visited Saigon in 1966 and 1967.

R: I was there twice. The first time was when the--I think it was December 6, 1966, until about January 10 or so, 1967, and the second time was from sometime in early December 1967 until February 11, 1968, so I was there over Tet.

G: That's good. What was the second visit? That's a fairly long visit--two and a half months--were you there? What were you doing on that trip?

R: By that time Komer was of course over there. He had his own staff of very, very competent people at CORDS who were doing investigations and giving him advice on various things. I think he was perfectly well aware that we in what was then the Leonhart office were quite underutilized, so he figured why not get some help from some of us over there. One thing that he was particularly anxious to get a firmer handle on was a kind of amorphous operation, which dealt with the refugee situation in Vietnam. So he asked me to come over

and do a study of how to streamline the refugee operation in-country. I went over for that purpose and I went all over the country. It was absolutely fascinating. I got into every corner of the country, sometimes with GVN [Government of Vietnam] ministers, sometimes with U.S. military, sometimes with CORDS people, and looked at the refugee situation from top to bottom. I found it the mess [that] Komer knew that it was and did a report for him on my observations and what I thought needed to be done to improve it. Of course, my stay was unexpectedly extended by Tet.

G: I want to come back to Tet, but the refugee thing, that was kind of a hot issue at one point. Weren't the Kennedys making a big to-do about that?

R: Yes, indeed. In fact while I was out there I met up one day I think we had breakfast in Can Tho with Kennedy's refugee staffers. There was a fellow by the name of Powers.

G: Dave Powers?

R: No, it wasn't the Powers from the White House; it was the guy who practices law here. And two or three other guys, I think they're probably still around town. They were going out quite clearly to do a hatchet job on the refugee situation. They didn't really understand it. They came there as good, practical down-to-earth lawyers, doing a bit of fact-finding and trying to put together some conclusions for Kennedy. They did ultimately put together a report, which was not very good. I met with them for the purpose of, first of all, trying to understand what their approach was and, secondly, to try and unsettle their determination that they knew what the situation was about by throwing out some facts that they weren't aware of. In other words, making them take a second and maybe a third look at a lot of the things that they were ready to draw conclusions about. I found them perfectly decent and to

a certain extent quite open-minded group of people, but they knew what their political mission was. And one way or another, it was my opinion that they fully intended to fulfill that mission.

G: So you did not have overwhelming success at moderating their report to--?

R: Oh, certainly not. I don't think there was anything that anyone could have said that would have substantially deterred them, but I think they were basically honest people. They were simply people who were looking for a way to criticize a war, which many people had quite honest differences about and draw conclusions that would favor their political mission. There was no question in my mind that they had a political mission.

G: There's a question, which may never be resolved in this connection about the refugees. It seems to me there were two schools of thought. One was that the refugees were fleeing the devastation that American firepower was creating in the countryside. Of course, you first have to accept that that was true. The other school of thought was that they were fleeing the Viet Cong. Did you come to some conclusion about this, or was it possible to come to a conclusion on that question?

R: Well, I don't think every refugee fled because of an identical reason affecting every other refugee. Sometimes they fled for the one reason that you assign and sometimes the other, and sometimes simply to get out of a situation where they were caught between the lines. But there were many different kinds of refugees; there were refugees that would flee because they were in an area that was involved in fighting and then they would try to get back just as soon as they could to their homes. As you know, the Vietnamese are profoundly attached to their immediate localities. There were others that were more or less

permanently resettled that had been taken out of an area, let's say, that was under firm VC control and they didn't want to go back to it, so they were beginning to remake their lives elsewhere. Some of these were satisfactorily resettled; some were quite unsatisfactorily resettled. So I think you could probably find an exception for any rule that you wanted to articulate or try to articulate about the status of the refugees. But the thing that perturbed me about it was that the GVN was not really doing anything at all other than just giving them enough rice to keep body and soul together for a while, not for very long, and then let them scratch for themselves thereafter. I thought that from the standpoint of CORDS and our office's mission that this was not only tragic in human terms but it was foolish politically. Because these were people who, having fled and having been uprooted, could have been used to good political purpose to help achieve the aims of the GVN, to consolidate their control in the country, and they weren't doing it. That's why I wrote the report that I did.

G: Most of these people were peasants, I take it?

R: Yes, they were mostly from the countryside, although after Tet you had a good many urban refugees, but I think they were just temporary. They tended to filter back into their cities as soon as the fighting was over.

G: Was there a serious attempt to resettle these people after your report?

R: Well, shortly after my report--as a matter of fact, I completed the report after I left the office I think, or just as I was leaving, so I never had an opportunity to follow up what happened thereafter. That was when I went off with Marvin Watson to the Post Office Department.

G: Was there land available to resettle these people?

R: There was plenty of land.

G: What would it have taken to put the two together?

R: Well, what you needed to do is to get the GVN to focus, and it wouldn't have taken much by way of resources, to focus on finding new land that was available for people within the scope of their revolutionary development programs. They knew what areas they were going to try to secure and within those areas there were open spots that could be used for resettlement of refugees. I don't know to what extent they did it.

G: Okay. You were there during Tet. Well, you've got a story to tell, I suspect, about Tet. Where were you when the fireworks began?

R: Well, I was in a fascinating house that was well known to the American mission in Saigon. It was called 47 Phan Thanh Gian.

G: You better spell that for me.

R: P-H-A-N T-H-A-N-H G-I-A-N. It's one of the main boulevards of Saigon and, I don't know if you know the geography of Saigon, but Phan Thanh Gian is the street that goes from downtown toward the Bien Hoa Bridge. The Bien Hoa Bridge is just two blocks from number 47 and it's the edge of the city, it's the northeastern part of the city. One of the major--well, first about the house. The house was originally built by Emperor Bao Dai for his mistress, one of his mistresses, and it was a lovely little place with a beautiful garden and a high wall around it. It had been used by various of our more distinguished younger people in the mission. The chief tenants during the Johnson period were Frank Wisner and Paul Hare. When I first came to Saigon in 1966 and first met Frank, he was living there.

When I came back the second time--I lived with Len Maynard during that first visit--the second visit, I was invited to stay there by the two guys who were living there at the time. That was Dave Kenney, who was in the evaluation division of CORDS, a foreign service officer, and Mike Cook, who was doing the same thing. So I was staying there the night that Tet began. It began so far as we were concerned with the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] coming across the Bien Hoa Bridge.

G: Was it the NVA?

R: Yes, yes. I mean, I didn't see them personally, but people who were there at the time told me there was no question, both from their manner of speech, which they heard and the way they were dressed and everything else that they were NVA. They came across the bridge to seize the radio station, which was two blocks in a different direction from number 47. We were quite well aware, Dave and Mike and I, the only people in the house that night, that the NVA were in charge of our neighborhood, there was no two ways about it. There was a machine gun set up several feet from our house. By God, it was the ARVN that got our chestnuts out of the fire the next morning. They came in there with a couple of tanks; a tank was knocked out about a block from our house; they rooted them out of the radio station, which ultimately went up in smoke. We watched that happen. It was a fairly tense night, because we really had no idea what they were going to do. We had some weapons in the house and I guess all of us knew a little bit about how to use them. But, God, there was nothing much you could have done with some old rusty pistols and a few carbines, and there we were. So after the first night when the ARVN came in and bailed us out, it was just fine. It was a matter of waiting for the thing to end and we saw a good deal of what

was going on, both in Gia Dinh province which we could see, surrounding Saigon, which we could see from where we were, the rooftops. And we went down to Cholon and saw what was going on. But of course nobody was able to do very much for the U.S. Government at the time.

G: How long into February were you in Saigon then?

R: I left on February 11.

G: So, is it fair to say that you had not really had a good chance to assess the impact of Tet on your programs?

R: It was difficult, except to the extent that one could see what was going on from the vantage point of Saigon. I was completely knocked out so far as functioning in the rest of the country was concerned, but the combination of my own observation with the cable flow that I began to see when I came back here gave me a pretty good appreciation of what was happening. I was just so shocked when I came back here and I began to see what kind of coverage Tet had been given by the press.

G: Would you contrast the coverage with what you were seeing in the cables and what you had seen personally?

R: Well, it seemed to me that we had certainly been surprised by Tet. Not entirely surprised. We were warned the night before it began.

G: What kind of a warning was that? I'm interested in that.

R: I wish I could remember, but U.S. Government people were warned that something was going to happen; stay off the streets. I think there was probably something on the radio and maybe the press.

G: "Stay off the streets." That's kind of unusual in Saigon, isn't it?

R: Very unusual, very unusual. There was no clear warning of exactly what was going to happen, but I remember very distinctly that we all expected something was going to happen. We didn't know what. And--where was I?

G: Oh, you were contrasting the coverage in the press and the cables and so on.

R: Oh, yes. It seemed to me that even though we had been surprised by the magnitude of this thing, that the NVA's expectations of what they were going to accomplish in Saigon contrasted sharply with the results. For instance, the building next to ours was a tall apartment building of about twelve stories which was occupied by U.S. people, and we used to go up there every day and watch what was going on from the roof. There were a number of people there who told me that they had been in the building the night that Tet began, saw the NVA troops cross the Bien Hoa Bridge and shout and yell, of course in Vietnamese, which these people understood. I, of course, did not. That they were telling people to come out of their houses and join the revolution because the revolution had now come to Saigon, and nobody came out. They just paraded up and down the street waving their flags and shouting, and nothing happened, nobody came out, there was no response. One heard those stories repeated in place after place around Saigon. It was clear that they expected that their arrival, their mere arrival, was going to start a popular manifestation against the government. It didn't. They got soundly trounced, largely by the ARVN. It was days before American troops got to Saigon in any numbers, and the whole effort, the attack against the [U.S.] Embassy, which got so much publicity, seemed to me at the time and at that place to have been a total failure, except perhaps in terms of the impression that

it would make at home. But they had gotten no place, they had discommoded a few people in the Embassy briefly, but in terms of operational affect, it didn't have any. And while Saigon, particularly Cholon, was pretty badly torn up by the fighting, again they didn't succeed and they didn't get any echo at all from the people. So coming back here and finding the coverage came as a shock. I thought that it was, hearing as I did about what happened in the rest of the country, that Tet was a major military defeat for the other side.

G: What about the impact on government officials in your circle, people that you knew? Some writer, one of them has said that Tet was like a lightning flash and it revealed all the doubters to one another. Was there anyone in your office or anyone that you talked to regularly who--?

R: I couldn't answer that, because I didn't have very much contact with the GVN officials during the few days after the beginning of Tet that I was there. I was pretty well locked up with the Americans. We were--

G: That's primarily what I meant, about when you came back to the States then and resumed your duties back here, what was the impact of the Tet offensive on U.S. Government officials?

R: Oh. Well, I think that the government officials that I saw when I came back here were badly shaken, really lost their confidence in the whole thing. It was straight downhill from there on.

G: How long was it before you were able to get a good picture of what had happened to the pacification program in the countryside after Tet?

R: Just a few weeks, not very long.

G: What was your assessment of it?

R: My assessment was that it had been set back, but because of the enormous losses that the VC in particular had sustained as distinguished from the NVA, it could be gotten back together again if we could just restore American morale, I mean Washington morale. In fact that proved to be the case. Within two years the pacification program reached its apogee.

G: Yes. How long then were you in this government position after Tet? You left--

R: In the White House, not very long. I left in I think it was May.

G: Yes. That's when you went over to the Post Office.

R: Yes.

G: Why did it take us so long--maybe that's a personal judgment, but it seems to me that it took a long time for the ARVN, in particular, to get out of its enclave and back into the countryside in the wake of the Tet offensive. Is that a fair assessment?

R: Yes.

G: What was wrong there?

R: Well, in the best of times most of the ARVN had to be pushed and shoved and manhandled into the front. Well, I don't have to tell you they had been fighting so long that I suppose after that many years of warfare, all of it fought on your own soil, you're not looking for confrontation, and they weren't. I think it was only when they began to realize that all was not lost that they began to get back into the swing of things. But that really is just the impression that I got from afar, because I was no longer involved at that time.

G: The CIA field reporting seems to have been rather pessimistic in the wake of Tet as to what the impact of it was. Were you reading that traffic as well?

R: You mean on the Vietnamese? Well, I think to a certain extent the Vietnamese were reflecting--at least the upper echelon Vietnamese--were reflecting some of the stuff that got filtered back to them from the Americans. By the time that I was involved in Vietnam, the Vietnamese were so totally pushed aside in terms of the operation of the war that they had sort of--. We seemed to express, in everything that we did, we expressed the attitude that they were incompetent, that we could do everything very much better, and they shrugged their shoulders and stepped aside and said, "Okay, you do it." Therefore it didn't take very long until they began to express or to exhibit the view that since it was all up to us, if we were beginning to lose our nerve, what was there for them to do?

That, I think, was one of the most difficult aspects of the whole pacification operation. We had so taken a take-charge kind of position *vis-a-vis* the Vietnamese that trying to operate as we did through the GVN to get things done in pacification became more and more difficult, because while we were telling them that we had all kinds of ideas about how they could do things better, in the final analysis it was up to them to do it or not do it.

G: I think you're saying they got in the habit of not doing it.

R: Yes.

G: And we regarded it primarily as a job to get done. That's an interesting perspective.

R: Well, it was one that--I learned a lot from that experience. When only eight years later I took charge of an office, which was similarly constituted. It was an inter-agency office,

dealing with a vastly different problem but with people who had been similarly, in a sense, demoralized because of their conviction as well as our own that we could do things better. It taught me a lot about how to deal with them, and I am referring of course to the Micronesian situation where the Micronesians were totally persuaded that they were incompetent and we were all competent. Dealing with them through the interagency prism with me now in charge of it, I think that experience of dealing with the Vietnamese taught me a lot that was useful.

G: Let me pause a second. Did your areas of responsibility primarily include AID, or did they extend to the revolutionary development *cadre* teams that were being trained at Vung Tau I think?

R: Yes, Vung Tau, Major Be[?].

G: Major Be. Did you know Jean Sauvageot?

R: Sauvageot, yes. I didn't know him well. I just knew him whenever he came through the office, which he always did when he was in Washington, and I saw him in Vietnam. But I wasn't a primary point of contact between the RD operation and our office; that was mostly [Richard] Holbrooke and--

G: I have to say you smiled when you said Major Be. What were you thinking?

R: Oh, he's a real character.

G: In what way?

R: A very unusual Vietnamese. He was one who was not prepared to let us do it all, and I think he got the admiration of an awful lot of Americans because of that.

G: How did he go about not letting us do it all?

R: Well, he took charge of that operation in Vung Tau and ran it his own way. He took support from us, but he didn't--nobody told Major Be what to do.

G: How about--was it General Nguyen Duc Thang in Saigon, wasn't he overall minister for rural development?

R: For revolutionary development, I believe so.

G: Did you have much contact with him?

R: None.

G: What did we do best in pacification? What was our strong suit?

R: Probably organization. The Vietnamese were so accustomed to that combination of Oriental and French bureaucracy that for them it was always a question of the boss man telling a whole collection, a pyramid of inferiors, what to do. I think that we were able to advise them about how to structure a bureaucratic effort of this sort in such a way as to achieve results and to engage the interest and patriotism of the lower-downs who were doing the work and exposing their hides. I think our example of how we conducted things did have a certain impact particularly on the lower echelons of the ARVN military and the GVN officialdom. One of the most difficult things that I found to do when I was in Vietnam or here dealing with the Vietnamese was to get the Vietnamese officials and bureaucrats off their butts and out into the field and prepared to enter into a meaningful exchange of opinions and views with us. They were so inhibited by their superiors and their orders and the rigidity of their structure. We came along with such a totally different approach, it was probably completely culturally alien to them.

But I think as the pacification program went along, some of it rubbed off and they learned something from it and probably we were responsible for that. Of course, also, we made very substantial contributions to pacification by offering supplies and money, which they wouldn't otherwise have had, and that was indispensable. But ultimately pacification was not and could not have been a great success on its own. I think that was apparent throughout that period. Pacification was going to work if the main unit war was successful and we got the NVA off their backs and if they could handle the VC [Viet Cong]. And maybe for all we know, I don't pretend to understand their culture or philosophy, perhaps anything would have worked once we got the main units off their backs. But certainly [the] pacification program was not so designed as to contribute much in the military sense unless it was capable of operating behind a very substantial military shield. Now we see this argument going on in Central America that's really basically a repetition of what we went through in Vietnam.

G: Is this basically a chicken and egg question? Security versus population control, I think is the way to put it.

R: Yes, I think it is. But I do believe that once you have a certain minimum sense of loyalty by the population towards the authorities, a minimum sense, then the burden shifts to the military side and you have to create conditions of security. I don't know enough about Central America to know whether that minimum condition has been achieved. It certainly had not been achieved in most parts of Vietnam. You could see there were areas of Vietnam, particularly where the Hoa Hao were in An Giang province and next door, whatever the name of that province was, where there were a lot of Hoa Hao where there

just wasn't a VC in sight. They just left them alone completely, because it was a totally different situation.

G: How about the Cao Dai, were they still pretty active?

R: They were pretty active when I was there, and you didn't get much action in Tay Ninh, in or near Tay Ninh. But that changed later on. One of the more interesting operations that I saw when I was out there was Operation Cedar Falls, which was a massive movement of refugees from a village called Ben Suc in Tay Ninh province. That's where that picture up there was taken.

G: Are you showing a picture of--is that you in the--?

R: That's me and that's Bob Sweitzer [Schweitzer?] looking down the hole.

G: And you're crawling out of the--is that a tunnel or a spider hole or what?

R: No, that actually is a grain storage area. This was one of the most devastating jobs that was done on what we were doing in Vietnam, by a man by the name of Jonathan Schell, who wrote a book called *The Village of Ben Suc*, which was a lie from beginning to end. He claimed that this peaceful village had been razed and people, arbitrarily, for some bureaucratic reason, had been shipped off to a refugee camp. I wanted to go see it and I didn't want to go there under a sort of White House *imprimatur*. So I went there with a friend of mine. This was in early January of 1968, I believe it was, or maybe it was early January of 1967. I can't remember. 1967. I went there with Robin Pell, a friend who was in the AID mission in Saigon, a personal friend who took that picture, and a Vietnamese journalist.

Tape 1, Side 2

R: Without asking any questions or having any paperwork done, we got into Robin's VW and went off to where the refugees had been relocated. We had a look at that, and we got a lift in a chopper out to Lai Ke, the headquarters of the First Division. We waited around on the chopper pad in Lai Ke until another--I guess it was a Medevac--came along and was going back out to Ben Suc. We got a ride with it, and we landed in Ben Suc and air strikes were going on, the whole battle was still going on. We got out of the chopper and started roaming around when I saw a brown-clad figure off in the distance and waved and went over there. Turned out to be a classmate of my brother's at West Point, who was the brigade exec; the last time I had seen him he had carried me around on his shoulders. I was a little boy when my brother was at the Point.

So we got a cook's tour of Ben Suc, and he showed me little huts in the village, which could not, in his opinion, have been taken out with anything less than a direct hit by a two hundred and fifty pound bomb, because it was all full of reinforced logs and dug down and so forth. The whole village was full of tunnels. There was enough room under the village in the storage areas, he said, for a division to live on for three months; there was enough grain in there for that. There were of course tunnels all over the place and revetments and this and that. This was the place that Jonathan Schell wrote about, wrote a series of pieces for the *New Yorker* which had a rather profound impact at the time, and later it came out as a book. Well, what can you do when things like this happen?

G: Were there repercussions for your office when this came out?

S: No more than usual. There were so many other things all happening at the same time. But I certainly felt a sense of acute frustration, knowing that the book was just a goddamned lie from beginning to end.

G: Did you ever talk to Schell about this?

R: No.

G: Do you have any idea what his purpose was, other than journalism?

R: I can't imagine. Well, I can imagine. I don't know.

G: Speaking of Ben Suc, what happened to those people? Were you able to follow up on what happened to the people who were taken out of the village?

R: I was only able to follow until I left the White House, which is approximately a year and a half later. They were resettled I forget where it was. It was down the river from Ben Suc, but it was well within U.S. controlled areas. They were put up in rather nice housing in a place that didn't look at all like a Vietnamese village, you know. It was some American planner's idea, I suppose, of how you resettle people. Sanitary, it was open, it was nice; the only problem was they didn't have any means of making a living. I'm told that there were VC agents who went in and out of there pretty much at will, and they were from the heart of VC territory and those people were committed. I guess they managed somehow to survive. God knows how Vietnamese refugees survived in these circumstances where they weren't getting any food from the government, they weren't able to grow anything, they didn't have any agricultural land, and they were just stuck there in these developments. So there they were. They were still there when I left office.

G: Did you ever brief LBJ about any phase of operations that you were responsible for?

R: No, interestingly enough, I was never given that opportunity. When I came back from Tet in February of 1968, I told Leonhart that I thought that it might be useful if I were given an opportunity to talk to Johnson and to some others on the staff and give them my own firsthand impressions of what it was all about, which contrasted so sharply with what was going around at the time. I guess the most I ever got out of it was a nod of the head from Leonhart, nothing further. I felt that I was there working for him and I was not about to go over his head, even though I knew lots of people, of course, in other parts of the staff.

G: Do you remember where you were when you heard the content of Johnson's March 31 speech?

R: Yes, I was at home watching it on TV. I had no advance knowledge.

G: Do you remember who was with you?

R: My wife.

G: What was your reaction?

R: Shock. I can still feel the shock today. I never before and have never since really admired any president as much as I did Johnson, and I felt when he announced that he was going to leave that it might be until the end of my life that I would ever see again a president whom I felt I could admire as much as I did him. I felt very, really profoundly upset about it.

G: And shortly after that was when you went with Marvin Watson to the next department.

R: Yes.

G: What did some of you think about the war? What did you talk about when you got together for a drink after the day was over?

R: I think I can say honestly that those of us in Komer's office almost never in private conversation touched on the rights or wrongs or whys or wherefores of the war. What we did talk about was the way in which the war was being managed, and in that I think we were all united in profound discouragement about the way in which the war was being run. I don't know why it is. I guess I can only speak for myself, I can't speak for the others in that office or many others with whom I dealt in the U.S. government, why we never got into the issue of was Vietnam the right war and the right time and all that. But I don't know of anyone that felt any sense of satisfaction at all in the way in which the thing was being managed. Of course we were responsible in our office for coordinating a vital aspect of it. I think we were just endlessly discouraged about the way in which it was done.

G: What in particular did you find bothersome? What was being mismanaged?

R: A lack of understanding of how to deal with the Vietnamese, which I touched on earlier. The sense that we knew how to do everything best and therefore we would take it over, the inability to deal sensitively and sensibly with a people who, in the final analysis, had to take the responsibility for whatever happened there, and the tendency of the American bureaucracy--well, there were two countervailing tendencies. One was always to take over more and more responsibility and do things ourselves because, after all, we understood each other; we didn't understand them.

The other tendency was to shy away from greater responsibility in Vietnam. Nobody in the bureaucracy really wanted to get involved. We needed good people to go over there and to assume responsibility for managing things on the civilian side, on the CORDS side. I'm not referring now to the military. And we had to go out and dragoon

those people. Dick Holbrooke and I, this was one of our assignments from Komer, went over to State and began to simply tell the foreign service people that we needed X number of people and, by God, we had to have them, the President wanted them and that was all there was to it. We'd get all kinds of excuses and statements about how it wasn't possible and all the rest. So we'd have that kind of thing. Everybody shying away from it, nobody really wants to get involved, or have any more to do with it than was absolutely necessary, and we saw that in our own office with Leonhart.

On the other hand, operationally once you were involved in a project and a group of Americans were given responsibility for getting things done, their tendency was always to do it themselves and to ignore the Vietnamese. We'd never had any kind of a sensible program for involving the Vietnamese in their own war.

G: Have you read Komer's book, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*?

R: No, I never did.

G: You'd find it fascinating, I think, and probably gratifying.

Who nicknamed Komer the Blow Torch, do you know?

R: (Laughter) I don't know. I think it may have come about at about the time of a great Tet party that we gave at 47 Phan Thanh Gian, which was the subject of some criticism by what's-his-name who wrote that book--you know, [David] Halberstam. We gave that party, I think it took place either the day before the Tet offensive began or two days before, and Komer arrived wearing an orange, flame-retardant suit. That was to do honor to his nickname of Blow Torch.

But, no, I think it was given to him about that time and there were perfectly good reasons for him having that name. That's how he operated. He breathed fire at people who were not moving fast enough and getting things done. That was his way of energizing people. I think, by and large, it worked. He had interesting relationships with people. People who I think lacked a basic element of self-confidence found it difficult to deal with Komer, because they would feel that he was down on them and they would become defensive.

I think people who worked for or with Bob understood that he was an enormously capable guy and that his whole focus was on hands-on immediately getting things done. Now, you could criticize him for perhaps his overall perceptions in certain respects. I think, for instance, the hamlet evaluation system was utter nonsense; it displayed no understanding at all of the realities of Vietnamese life. Yet, you know, he had problems, too. He had to get evaluations back for a bureaucracy that was thirsty for statistics, and what was he going to base them on. So while he may have sometimes done some things or been involved in programs that others disparaged, his method of getting things done, of energizing the bureaucracy, the loyalty that he had from his own people in CORDS and in Washington I think was quite impressive.

G: Of course, he became ambassador to Turkey.

R: Yes. Well, Johnson tried to bail him out of Vietnam. That was after his March 3l speech. Tried to get him out of there and sort of dust him off and clean him off for the next administration, if it could be; an effort to try and save him.

G: Yes.

R: But Bob behaved so loyally toward LBJ and so enthusiastically carried out his instructions that that was impossible. He was never confirmed and Nixon kicked him out immediately.

G: You say you had a Tet party at 47 Phan Thanh Gian. George Jacobson had a Tet party, too, up at the Embassy. I was wondering if maybe you had made that one, or--

R: Oh, no, we were the hosts. We had about a dozen people including a bunch of journalists and some of the people in the Embassy and, of course, those of us who were living in the house. Somewhere or other I have the invitation. It was called--the party was called "The Light at the End of the Tunnel."

(Laughter)

Facetiously, of course. I don't think anyone really believed that there was any light at the end of the tunnel. That was before Tet. It was a hell of a party, I must say.

G: And then you had to get up rather early.

R: No, it must have [been] the night after that.

G: Oh, it was the following night. I see.

R: Because we were still clearing out the drunks at four or five in the morning. No, we had some there that lasted out until mid-morning.

G: Good heavens.

R: Under the trees somewhere.

(Laughter)

It was a hell of a party.

G: What has been the heritage of Vietnam for America? That's a big question. You do with it what you like.

R: Well, I think our generation is affected by Vietnam in the same way that the previous generation was affected by Munich. In 1972--well, in 1968 I went out to the Chicago convention with Marvin Watson.

G: Oh, you did?

R: I did. Marvin, as you probably know, had been assigned by the President--well, I'm not quite sure what he was assigned to do, but he was there anyway, and he asked me to go out there with him. That was a profoundly shocking experience for me. I mean I was not shocked the way most good Democrats nowadays are supposed to have been shocked. I thought the performance of the Kennedy, McGovern, and McCarthy people was so awful, I had no words for it. Of course, they were the ones who defeated Humphrey in that election. The party was in a shambles for the next four years, and ultimately there was the McGovern experience.

So I suppose by way of answer to your question, Ben Wattenberg, who was a speechwriter for Johnson, and a group of others and I founded an organization right after the 1972 election called Coalition for a Democratic Majority. Whenever it's been necessary, which is about every four years, we've revived the organization and we're still in a sense fighting the Vietnam War. Right now I'm going through one of my periods of--well, my quadrennial periods of depression about the future of the Democratic Party, because I see us still under the influence of that 1968 convention and the 1972 convention. Ben and a few others and I are still running CDM and still trying to carry on that fight to try and get the Democratic Party to get out of its new attitude--well, it's no longer new. But its post-Vietnam attitude of isolationism and to recognize that we're in the world to stay and

things aren't going to go away if we close our eyes and bug out. So I guess CDM is the material expression of the Vietnam legacy in my life. Try to do something about it, but not very successfully, I'm afraid.

G: Who was in your office? Let's start there.

R: All right. Our office was in many ways the hub of the wheel. It was Komer and Leonhart; after Komer left, Leonhart was in charge. Nobody was appointed the new deputy. In fact, interestingly enough, Leonhart was never really given Komer's title of special assistant. He always remained deputy special assistant for all of the time after Komer left.

G: Is this the result of oversight or simply lack of interest on somebody's part?

R: I've heard so many different versions of why, that all I can really say is that I don't know. It was true that outside of the NSC [National Security Council] staff, there was nobody in the White House staff that really understood what we were doing, what we were about, or had any way of knowing how effective or ineffective we were. Apart from the President himself, it was only the people in the agencies that knew whether or not we were effective, not in the White House staff. So after Komer left and literally, well, next to nothing was accomplished by the office after Komer left. I don't think anybody in the White House staff knew it. I've heard things to the effect subsequently that they really didn't understand that.

G: Where were you physically located?

R: We were located on the second floor of the EOB [Executive Office Building], the old EOB now, and I think we all had pretty good access to other people in the White House staff. Most of us were members of the White House Mess, which was vital for us. That was how we cross-fertilized with other people in the staff. Yet, as profoundly important as Vietnam

was to the administration, there was really nobody in the White House staff outside of the NSC that had the slightest knowledge of what we were doing or what we were about or the internal situation inside of Vietnam. And there were not many people in the NSC staff that knew that either.

There was, as I recall it, Bill Jorden, who was involved solely in political issues particularly in relations with the allies and subsequently, I guess, with efforts towards negotiation with the NV [North Vietnamese?]. But that was one of the oddities, I guess, about our organizational set-up. We were focused almost entirely outside of the White House community and had very little functional interchange within the White House staff. Of course there would be memoranda back and forth when we needed something or when somebody needed information from us or press relations and that sort of thing. But there was nowhere outside of our office that really functioned on a day-to-day basis with the kinds of issues that we were dealing with. So all of our efforts were attuned towards the Embassy in Saigon and CORDS and the agencies in Washington.

Now, again, I have to tell you things as I saw them. Obviously Komer and after him Leonhart, had frequent contact with the people at their own level in the agencies. At the McNamara and [John] McNaughton and Bundy, and so forth, level. We staff people, for our part, had daily contact with their assistants and with people at a lower level in each of the agencies, so that, for instance, I guess our major point of contact in State was Tony Lake, who was Bundy's staff assistant and who happened to have been a very close friend of Dick Holbrooke's in our office. Then Bob Montague and Volney Warner had their

whole sets of contacts over in the Pentagon, which I hardly ever had anything to do with, and don't know about. I was dealing on a daily basis with Ken Kugel--

G: How do you spell that, sir?

R: K-U-G-E-L. He was the head of whatever they call it, I think there was a Vietnam Working Group or task force or something in AID which was fairly large. As I mentioned earlier, I used to meet with them every day, so I met with Ken, who Komer, by the way, didn't have too much trust in or respect for. That made life a little difficult, and the people who were working under him, some of whom were quite good and some not so good. Then there were people in USIA who had to be dealt with, there were quite a number of people in Agriculture that we were dealing with.

There were always questions of whether the Vietnamese were going to have enough rice from year to year, and that had to be worked out with Agriculture. But since we operated on a tasking basis while Komer was there, and working for him, we tended to work with a different cast of characters, depending on what the task was. For instance, in this effort that I mentioned earlier that Holbrooke and I were involved in in trying to get higher quality people from the agencies, particularly from State, involved in CORDS work, why, we would go over to talk to the head of the Foreign Service Institute. I've forgotten who it was; I think it was Solinger at the time, somebody with a name similar to that. Then the next time around, I recall, there was a problem in how USIA was going to deal with this thing, and I had a whole project--I've forgotten who I dealt with on that at USIA. But each time it was slightly different.

Then when I got involved in the refugee situation, I had extensive contacts with the voluntary agencies, and there was an organizer in AID whose function it was to coordinate the activities of the voluntary agencies in Vietnam, some of which were foreign, some of which were American. So I had a lot to do with them. Of course constant, constant contact with the Embassy through our back channels, on the telephones and always in an effort to try and head off problems or crises involving our bosses and to sort things out, which we very often did.

G: Can you give me an example of that sort of thing? Can you remember any particular hot potato that people were tossing around?

R: I can't remember offhand. If I could get hold of my papers, I'm sure I could--

G: I'll conduct a search in the [LBJ] Library and see what I can come up with.

R: I'm sure that if I had a chance to go through those papers, a whole raft of things would come to mind that have just--I've lost track of.

G: Now, you've mentioned some names, you've mentioned Bob Montague, Dick Holbrooke. Who are some other people who were working in the office at this time, at this level?

R: Well, my predecessor was a foreign service officer by the name of John Sylvester. He was there from the time that the office was established until my arrival. I think that Komer was dissatisfied with John, which is not by any means entirely John's fault. He was an orthodox foreign service officer and he did things more or less by the book and that just didn't comport with Komer's way of doing things. Even though Komer was a career government person, he liked to do things always in the most unorthodox possible way, simply to

demonstrate his freedom from red tape. I think he was as effective as he was in large part because of that.

But, anyway, he and John just didn't match up well together, so I came in to take his place. When I left, I was not replaced. The office, as I have said several times, simply stopped functioning after Komer left. Holbrooke was there from the establishment of the office until I think the end of the Johnson Administration. Colonel Bob Montague was there from the establishment of the office until he went to Vietnam with Komer; he was replaced by Colonel Volney Warner who was really super. Chuck Cooper from RAND was there from the establishment of the office until he went over also with Komer and Montague and became, as I recall it, the economic minister at the Embassy. He was replaced by a Hans Heymann, H-E-Y-M-A-N-N. Hans was a CIA person and went back to the CIA, I believe, at the end of the Johnson Administration.

G: Excuse me, I've come across a Vince Heymann. Is that the same man?

R: No.

G: Not the same man.

R: No. I don't know any Vince Heymann. Hans, as I say, was CIA. Then there was Dick Moorstein. I think Dick remained there until the end of the Johnson Administration. He died several years thereafter; a great loss. Now, we also had in the office for a period of oh, it must have been six months at least, we had Phil Manhard.

G: How do you spell that, sir?

R: M-A-N-H-A-R-D. Phil was a foreign service officer; he was brought in, I'm almost certain, because of a personal relationship with Bill Leonhart. It was never quite explained to us

why he was spending so much time in the office except that we were told that he was preparing himself for assignment to Vietnam. He did in fact go to Vietnam, became province senior adviser in Hue, and achieved some degree of unfortunate fame, because he was captured during the Tet offensive and remained a North Vietnamese prisoner for about five years until he was released.

As it turns out, our paths crossed again, because he became--after he was released, he became Ambassador to Mauritius. His next assignment after that was as deputy to the chief Micronesia negotiator for Nixon and Ford. He was in the deputy's slot, was virtually the only person left in the office at the end of the Ford Administration, and then campaigned very vigorously to get the top job, as it turned out--I wasn't aware of it at the time--against me. Of course [he] failed and when I got that job I asked him to stay on, but he vanished without saying a word to me a week before I got there. But anyway Phil was in that office for quite a while. There were a few other people who drifted in and out. I remember there was a fellow by the name of Bull, B-U-L-L, from the CIA who was there for a while. I think that's about it. I can't remember if there was anyone else.

G: Did you have anything to do with the security programs that were in the countryside, such as Phoenix or [a] special branch of the National Vietnamese Police or any of those?

R: Not directly, no.

G: Who did you deal with most commonly at the State Department, would you say?

R: I think that the person that I dealt with more than anyone else at the State Department, apart from Tony Lake, was the head of the Vietnam Working Group there, and for the life of me I can't remember now who that was. Again, that would have to come back to me from my

papers. There was, as you probably know, a kind of super desk in the State Department, which was called the Vietnam Working Group, and it was a tremendously outsized affair with perhaps a dozen people in it. So we were always working with them, and I can't remember who at any given time was the head of it.

G: Did you have occasion to deal with the CIA directly?

R: Almost never. The CIA account was handled, while Komer was there almost exclusively by Komer because he was himself a CIA person. And I think Holbrooke and Montague worked with him on those things to some limited degree.

G: How about Agriculture?

R: Agriculture was mostly the function of the two economists in the office.

G: So you had refugees primarily and--?

R: Well, I took refugees upon myself. Komer was the one who got me into it. The first time I was over there. I went over--incidentally, my assignment the first time I went over in December of 1966 was to work on Saigon port congestion, which was a major problem. So I went through all that in about two weeks and came up with some recommendations. I can't remember what those recommendations were at this point.

G: I've seen the papers; I remember the issue, yes.

R: For one reason or another, whether it was because of my recommendations or despite them, I can't remember, but I think the problems sort of went away not long afterwards. Then, as I was about to go, as I mentioned earlier, Len Maynard, with whom I was staying in his house, and Frank Wisner approached me and said, "Look, we've got this OCO business getting started. Let's sit down and talk about it for a while, so when you go back you'll

know what we're trying to do over here and *vice versa*." So I got very much involved in the original planning for the establishment of OCO.

Then when I was finishing with that, I got interested--and I don't remember how it happened; probably at the recommendation of Len Maynard and the AID mission--in the refugee business and I began to look into that. Then from that time forward I began to take more and more of an interest in something that I thought was badly neglected by all concerned. It was a major humanitarian and political problem and an opportunity that wasn't being seized. I guess, knowing that, Komer asked me to come back that second time a year later and get deeply involved, which I did.

G: Wasn't there something called Operation Recovery generated during Tet--do I have the name right?--which had to do with dealing with the great influx of refugees?

R: I don't recall precisely what the name of it was, but there was a program for dealing with the refugees that were generated specifically by Tet. But my recollection is that the vast majority of the refugees generated by Tet were not permanent refugees. They were the result of the fact that the cities had been hit for the first time, large numbers of people were displaced by the fighting in the cities and became refugees, but most of them drifted back home after the fighting was over. Most of them were not permanent refugees in the way that people who were driven or relocated out of the countryside became permanent refugees.

G: Right.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I