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

ROBERT LESTER

Interviewed by: Ann Van Dusen
Initial interview date: November 15, 2016

This oral history transcription was made possible through support provided by U.S. Agency for International Development, under terms of Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-F-16-00101. The opinions expressed herein are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTERVIEW

Q: Let's start at the beginning and don't tell me you were born at a very early age that one's been used.

LESTER: I was as old as my tongue and a little bit older than my teeth.

Q: There you go. So go ahead not only date and place of birth but something about your own family background and the things that might have steered you toward international or development work.

LESTER: I was born in the Bronx on April 8th, 1947, Bronx, New York. My dad was the owner of a hardware store in the Bronx and mom used to be a nurse but when she got married she had me and then later my brother and she dropped that job and became a full time mom. My grandparents were all immigrants so I guess they'd have trouble getting into this country today. In any event, my grandparents on my dad's side were from

Vienna and from my mom's side were Latvian and they came over in the early1900's late 1800's. My grandfather had some land, a really tiny patch of mostly rocks that he'd farmed and my other grandfather had, in New York, what we'd call a candy store. He was a tailor and then he owned a candy store which in New York and other places you'd call a luncheonette and they'd serve hamburgers and hot dogs and things like that and also candy, magazines, newspapers and the like. My dad owned a hardware store in the Bronx, that must be thirty years ago, which is no longer there so this is not a plug for it.

Q: Did you ever work in the store?

LESTER: Oh yeah. It was neat because it was one of the old time hardware stores not one of those chains like Loews or Home Depot. I remember he had barrels of good sized nails and you'd walk into the hardware store on a hot summer day and you'd reach into the barrel of nails and your hands got instantly cold. But over the Thanksgiving/Christmas holidays was the biggest time of the year for the store because they not only sold hardware but they sold things like Corning ware and that kind of thing for Christmas presents. So here is this Jewish guy making half of his yearly income selling Christmas presents. Like I said I was born in the Bronx and the Bronx is not fun. After World War, GIs coming back couldn't find places to live and my grandmother on my mother's side had a distant relative who was a slum lord and so he rented an apartment to my parents. I remember my mom telling stories about how she would stay awake at night in order to keep the rats from nibbling on me. I don't remember much about the Bronx, I remember playing ball in a lot filled with glass and cans and bottles and stuff like that and you got to be able to field ground balls pretty well because they were always taking bad bounces and you got to be very good at anticipating which way the ball was going to go.

Q: Was it a fairly stable population that is to say the kids you were in primary school with stayed through high school or was there a lot of turn over?

LESTER: Well in the Bronx we moved when I was six, seven or eight years old so I don't remember much about the projects except the smells. You'd open the window and all these wonderful smells would come into the house and you'd have people downstairs in pushcarts selling fruits and vegetables, it was for the most part a Jewish ghetto. People say that New York is a melting pot, well it's not really a melting pot you have little ghettos because people moved into places where they were most comfortable. When I was about six we moved to the suburbs, which from my parents' standpoint, was Queens, New York, still in the city but it was not the Bronx. It was a cooperative housing project called Clearview. It was on the North Shore of Queens in an area called Whitestone and technically we were part of Whitestone. Whitestone is cut in half by something called the Clearview Expressway and we were on the southern half of Clearview Expressway, which is where the cooperative housing projects were. At the time I think this was the largest segregated cooperative housing project in the country.

North of the Clearview Expressway was the little town of Whitestone or community of Whitestone and that area was mostly single family homes. Our home was it is hard to describe it but it was an apartment but it was only two stories and they were all connected

into horseshoe shaped units, but on the other side of the expressway was the Whitestone of single family homes and guess who grew up there-- Kelly Kammerer. Kelly later went on to University of Virginia School of Law—where I wound up, but because of our age difference, he was there many years before I was.

Q: Is that right?

LESTER: Now the area is all sort of yuppified and gentrified because a lot of people can't afford to pay rents in Manhattan so they've moved out to Queens and this area and it's become quite the thing. Lots of chic restaurants and shops are now located there. But when I was a kid, we all grew up together in pretty tight-knit communities, and we stayed together through high school. There was no movement. Queens seemed to be the promised land.

Q: Was it still a Jewish community or was it much more…

LESTER: It was about 98 percent Jewish but I suspect that percentage has changed. Nearby communities in Whitestone weren't as self-segregated. The main commercial area was an area called Flushing and that's where right now Citi Field where the Mets play, and where the World's Fair was in '64 and, at the time, that area was mostly Italian and Irish. When I went to high school, Bayside High School, about a third of the school was Jewish, a third White Christian and a third African-American Christian.

Q: Did the groups mix?

LESTER: Excuse me?

Q: Did the groups mix much? Did you have friends across the divides or was it pretty stove piped?

LESTER: It was very much stove piped. The thing is high school in New York isn't like high school in suburbia, there is no campus. We took a city bus to get to school and when the bell rang at three o'clock you got on another city bus and you came home. There were no after school events and, in fact, the school had its own tennis courts but for either liability reasons or people just afraid of fights and stuff, the nets were taken down at three o'clock and you couldn't play tennis. No, you went to school, you did your work, you came home and in our community what that meant was when you came home you did your homework, you went outside, you played stickball during the warmer months, you played football during the colder months and sometimes we'd play hockey, roller hockey on pavement. We didn't have any grass so stickball was played in the streets, football was touch tackle in the street and it hurt when you fell once you got tackled. My mom was always patching up my pants because you land on concrete something is going to rip.

Q: Do you remember when you were in high school what you thought you'd be when you grew up or what you thought you wanted? Do you remember even having aspirations?

LESTER: Yeah, I always wanted to teach and I was very much interested in history and government. I read a lot and my dad used to hate that. He always blamed my mother because I was always reading and he said, "He needs to be more social, he needs to go out there and meet more people." But I was quite happy reading and one of the first books I remember reading was Advice and Consent. I was fascinated by the stuff so I thought teaching would be a good thing. I graduated high school when I was sixteen because in New York City you could, based on tests that you took in sixth grade, skip the eighth grade and do a year and a half at night. So that's what I did plus I started kindergarten early. But in any case I left when I was sixteen years old and because I really liked the idea of government, history and political science and stuff like that I went to GW, George Washington, as an undergraduate and where I was introduced to AID.

Q: How were you introduced to it?

LESTER: How was I introduced to AID? When I was probably in my junior year maybe senior year, one of the two, I had a course in Latin American economics and the course was taught by someone who was an employee of AID. He was an economist working for AID.

Q: Do you remember his name?

LESTER: Don't know, no. It was a good course, it was fun, he was really a stitch, he was a lot of fun, told a lot of stories about working in government and at AID, and the course was interesting, too. But mostly I enjoyed courses in American diplomatic history, European diplomatic history, some of the best professors I ever had at any school I ever went to were the guys who taught diplomatic history. Howard Merriman taught American diplomatic history and I can't remember the name of the guy who taught European diplomatic history. They were spectacular and, in fact, the guy who taught European diplomatic history gave pretty much the same last lecture of the semester every year in the form of a poem he had written about European diplomatic history. People would line up for an hour before the class started just to get in to listen to that poem. That was how good he was. GW was good for me in that sense, bad for me because I was again in a city. It was in Washington, D.C. and I really enjoyed being in Washington but I was sixteen years old when I started.

Q: You were a kid.

LESTER: That was hard to take. I'd never been away from home before.

Q: Did you go home a lot or once you'd gone back in those days it wasn't so easy to stay in touch.

LESTER: No, no, in the dorm we had one telephone which was a pay phone and my sophomore year, I think, I roomed with a guy named Roger Kimmel. Roger's uncle was a guy named Admiral Husband E. Kimmel. Admiral Husband E. Kimmel was the

commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet when it was bombed at Pearl Harbor and Admiral Kimmel always thought and he was probably right, that he was a scapegoat for what happened. But Rog had a girlfriend and this is probably off the track but anyway it is a fun story. Roger had a girlfriend named Inez and she was a sweetheart and Rog was on the phone talking to her one day when a guy comes up. Now Rog is about five foot eight inches and one of the strongest people I had ever met. Anyway, this guy comes up in the elevator, a guy who lived on the floor, and looked at Roger and says, "That dirty Kike is on the phone again." Well, Roger put down the phone and started chasing this guy down the hall and we found Roger in the guy's dorm room, his dorm room had swastikas all over the place, beating the living crap out of this kid. So we took our time and slowly pulled Roger off. Meanwhile, poor Inez was on the phone not knowing what the heck was going on. Notwithstanding that, I think the experience at GW was good because I did meet a lot of different kinds of people and new experiences. In fact, one of my roommates introduced me to the world of classical music. Up until then, the only music I listened to was the popular stuff on the local stations. And there was also folk music at the Cellar Door. Plus, it was Washington, D.C. and at that time you could read several newspapers reporting on world and national events.

Q: That you hadn't been exposed to in New York.

LESTER: Remember, I grew up basically in an all Jewish neighborhood and that wasn't the case when I was at GW. During the summer months I had a job working as a stock boy and later as a shipping clerk at Howard and Peter Pan Uniforms where they made waitress and nurse uniforms. I was in the shipping department and I was the only White guy there and this was my first exposure to Hispanics and African-Americans. We had a ball, so much so that my last weekend in New York before I went back to school Joe Feeny who was the foreman and a couple of the guys took me to Harlem and we got drunk and they made me an honorary Black. We just had a ball and we did good work. Now that company was owned by a guy named Alan Kay and Mr. Kay was a Jewish guy who lived out on the island. Well everybody hated Kay and he would come into work and park his Cadillac in one of the loading bays and then go to his office. I remember a UPS, United Parcel Service, guy coming one day to make a delivery and he said to me, "Well, now that we've unloaded the truck how about we take a ride in the Cadillac?" Kay always left the car keys in the car. I said, "For me if I get fired it's just a summer job. You can lose your job but you've got a family." He said, "Don't worry about it." So we got in the car and we drove around Long Island City for a while in the Cadillac and we felt great. We turned the air conditioning on and it was fantastic because the shipping department didn't have any air conditioning and it was hot. But it was great fun and I enjoyed that place. Soon after, Kay up and moved the whole plant to South Carolina because in South Carolina he didn't have to pay union wages and I'm sure that after a stint in South Carolina he probably moved to some other place where he didn't have to pay union wages or didn't have to pay as much in labor costs as he was in South Carolina. Believe me, he wasn't paying that much in New York. So that's another experience that colors the way you think about things. Mr. Kay was really kind of outrageous. I'm a seventeen year old kid getting two bucks an hour that was a pretty good salary for me. The people were great, absolutely great.

Q: What did your parents think you were going to be? Or did they have any opinion on the direction your career should take?

LESTER: They wanted me to be a Rabbi. Ah, so listen, they wanted me to be a Rabbi. I was valedictorian of my Hebrew School class which meant that I was one of the few people who stayed on in Hebrew School after his Bar Mitzvah. I actually seriously considered that but then the best thing happened—I went off to college. I went to GW and that was just a whole new world and the idea of being a religious person sort of went bye-bye, it went away. There was a guy in our rooms named Dave and I can't think of his last name, who introduced me to classical music. He loved classical music and he would play it on his old Victrola or something and we would listen to classical music. My guess is, at GW, there were probably about fifty or sixty guys on the floor and I would say that three of us graduated.

Q: You're kidding, because of the war?

LESTER: No, this was before the draft started to take hold. I was at GW starting in 1963 and I graduated in '67. No, this had nothing to do with the war and had everything to do with alcohol; not drugs but alcohol. I had a roommate named Dick, he was a good ole boy from Marietta, Georgia, I never met anybody from Marietta, Georgia. Well he is from Marietta, Georgia, and he was at GW on a full scholarship. They paid books, tuition, room and board, everything from Lockheed, he paid not a dime. Dick would get drunk every night and he flunked out with a 000 GPA. He failed everything.

Q: He was inebriated most of the time?

LESTER: Yeah, and inebriated is a kind word. He was so drunk he would hang his head out the window and vomit. Most of the people on the floor had problems like that. Being sixteen years old when I started I couldn't go to a bar. I wasn't allowed in.

Q: Were you sort of a straight arrow anyway?

LESTER: Yeah. I mean everybody who grew up in our neighborhood was. We were a bunch of little Jewish kids and our parents made education the most important thing in our lives. And so that's what your parents expected and we had a lot of respect for our parents so that's what you did. In fact, I remember telling my dad that after I graduated I could come back and work with him and his partner in the store. He got real angry and said something to the effect, but in a more colorful way, that he hadn't worked this hard just to see his son take a job in a hardware store.

Q: You do it and you succeed.

LESTER: Yeah, that's right. Only two of us ever left the neighborhood to go to college me and my brother. I went to GW and my brother went to Boston U. All the others stayed

in the neighborhood or within fifty miles of the neighborhood. I don't know what happened to those people but I don't think any of them had anywhere near the experiences that my brother and I have had. I don't know why it is except my brother wanted out of New York in the worse way and so did I. My parents said, "Okay." We got a lot of loans and things like that and we did it.

Just one other personal thing when I was I guess in my freshman year my dad had a major heart attack and the doctor told him that if he didn't stop drinking, because he drank a case of beer a week and that was more than that actually because we used to get it. Those were the days when beer trucks would stop on your street and deliver beer to your home. They would take the empties and they'd deliver bottles of beer in cases to your house. So every week the Ballentine Beer truck would come by and deliver beer and he would drink probably a six-pack of beer a day. So the doctor said, "You've got to stop drinking beer, you've got to stop smoking cigarettes and you've got to lose thirty pounds. If you don't, you are going to die in six months." This was after the heart attack so he said, "Okay." He stopped drinking beer, he stopped smoking cigarettes and he lost the thirty pounds and lived for another 25 years. Now my uncle, my dad's brother, same problem and the doctors told him the same thing. The difference was he didn't stop smoking, he didn't stop drinking and he didn't lose the weight and he died in six months.

Q: They knew what they were talking about.

LESTER: They knew what they were talking about and it made an impression on both me and my brother. I hardly drink at all nor does my brother, and neither of us has ever smoked. Now, every year I get fifty dollars from Blue Cross Blue Shield because they like the fact that I never smoked; I fill out one of their questionnaires every year. Both of us, my brother and I, took up jogging and things like that and took care of ourselves because in large part we saw what happened to our dad. So where were we?

Q: Some fascinating facts about GW and given the pressure on you to succeed and the pressure you put on yourself did you immediately go to graduate school after GW.

LESTER: Yeah, I went to the University of Wisconsin. I majored in what they called Ibero-American Studies.

Q: Is that a master's?

LESTER: Excuse me.

Q: Was that a master's program?

LESTER: It was a joint Master's--PhD program. This was in '67 and I'd never been on an airplane before but I flew to Madison and I didn't know anybody there. Madison was a great town I learned a lot, and got reintroduced to AID. In those years, AID was funding people to become part of host country ministries. They were technically employed by the host country but paid for by AID. One of those people was a University of Wisconsin

professor who taught economics and had worked for the past two years essentially writing the Chilean government's budget. I was lucky enough to have him as a professor. I was also able to become familiar with the University's Land Tenure Centre, which received AID funding. A wonderful library on land tenure issues.

But after the first year in Madison the president, President Johnson, announced that there would be no more graduate school deferments. Yes, and by this time I had decided I wanted to be in the Foreign Service or teach. Well, you needed a PhD to teach so I was going for my PhD there, but there were no more graduate school deferments, so what do I do? Well I thought about enlisting in graduate school ROTC. I figured by the time I got out of grad school the Vietnam War would be over, wrong, and then I would be okay. By this time I developed a real intense feeling about Vietnam and that was one of the reasons for going to Madison which was it was a very lively place for anti-war protesters. As near as I could see this was my only option and I happened to see a notice, and there were 150 of us that took a test to see if we qualified for the program.

Q: The ROTC program?

LESTER: Yes, the ROTC, the graduate school ROTC program. Twelve of us were accepted. I don't know why I was accepted but twelve of us were accepted. Then we all had to go and take physicals and I took my physical and the last step was to go to Milwaukee and take one step forward and they'd assign me, I'll swear and sign my name on the dotted line and that would be that. But before that happened I saw a want-ad on a school bulletin board for teachers. New York City was hiring elementary school teachers, actually anybody who wanted to teach, and if you signed up they would pay you just like you were a regular teacher and that meant you'd get paid $6,750 a year--the starting salary, and you would be a teacher. They would give you intensive teacher training, they would give you a number of classes in the summer and then you had maybe one week of actual classroom experience and voila you were a teacher. I had no idea what was going on until the program was over and then I realized what was happening. The teachers union in New York City was going out on strike.

Q: So you were a scab?

LESTER: I was a scab; that was the intention anyway. The intension was that the schools would hire these people who didn't know anything, like me, train them a little bit just a tiny, tiny, tiny bit and throw them into ghetto schools; schools in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods and then somehow impart knowledge to these kids or what was more accurate be babysitters for these kids until such time that the strike was over. So that's exactly what happened I became a teacher--I passed the exams or whatever and I was a thesis away from a master's of education—all in 2 months. Can't beat that, unless you wanted to do something useful.

Q: Oh my gosh.

LESTER: Yeah that's a scary thought, a masters in elementary education and the courses we took at NYU so it would have been a legitimate degree, in just two months. Anyway, I was an "above quota" teacher, which meant that I didn't have a classroom for myself but, instead, I was a roving substitute. The contract that the union had with the city was that teachers had a lunch break and they also had a 45 minute break every day, in addition, so they could do lesson plans and things like that. Well, someone had to cover their classes during that 45 minute period and those were people like me. But first we were on strike and since all the regular teachers, the adults, were striking it meant that we were probably going to have to teach. Wrong, because the maintenance union also went out on strike in sympathy with the teachers and the guys who were the maintenance men had the keys to the school. So the schools were closed in New York for two months. There was one three day period where the schools were open and where the teachers went back to work. Then the teachers came back and since they didn't have a job for me because they weren't organized yet, I was put in charge of the library which was really great because I could work with books and not students. The library was adjacent to the principal's office. Our school was the closest modern school, that's not saying very much, to the school district that was the focal point of the strike. Every day we were working, Mayor Lindsey's people, the school district people, the community leaders for Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district, met in my principal's office. They discussed how to end the strike and the conversation went something like, "Why you White son of a bitch, Why you Black cocksucker…". So I figured we weren't going to be working too much longer because these people hated one another. Sure enough we went back out on strike and the main part of the strike lasted about two months. The strike was settled and we came back to work. I was still an above-quota teacher, subbing for people who had to have their 45 minute planning period. This was probably the most depressing time in my life because you see these kids and they are dying right in front of you, they are dying, they are not getting any education, most of the teachers don't care, the kids obviously don't care, no one cares. They have one parent, the parent works; they all come to school with keys tied to a lanyard around their neck. They just don't care and teachers do nothing to instill any kind of thirst for knowledge but I don't know how you do it in that kind of environment. In any event…

Q: Did it kill your interest in teaching?

LESTER: Definitely. I've always admired my brother who became a legitimate elementary school teacher and administrator. He did it for about 30 years and now teaches teachers at B.U. However, there was some good news. The reason I did all this was not any great desire to be an elementary school teacher, but to get an occupational deferment from the draft; I couldn't be drafted because I was working in a ghetto school. So, I'm really depressed, I commute an hour and a half one way every day. The job was interesting because I really liked the kids but I mean some of them were pains and some of them would get out of control every once in a while but mostly I'd bring in maps. I was supposed to teach remedial reading but I didn't know how to do that so I would bring in maps and they would color in the maps and we would try to identify all the countries and talk about the different places. One of the students wrote a poem for me. He said, "Lester cool, from a friend, let's play ball, play game." For the longest time I had that

poem wherever I went. He was the second toughest guy in the school and he was a fifth grader. I can't think of his name but I will later. The toughest kid in the school was a girl, a sixth grader, and I remember her punching out some guy on the school yard and knocked him unconscious. She had to spend Christmas vacation in a youth house. I quit after one semester.

Q: So that was 1968?

LESTER: William Blake, the kid's name was William Blake.

Q: And he wrote you a poem?

LESTER: He wrote me a poem. His regular classroom teacher was a guy named Hairston. Mr. Hairston had made this train out of cardboard: the engine was success and the different cars were arithmetic, reading and whatever else were the subjects he taught. He asked the kids to write a story about the train, the train of knowledge. William wrote his story in the form of a letter. Now Mr. Hairston's wife had helped on this project so William likes his story in the form of a letter, and it said, "Dear Mr. Hairston, Why don't you, your wife, and this train of knowledge go to hell?" signed William Blake. What was neat was the punctuation was correct, the spelling was correct, everything was correct. I don't know how any of these kids survived or whether they did survive. We had teachers who taught astrology. This school was entirely Black and Hispanic with 100 faculty; 98 percent of which was White. We had two Black teachers and the principal was a Jewish guy who lived out on the island who was having an affair with his secretary, and so whenever his office door was closed and the secretary wasn't around we knew what was going on.

Q: And so did the students.

LESTER: Yeah. One of the assistant principals was always on the phone with his stock broker. It was a zoo and this was not the worse school in the city. We did have the worst attendance record of any school in the city: on any given day 25 percent of the kids were absent and we thanked God for that. I don't know what would have happened if everybody had showed up.

Q: So you lasted one semester and you obviously couldn't go back to Madison.

LESTER: I did.

Q: You did?

LESTER: I did go back to Madison and said, "Screw it." If they draft me, they draft me.

Q: And just take your chances with the draft board?

LESTER: I took my chances with the draft board. Funny thing—the school board was so incompetent that they never notified the draft board that I had quit. And I certainly wasn't going to tell them. I got masters at the University of Wisconsin in Ibero-American studies. But I still had a problem with the draft. There was no telling when or if the school board would rat me out to the draft board. Just as an aside, I had an international law professor at GW who was an actual international lawyer named Carl Salans. He was based in Paris. I remember taking his class and taking his final exam and just loving the final exam. It was all these hypotheticals where the answer really didn't count for much, only the reasoning you used to get there. I guess that was my first "law" course and it was a treat.

Q: No, but it put you through law school eventually or did you think about it?

LESTER: It made me think about it, it made me start thinking about it. I finished up at Wisconsin and then realized that with the war was still going on, I had to make some decisions. I decided to apply for graduate teaching assistantships. The University of Florida agreed and paid my way.

Q: Florida?

LESTER: Yep, the University of Florida in Gainesville; so I went down to Gainesville. I figured if I got a teaching assistantship and they gave me a 1A classification I would have grounds for an appeal. I was not optimistic that the appeal would work but at least it might delay the process somewhat longer. Well, as luck would have it, the New York City Board of Education continued to ignore the fact that I had quit, so I continued on with my occupational deferment.

Q: Nice.

LESTER: So I'm at the University of Florida now in the PhD program in political science taking political science courses, international politics courses, and the like. I was also one of three people put in charge of what they called the Political Science Statistics Laboratory. Back in those days, that was in the early '70s I guess, political science was recognizing the value of the computer and how they could use statistical analyses to enhance their understanding of the American voter, what goes on in international politics, and other things political. Schools began getting computers and in those days computers meant punch cards and you know large mainframe computers. We were always hoping that we didn't put programs in an endless loop where all you get is reams and reams of worthless paper. So that is what the three of us managed when other students came by to get time on the mainframe.

Q: So did you finish your doctorate?

LESTER: I really had no love for the University or the department. I thought both were mediocre. That's changed, but in those days I think that would be a fair assessment. The

only thing I can tell you about Florida is that I ate well because I was on a full scholarship and the food was good. The department I think only had one decent professor. His name was René Lemarchand and he the world's expert on Rwanda and Burundi. I thought that getting a PhD in political science from the university was a career dead end. The best thing that happened to me was that I met Deedee Daughty, the woman I was to marry 25 years later. But that's another long story that we can get into tomorrow.

Q: I'm still trying to get you to law school.

LESTER: Excuse me?

Q: I'm still trying to move you to law school.

LESTER: I'm coming to that don't worry.

Q: Is that when you met Deedee?

LESTER: What?

Q: That's when you met Deedee?

LESTER: No, I met Deedee at the University of Florida.

Q: Yeah, right way back when you were miserable.

LESTER: She wasn't the reason for my miserableness. That was around 1971 or '72. I haven't gotten to law school yet; I haven't forgotten. But the other thing is that as part of a course I was taking I decided to do a paper on the land tenure system in the Bolivian lowlands. I went back to the University of Wisconsin LTC to do the research and was able to learn a little more about AID while I was doing research. Those were the only two good things that came out of my stay at the University of Florida. When I took my last flight leaving Gainesville I vowed I would never ever go back. Things, thankfully, didn't work out that way.

Q: How far away are you from Gainesville?

LESTER: Sixty miles. We've seen Tim Tebow's last game as a Gator, belong to the local University of Florida Gator Club, and tomorrow we will be at a local restaurant, wearing crazy Gator hats, and cheering on the University of Florida as they play LSU.

Q: I have a son-in-law who is a Gator and so I know all about the compulsions of the Gator Club.

LESTER: Good for him. You should see my golf cart; I'll send you a picture--it's all decked out in Gator stuff. We travel around here by golf cart. Anyway, while I was at the University of Florida I got in touch with my old roommate from George Washington

University, Roger Kimmel. Roger had gone to UVA, University of Virginia, law school and he said it was a wonderful place and that it would be a very stimulating and that I should apply. I said, "Rog, I'm a little bit tired of school." He said, "No, go ahead and apply." So I applied, I took the law boards, and I got in. I spent three really interesting years at the University of Virginia.

Q: That was what "72?

LESTER: '72, '73 and I graduated in '74.

Q: And you loved it?

LESTER: UVA was a wonderful school the teachers were brilliant, they were fun, they were challenging. My worst grades were in administrative law which, looking back, I think boy that was ironic. But a guy named Carl McFarland taught that course. He worked in Franklin Roosevelt's administration and I remember one time while we were talking about some New Deal piece of legislation some obnoxious kid in class raised his hand and said, "Well do you think that this ambiguity in the legislation was intentional or do you think it was just bad drafting?" McFarland, we used to call him slow Carl, said (in a slow pronunciation), "Oh I think it was intentional." The way he said it we were all curious so we found out through doing some research that he probably drafted part or all of the legislation. I was a member of the John Basset Moore International Law Society and I just had a great learning experience. Funny thing is that I never really wanted to practice law. My interests were still in teaching and the foreign service.

Q: Yeah and you obviously discovered that you were good at it.

LESTER: No, I'm not sure I was but when you are in your third year you start looking for jobs and between your first and second years you might get a job in a little law firm as an intern. I didn't I just had no desire to so I got a job as a lawyer as an intern for the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, which was an eye opener in terms of how bureaucracy works. Oh. And then between my second and third years I got a job with a law firm in New York and it just confirmed my view that I didn't like the practice of law. So in my third year I was a little bit concerned about what I was going to do-- I've got to start earning a living. I happened to see a 3x5 index card on the bulletin board outside the placement office and it was a notice that AID was hiring lawyers.

Q: This was '74, right?

LESTER: '74. I knew what AID was and so I applied. Now unbeknownst to me AID, the General Counsel's Office, had never hired a lawyer straight out of law school. They always insisted that the person have some private practice experience or some government practice experience before they considered them, but I had none. But that year, and I don't know why, they made two exceptions and they hired me and a guy named Bill Loris. They've never done that again, so maybe the experiment failed. If it did, it wasn't Bill's fault.

Q: Did they hire you into the Foreign Service or civil service.

LESTER: Foreign Service. They were looking for Foreign Service lawyers. I interviewed with Chuck Gladson, who was the general counsel at the time, and Chuck said, "Would you have any problems in going to Vietnam?" I said, "No." That was my first assignment. I was hired probably in August of '74 and they sent me a letter saying you are hired but don't do anything or go anywhere just yet. We're under a continuing resolution and can't formally hire you. That was my first exposure to a CR—something that I was to become very familiar with over time. Around the middle of September I got a letter saying, "Okay, now you can come to Washington, you are going to be an IDI." And so I became an International Development Intern and I went through the IDI training program.

Q: At that point it was at least a year wasn't it?

LESTER: Oh no, no, no. We are talking a month.

Q: Oh okay.

LESTER: At that time, in AIDs history, everything began with a P, project papers, PIDs, Pro-Ags, etc. The first couple of weeks of the training program were devoted to learning AID acronyms, learning procedures. This was obviously before the New Directions so this was at a time when AID was into large capital projects. So, we did that I think for two to three weeks and then we spent a week in Western Maryland where we were split up into four or five groups and each group was tasked with designing a project that would benefit folks in Western Maryland. Our group decided what would be best was something to supplement the income of farmers in the area, and you'll appreciate this. What we did was recommend a maple syrup industry for Western Maryland. We interviewed people, in fact there is a large Mennonite community in Western Maryland and the minister at the local church invited our group all out to a Sunday dinner with the congregation. We were introduced to the whole congregation and in the middle of dinner he had a cow that was giving birth so we all went out to the barn and I saw a calf being born. I have to tell you that was a stunner.

Q: I bet, it didn't convert you to the AG cone I guess.

LESTER: Not a bit. When you grow up in New York City, seeing a calf being born is really a remarkable thing and it was a breech birth so that he had to tie a rope around the calf's legs and we all pulled and got the calf out. We thought the calf was dead. Then the mom turned around and with the biggest tongue I'd ever seen started licking the calf and the calf started breathing in time with the licks.

Q: It was pretty exciting but yeah did you play the role of the lawyer on your IDI team?

LESTER: No, and this should have been a warning to me. There was no lawyer on the IDI team. I was to learn that often times lawyers weren't often invited to be on project teams.

Q: Right, they didn't know what to do with you?

LESTER: They just wanted to teach us the project process, which they did. It was a couple of weeks later that I bought myself a Christmas present with my first paycheck--Lazy Boy reclining chair. A couple of weeks after that, I got orders to leave for Vietnam on December 30th. So, much like the experience with the NYC Board of Education, I went to a new position knowing pretty much nothing about the job. All I knew was that I had been a draft-dodger, Vietnam war protester, and now I was headed to a place I'd only read about.

Q: At that time the staffing in Vietnam was huge right?

LESTER: Aha, so here I am having graduated from law school, no practical legal experience and except for the leases that I signed when I was renting an apartment, I'm not sure that I ever saw a contract. I didn't know anything about AID's rules and regulations, I just knew where to find them that's about it. I knew about the project process and I'd never been overseas before. But I had a couple of advantages. First, I was willing to read the Manual Orders—predecessor to the Handbooks, which preceded the computerized system you have now. Second, I was more than willing to put in the time and effort to learn the material.

Q: Ever?

LESTER: Ever. The furthest west I had ever been was a little town called Maquoketa, Iowa, which is near Davenport and the furthest east I had ever been was Montauk Point, Long Island. I'm supposed to go on this plane on December 30th to go to Vietnam. I had a roommate at the University of Florida named Doug and I remember sitting at a kitchen table and I had to go to class and the news is on and I'm hearing about what is happening at Kent State. I was stunned. I couldn't imagine U.S. troops killing U.S. students it was beyond comprehension for me and this guy Doug comes walking into the kitchen and I said, "Doug, did you hear what happened?" He said, "Yeah but those kids were throwing rocks I'd have killed them all." I don't think we spoke ever again after that. I mean Vietnam was a horrible time. Aside from the death and destruction, it changed lives, and it separated families. So here I was, I had a Lazy Boy reclining chair, I had some books, I had some records and a stereo and AID was going to trundle me off to Vietnam. I can tell you this story and this is my first experience with the AID bureaucracy.

This is the honest to goodness truth. I had this Lazy Boy reclining chair I liked it and it was ugly. It was olive green and Naugahyde. It was my chair, I bought it with my first pay check, so I wanted to put it in storage. So I went down to the travel and transportation people and I said, "Look, I'm going to Vietnam." I showed them my orders. "I want my chair put into storage." They said, "How much does it weigh?" I said, "How much does it

weigh? I don't know maybe almost 50 pounds." They said, "Sorry, it doesn't weigh enough we can't put it into storage." "It doesn't weigh enough?" "It doesn't weigh enough we can't put it into storage." I said, "I could go out and buy bricks." I decided not to do that. My only other option was to have it shipped to Vietnam. So I said, "Okay." They asked me what my address was and I told them. My apartment was in the Westover area of Arlington and it was on the bottom of a little valley hill. One snowy morning this huge Allied Van Line truck comes to my apartment because they had been told to pick up the household effects of a Foreign Service officer; although technically I was a Foreign Service Limited officer since I still had to go through a year's probation period. But anyway they were expecting a full truck load of furniture. These two big guys come out of the truck and ring the doorbell and they said, "We are here to pick up your household effects." I pointed to the chair and I said, "There it is." They sort of cursed and they took the chair and they put it on the truck-- and there is my chair, alone, in this huge van; I felt sorry for it. Oh, I forgot, it was snowing that day. The van's at the bottom of a hill, without a load of furniture to weigh it down. There were no chains on the truck's tires and it couldn't make it up the hill. Hours later, after the guys got their supervisor out and the put chains on the tires, my reclining chair was off to Vietnam. I assume my chair was then crated and taken to Baltimore, the port, and after a while put on a ship going to Vietnam. By the time all this was happening I was already in Vietnam. So now this is probably February of 1975. By the time it shipped and is approaching Vietnam everybody was going the other way. We were evacuating Vietnam and people were beginning to ship their stuff out and no more household effects were allowed in. So my chair was offloaded at a port in the Philippines. Then the evacuation comes in April of '75 and my chair is still in the Philippines but because I've now been evacuated my chair has changed its status and is no longer normal household effects. It is now evacuation furniture, which can be stored. So my chair then went to St. Louis to a storage facility, which is where I wanted it in the first place. I figured that it took all this money and effort and losing a war to get my chair stored..

Q: There must be a lesson there.

LESTER: The lesson is that sometimes bureaucracy doesn't use common sense.

Q: Yes. I suspect you will have other stories to add to that.

LESTER: So that is my chair and the beginning of my stay in Vietnam.

Q: So you had maybe four months in Vietnam.

LESTER: Yeah, I got there in December or January around the beginning of January I think of '75 and left on April 15th of '75. I left two weeks before the general evacuation and all I can say is it was an experience I will always remember. I'm not sure how valuable an experience it was except to make me even angrier about what was going on. Some of the people I met in Vietnam I met again in another assignment when I went to Nairobi. For the most part it certainly had nothing to do with development and I had no idea why I was sent there. I mean none, no idea why I went there. I spent the entire three

months looking at contracts, and remember I'd never looked at a contract before. Reading the contracts, finding the relevant sections in the manual orders, correcting grammar, correcting punctuation, correcting spelling, making sure the thing made sense at least. That was about it. My value added was very limited. What I did learn was that in a highly politicized situation like Vietnam, the rules were, to say the least, very fluid.

Q: You could have done it Washington probably.

LESTER: Excuse me?

Q: You could have done it from Washington I suspect.

LESTER: Oh yeah, there is no question except what you couldn't do because communications were not nearly as good as they are now. What you couldn't do is you couldn't walk upstairs and go into the contracting office and say to whomever, "This doesn't work." I could have done my particular job I suppose in a narrow sense from Washington but I could not have done it in a complete sense from Washington because we just didn't have the communications set up as we do now. I don't think I worked on any grant agreements or loan agreements in Vietnam. As I recall, most of our assistance was obligated by contract with fairly large U.S. construction outfits. So, mostly I spent my time reviewing these contracts and working on some personnel issues. One guy came into the office and said, "Look I'm married to a woman in the States but I am also married to a Vietnamese woman, and I'd like you to draw up a will that would leave my Vietnamese wife [he was going to take her back to the States] something." We didn't get into the fact that the Vietnamese "wife" was not his legal wife. I suspect he knew that.

Q: Do I have a legal problem?

LESTER: I said fine, drafted a will based on the form books we had in the office, and told him that when he got home he needed to consult an attorney in his home state, and clear up the mess he'd gotten himself into.

My boss was a guy named Jerry Jacobson. The State Department does not post lawyers overseas for the most part, and embassies often rely on AID lawyers for legal advice. In this case, Jerry was also the lawyer for the ambassador. I and many others had no respect for the ambassador. One day I was invited to dinner and it was at Jerry's house. Jerry had this villa; all the high mucky mucks had villas. Jerry had invested in Asian antiques, for example, he had three opium couches. Jerry had invited the AID mission director, the deputy mission director, a couple people from the embassy, me and a guy named Harry Crowe who also worked in the legal office. So we are sitting around the dinner table and finishing dinner and all of a sudden the mission director, I think his name was Robinson but I couldn't swear to it, and says, "You may think that I am a little crazy but I think we ought to nuke them."

Q: Oh my God.

LESTER: This was the AID mission director.

Q: So much for development.

LESTER: Hum?

Q: So much for development.

LESTER: "I think we ought to nuke them." To show you how screwed up this place was I found this the other day. It's a cable that was sent out from the ambassador to Washington in response to a Washington cable that relayed a request from members of Congress about what could be done to help Vietnamese legislators who had been helpful to the U.S. during the war. This is how the ambassador responded:

"1. A vote for military aid would be the best help.

"2. The second best thing would be to have Washington mute its vocal comments on "evacuation".

"3. In the absence of either of the above we will do what we can as best we can, which so far has been successful. Martin.

Graham Martin was the U.S. Ambassador. The cable was dated April 24, 5 days before the general evacuation. Personally, I blame the ambassador the mess the evacuation turned into. In fact, one of the few documents I saw while I was in Vietnam happened to be our evacuation plan. I think it was early April, people were shipping all they could out of Vietnam, and Time magazine ran a story about the evacuation plan for U.S. personnel. Trouble was, no one had seen any plan. A couple of days later, the Marine guards at the AID compound passed out the "plan". It was unclassified so I kept mine even though admin people tried to retrieve them. It was two pages long. The first page was a map of Saigon with red dots where the embassy, various apartment buildings, and the airport were. Looking out the window of your office you could see that wind socks had been hoisted on the red dot designated buildings. Of course, that was where the helicopters were going to land. (It was later determined that if a helicopter landed on any of the apartment building roofs, they would have blown anyone standing on those roofs down to the street below. The apartment rooftops weren't used as evacuation points.) Well, how do you know when the evacuation was on? That was page 2. We were to listen to Armed Forces Radio. If the announcer said that the temperature in Saigon was 105 degrees and rising, and then he played the first 20 or 30 seconds of White Christmas, and repeated that I think twice, maybe three times, an hour for two or three hours, the evacuation was on. I left Saigon on April 15. A friend of mine told me that there was a good chance that the airport was going to be rocked on April 16. So, I left. There was a general "order" that anyone that was not indispensable was encouraged to leave, so I did. I know, it contradicts Martin's April 24 cable. But that's the way it was.

When we stopped you had returned from Vietnam and so we were going to pick up there. You talked briefly about going to Kenya but maybe if I can just ask you to pick up the thread from there.

LESTER: Okay I might go back a little bit into Vietnam just to make a couple of comments. One comment is that the program in Vietnam did not train anyone to be a developmentally oriented Foreign Service officer in AID. The program was huge capital projects, major road construction; we established the first traffic light system in Saigon, major commodity import programs, huge, huge things. If you wanted to buy any U.S. product, all you had to do was walk down the street.

Q: And it was being sent?

LESTER: Someone was selling some commodity that we had shipped over through the CIP program.

Q: So there was a little…

LESTER: The corruption was unbelievable but no one really cared. All they cared about was getting the commodities in country and whatever happened to them after that well that wasn't our business. Another reason why I am going back into Vietnam is that we are going to see some of the personalities later on, particularly in Kenya. I had one mission director tell me that if he was asked to hire someone who had served more than six months in Vietnam he would refuse that person. The reason was that that person would be tainted because there were no rules. You basically did what you could get away with. The nearest I could tell being a very short timer at AID was that no one looked at the manual orders, this was before the handbook series, no one looked at any rules and regulations it was really like the Wild West for AID. There were no rules.

Q: The goal was just get the money and the commodities out the door?

LESTER: That's right, that was the goal. I don't blame that mission director in the least for not hiring someone who had spent six months in Saigon because the level of incompetence was staggering. The head of the contracts division, and this is a guy who is running a two, three, four billion dollar portfolio, and we are talking 1975 dollars, was a lay Baptist minister who went to Harvard got a law degree, never was able to pass the bar exam. Some would say he was never able to pass a bar, but I'll leave that alone. But, in any event, I got to know him. He was the only person I met in Saigon who every day came to work in a coat and tie. Now it was 100 degrees, the humidity is 100 percent--it's Washington in the summertime only hotter. It's miserable but he is there with a coat and tie.

Q: Keeping up appearances.

LESTER: I guess. I couldn't figure it out. Well one day I see him and he had just come back from the Philippines and he wants to leave Saigon. It's now April of '75, and he wants to leave. So he goes up to the number three person in the AID mission the admin officer and says, "I want to leave right now." Well the admin officer says, "No, you're not leaving, you are the head of the contracts division and if things fall apart we have to close out all these contracts. You have to be here." A couple of days later there's no coat and tie, he hasn't shaved, and he looks like a mess. That's the way it was until I left on the 15th. As I was walking to the motorpool to get a car to take me to the airport on the 15th, I ran into him. He says to me, "Bob, where are you going?" I said, "In another fifteen hours I'm going to be sitting on a beach in Honolulu, Hawaii." He grabs my shoulders and he says, "God bless you, God bless you, God bless you," and he walks away. I thought the guy had totally lost it. The only reason I bring him up is that we are to see him later as the mission director in Nairobi, Kenya.

Q: Oh God.

LESTER: Yes, exactly and there are two more interesting stories about life in Saigon. One is on the night before I left, my boss decided to hold a little farewell party for me at the Embassy recreation center. Well, we were the only ones in the recreation center except for some guys at another table. There was a band that was playing and we got pretty drunk and my boss hands the band leader a request; it's a request to play White Christmas. The band leader, who is Vietnamese, this was a full Vietnamese band, gives the request to the folks sitting at the other table. They look at the request and they shake their heads no. So here you have the Vietnamese band leader knowing what the evacuation plan was. And the guys at the other table were probably spooks.

Q: Bob let me ask you. Were you ever worried for your own life?

LESTER: No, I was too stupid to worry about my life, I really was. I was more curious than anything else. I was never really afraid. It was my birthday, April 8th, 1975, and I was sitting at my desk and I hear this jet plane overhead. Now you rarely if ever heard jet planes flying over Saigon for security reasons, they just didn't fly over Saigon. But here was this jet plane and there is noise like he's diving. So I didn't know what to do. Then all of a sudden you hear the plane going up, gaining altitude, so I didn't think anything of it except that he comes around again and he's diving. This time I hear well at least one probably two explosions and all of a sudden lots of machinegun fire. So like an idiot I go to the window to find out what is going on. Well then it dawns on me if I am standing by the window and these sixteen year old kids with M-16s are firing up in the air, that's not too smart. So I go into the hall way and lo and behold the entire AID mission, at least this floor of it, is sitting in the hallway. They knew what was going on; I didn't and no one bothered telling me. This jet plane was piloted by a defector and he decided to try to bomb the presidential palace which is only a couple or three blocks away. He missed the palace and he missed the AID office building, thankfully, but it turns out that's life in the foreign service. A lot of people have stories of how they were involved as innocent bystanders in military coups and things like that. This was my story.

We would get news from basically three sources the Armed Forces Radio, which was the funny news. They told you stuff that you knew couldn't possibly be true. We were winning the war, everything is hunky dory. Then there was BBC. BBC was pretty good--they were pretty accurate but usually about a day or two behind events. The third source was cable traffic. Because my boss was basically the lawyer for the embassy as well as being AID's lawyer, he was able to get his hands on lots of information that wasn't common knowledge throughout the AID mission. I had a map taped to the wall behind my chair and it was a province map of Vietnam, and I would X off a province every time it fell based on the news from the cable traffic. When things got too close, at least from my perspective, I went downstairs to the travel and transportation people at AID and said, "Look, I would like to book a plane flight out." They said, "What date?" I said, "April 16." They said fine and we made the reservations. Then someone came into my office and said that it looked like the airport was going to be rocketed as early as April 16th. I said, "That's no good." So I went back to travel and transportation and we changed the reservation to April 15th and that is when I left. I had no written orders to leave, I had nothing, I just left. Not the greatest introduction to a development agency.

Q: Did you come back to Washington or no?

LESTER: I went back to Washington, which came as a big surprise to the folks in the general counsel's office.

Q: They weren't expecting you.

LESTER: They weren't expecting me, there was no cable traffic telling them that I had left and when I would arrive. They had not planned for an evacuation of Saigon and so they had no place to put me. I walked the halls for a while; I literally had nothing to do. There wasn't a place for me to sit, nothing.

Q: Who was the head of the GC at the time?

LESTER: I think it was Chuck, Chuck Gladson still. I believe that was the case and I think Kelly was in GC but he wasn't a deputy at that time. I think he was working for Dennis Neil in GC/Legislation and Policy. I believe Kelly was the number two in that office at the time. So, while walking the halls, I ran into a guy in the hallway named Tom Moser, who I'd first met in Saigon. Tom was the officer in charge of the Vietnam desk at AID. So I said, "Tom, do you need any help?" He said, "Sure, we can always use some help." "Fine, I'm yours." So I worked for the next two months, three months, or four months on the Vietnam close out operations.

Q: With no orders from anybody you just volunteered?

LESTER: Yup. I was lonely, I really enjoy working, and I had no work to do so Tom gave me work to do. It doesn't mean I knew what I was doing but I helped him out as much as I could. It was during this time on the Vietnam desk that I got a copy of Ambassador Martin's cable. The stories while on the desk about the evacuation and how

disorganized, and I'm being kind, were really horrible. We would evacuate the USIA or the AID employee but we would leave that employees family behind or we'd evacuate the family and leave the employee behind. One story that I'm personally familiar with is the story of a Vietnamese secretary who came to work on April 29th, the first day of the evacuation, only to find herself alone in the office. She started to do her job when some guy comes in to tell her that the evacuation was on and did she want to leave. She said she did, but had to get her family. The guy said that wasn't possible and that she had to make a decision at that moment. She left Vietnam. Again, that was not uncommon. The evacuation was a total, total fiasco and the U.S. government should feel ashamed by that.

Okay so now I am in Washington and doing work for Tom Moser and I remember dealing with PL480 issues. I didn't know much about PL480. We had a question that I was told that I needed to call the AID lawyer who backstops PL480--a guy named Rick Rickstein. I never met Rick but I'd heard about his reputation, he was supposed to be a very, very hard person so I was steeling myself to deal with him. I call his extension and he answers his phone and I babble something that was totally incoherent. Rickstein was very polite and said, "Son, when you know what the hell you are talking about you give me a call back." We got to be good friends, and I was never sure whether he knew that I was the idiot on the other end of the line. I really don't remember too much of my stint in Washington.

Q: How long was it?

LESTER: Excuse me?

Q: How long was that stint in Washington?

LESTER: Well I got back in April of '75 and I left in September of '75. Then in late August I got orders to go to Nairobi to be one of two lawyers on the staff of the REDSO East Africa mission. So I guess it was the day after Labor Day in '75 I arrived in Nairobi and ready to do whatever it is that people wanted me to do in Nairobi. In those the REDSO was fully staffed up, almost like a little Washington. We had engineers in REDSO, we had lawyers, we had project officers and, in fact, sometimes the REDSO had their own projects that it was implementing. The RLA office was responsible for backstopping programs in every country in Eastern and Southern Africa except for countries where we were not allowed in such as Uganda and at that time Southern Rhodesia. We covered as far west as Rwanda, Burundi, we went as far east, I think, as Mauritius, Botswana, and pretty much every country in-between.

Q: Right and as I recall those jobs were full of travel.

LESTER: Yeah, I probably traveled two weeks out of every month. My boss decided that he would let me backstop the Kenya program, which was a very, very large program for those times while he would backstop the really nice programs like the one in the Seychelles. We did a lot of traveling to southern Africa—Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. Always good places to go because they always put you to work. Later on in

my stay in Nairobi I would go down to Swaziland and they would greet me with bags of candy—chocolate—as a way to get me motivated. These were really good people, chocolate aside. When I'd travel at the end of the fiscal year—in those days most of our program funds were one-year monies that had to be obligated by the end of the fiscal year—I would send cables out to the other missions telling them where I was and how they could contact me. We would get these NIACT Immediate cables at all hours of the night from missions wanting help with grant agreements. Communicating was a much bigger deal then than it is now.

I started learning a lot more about the bureaucracy and how bureaucracies have ways of shutting out people that they don't want to deal with. I also learned the value of being around people who knew what they were doing. This is one of the wonderful things I discovered at the outset. I was lucky. The REDSO director, Ed Hogan, was really knowledgeable and easy to work with. He had common sense and good judgment and he actually liked working with lawyers. I was to find that the latter was the exception not the rule. The thing about bureaucracies, especially in a relatively small space like an overseas mission, is that personalities play a significant role in being able to get things done. Ed and the USAID/Kenya mission director hated one another. Not only did they not get along, but their wives hated one another. There was a tremendous amount of tension between the two so much so that REDSO people, the engineers, the lawyers, anyone in REDSO, were not permitted to get involved in any part of the USAID Kenya portfolio. Now this was a tad awkward for a number of reasons. One was that we were in the same office building and the Kenyan missions were doing things that should have had significant legal review and should have had sufficient engineering review. Remember this is the time when we were still building roads and building buildings, and the like. But these reviews just didn't happen or didn't happen to the extent it was supposed to. For example, there was a meeting about an AID Kenya project and the Kenya mission project officer called me up, which was in itself a brave thing, and said, "Would you want to sit in on the project meeting?" I said, "Are you sure? Is it okay?" He said, "Yeah, I'm inviting you." I said, "Okay, I'll be there." The meeting was scheduled for two days later. So the next day I get a message from the mission director uninviting me to the meeting, and the guy who offered me a chance to go to the meeting was transferred. This was eye opening; this was the only mission where we had this kind of trouble. There was a lot of resentment in those days toward the REDSO because the REDSO had all the technical specialists and the missions had generalists. The missions resented REDSO coming in and telling them what they could or couldn't do but mostly what they couldn't do. Delegations of authority in those days gave the REDSO considerable responsibility over mission projects. But to the mission, this was their program not the REDSO's program and they would be damned if they would share it with the REDSO.

Q: Do you remember what the relationship was with the Africa bureau in Washington? Was it probably with the REDSO and the mission hated Washington but…

LESTER: Yeah, at that time the idea was to maintain as little contact as possible with Washington, I guess under the theory that what Washington didn't know wouldn't hurt you. As far as the mission and the REDSO were concerned, they were the equivalent of

Washington and, in fact, because they had all the staff that they needed, they didn't need Washington. Washington was looked on Washington as just another place that was imposing responsibilities on them that they could do without. They were afraid Washington would start acting like a backseat driver and get involved with their programs where, they believed, Washington had no business getting into. I never saw though that Washington really cared all that much. Washington basically let it slide and the missions and REDSO took full advantage of it. I was very fortunate to meet and work with some truly bright and dedicated people. Ed Hogan went on to head the policy office within PPC under Alex Shakow. I worked closely with Larry Saiers in Ethiopia and he later became the Deputy AA for Africa Bureau. I learned about road construction, major roads as well as rural roads. I learned that sometimes following the letter of an agreement isn't the wisest thing and that at times it would best to look the other way. For example, Tanzania had a rural roads project going in the north-central part of the country. There were a few countries doing roads projects in Tanzania at that time. All petrol for road building equipment had to come through Dar es Salaam, many miles from where these projects were being implemented and the road between Dar and the project sites was not good. It was so poor that trucking companies wouldn't make the trip. Our project would have been dead in the water just like the others, but our guys decided to way over-order truck tires from the States. The Government of Tanzania had a monopoly on locally produced tires. It was very inefficient and there were significant gaps in production. Trucking companies desperately needed tires. So, for a payment of tires (some might call it a "bribe") the trucking companies shipped our project's petrol over Tanzania's potholed roads. Ours was the only project that was actually working. At the end of the day, we finished all the roads the contract called for and came in under budget. Now, the contract did not call for the purchase of nearly the number of tires that were bought by the contractor, but this little deviation worked to get the project done. But mostly, it was the people. If the mission or the REDSO had good people, programs worked. And I could learn from all of them.

Q: Bob, that was the Carter years so were there initiatives that you either had to take on board or sidestep? I know that human rights was certainly a focus but maybe mainly Latin America but do you remember policies that came sort of over the transom at you?

LESTER: To be honest I don't. Over the four year period I didn't see too much certainly in the way of change. There were some human rights programs certainly in USAID/Kenya that I didn't see earlier on. The whole region was gradually getting out of capital projects, so when I went down to southern Africa to work on the loan for the BotZam Highway, that was probably the last of the major roads project at least in southern Africa. Oh, no, there was one other Lesotho we funded a ring road around Lesotho but, in any event, capital projects were becoming increasing rare. We were moving more towards rural roads, if we were doing roads; primary health care became a big issue or focus, preventative care rather than curative care, and we began to do a lot more through grants to NGOs. At that time, NGOs were not nearly as sophisticated as they are now. In fact, it was often the case that we had to write the grant proposals for them. It was a gradual change away from capital projects. We were still doing loans—the

appropriations acts contained a provision requiring that we provide a minimum amount in the form of loan assistance. This didn't change until the early 1980s.

Q: What about relations with the embassy?

LESTER: Relations with the embassy were minimal. We pretty much had pretty much no contact with the embassy. AID ran its own program we were not getting very little if any ESF money for eastern and southern Africa. Mostly, the embassies cared about the bottom line level of assistance to their countries. And they never got involved in implementation unless there was an issue about getting goods and supplies through local customs. When it was time to do the Congressional presentation or the annual budget submissions I'm sure that was run by the embassy for the ambassador's approval. I don't recall a single time in any of the countries that we backstopped where the embassy said that we could not carry out an activity. In fact, one of the standing jokes was that we would request a small pot of money for each country Kenya in a basket project so that the ambassador might have several opportunities to do signing ceremonies or ribbon cuttings, and get some publicity. The development value was nil and I'm not sure of the value of the publicity, but it kept the embassies happy. The largest portion of our work was done outside the purview of the embassy. I'm sure they had no idea what we were doing.

Q: So much of you were doing was basically the legal work around agreements or did you actually get pulled into program work?

LESTER: If I could I did get into the program side. Because I enjoyed the program more than the legal work, which was cut and dried. I would make it my habit to "ride circuit" within the REDSO office. I'd go from office to office every once in a while, just chatting with the officer there and finding out what was going on. If either the officer or I found a problem, we'd try to fix it on the spot or I'd go back to my office to work on it. I'd do the same, but to a much lesser extent, in USAID/Kenya. And, I'd do it in every mission I went to. It was sort of a way of gaining the trust of the people who and allay their suspicions about lawyers. Eventually, they started coming to me for advice, although I still made the rounds regularly.

As far as legal work was concerned, we could do everything that USAID Washington, could do. If people had a personnel question we would answer the personnel question. If they had grant questions we would answer the grant questions. Anything that you could think of that Washington could do, contracts, grants, personnel, ethics, conflict of interests and things like that, that is what we did for every post that we backstopped. But often times we got into program issues and that was normally at the behest of the mission director. I went up to Sudan once for some reason I can't remember, probably to review some grant agreements, and well let me stop right here. Again communications are different today than they were then, so if you wanted to look at a grant agreement that they were doing you had to go up there and look at it. You had to go to Sudan to review it. I don't think we had faxes then, I'm pretty sure we didn't. So, while I was in Sudan the mission director says, "Hey, we are having a big meeting tomorrow on this project paper. Would you look at it?" I read it and it was really a terrible piece of work. It was prepared

by a contractor. I'm not sure what the project was about, I think it was an AG project. I'm no expert on agriculture, but it didn't take an expert to figure out that the project made little sense. So I went to the meeting and the mission director said, "Does anyone have any questions?" I raised my hand and I said, "I'm no expert but this doesn't meet our minimum requirements for a PP." The mission director said, "Why?" "Well, as just one simple example it doesn't even have a plan on how to implement this program. How is it going to work?" The contractor was there and the contractor said, "Well, I have a plan, look on page 38." On page 38 the paper had some dates running down the left hand side of the page and there were corresponding events running down the right hand side.. I said, "That's not an implementation plan. You don't identify who the responsible parties are, what actions are needed and, besides, it doesn't make any sense. You've got the grant agreement being signed on day 1, and then you've got the project starting thirty days later. That's ridiculous. It'll be a year, at least, before you get people coming out here. So how can you have a project start in thirty days?" He said, "Well the mission director wanted a three-year project so I designed a three-year project." I said, "No you didn't--you designed a six year project and artificially squeezed it into three years."

Q: So you were really popular.

LESTER: The mission director liked that. He knew the paper was garbage, but he wanted an outsider to say it was. I wasn't popular with the contractor. It just reinforced what I had learned already—very few people actually read AID guidelines, manual orders, and later the handbooks. The drafters of these papers were technical specialists and they left it up to the project officers who, in turn, left it up the lawyers, to tell them what they could and couldn't do. But often the project officers at that time were also technical officers and reading and applying the manual orders bored them to tears. So they left it up to the lawyers, as well. As near as I could tell the only people who read this stuff were the lawyers, which was great for me. The role of the lawyer, then, was to get on as many project committees as possible so you could advise clients on what they could and couldn't do at the earliest possible stage. With only two lawyers covering all of eastern and southern Africa, this was a problem. But the key thing, because interpersonal relationships are so important in a bureaucracy, was that if you were going to tell them what they couldn't do, you absolutely had to tell them what they could do. My first boss in the REDSO, on the other hand, would always tell them what they couldn't do but never told them what they could do. It got to be so bad in his dealings with our small regional mission in southern Africa, called OSARAC (Office of Southern Africa Regional Activities Coordination), that my boss was effectively made persona non grata. They would not ask him to go down there. I guess I was tainted, as well. So now you have, when I first got there, a REDSO that wasn't permitted by the USAID/Kenya mission to look over their programs, and where the REDSO lawyers weren't invited to work with our regional mission in southern Africa. And this all for personal and stylistic reasons. Well, one day there was going to be a loan agreement signing in southern Africa. Loan agreements were taken more seriously by AID and the host country since they were usually for larger activities, they often imposed a number of conditions on the host country and, of course, there was an obligation to repay the loan. It was customary that an AID attorney attend the signing in case any issues arose. My boss, as the drafter of the

loan agreement, was reluctantly given permission to attend the signing. So Bill got up one morning and headed to the airport and presumably got on the airplane. The signing was scheduled for the next day. He was bringing down the text of the agreement. I'm in his office and I happen to notice that the loan agreement is sitting on his desk. Now there is only one way to get that loan agreement down there, two ways actually. I can sit by the phone and dictate the 30 or so pages to a typist and have it retyped down there, or I can get on another plane and travel down there just for the purpose of getting him the loan agreement. As luck would have it, my boss's plane developed engine trouble and had to land back in Nairobi, by which time he discovered he'd forgotten the loan agreement. So, instead of a nice trip to southern Africa, I got into a cab and took the loan agreement to the airport and everything worked out.

What I decided very early on was that if I was to make AID a career, I needed to learn as much as possible about AID's business and how it functioned. The best way to do this was to find some really good people and glom on to them and learn as much as I could. I was very fortunate I met a guy named Bob Bell. Bob was in REDSO in charge of our program division and Bob was first rate, absolutely first rate. He didn't mind at all that I would stick to him and ask him lots of questions, and we got to be good friends. Unfortunately, a couple of years after I left Nairobi, Bob was in the car with the ambassador going to a tennis tournament and he had a heart attack.

Q: Right, I thought it was on the tennis court.

LESTER: I thought it was in the car. Bob was always in great shape and he died right there. We played tennis pretty much every weekend together. Anyway, so there was Bob, there two very good economists, there were good staff in other missions—Saiers, Rose Marie Depp, Princeton Lyman. I think the Ethiopia mission at that time was probably one of the best we had in the world. The engineers on our staff were cowboys from Vietnam, but I managed to learn a little about road construction. And there was a first rate contracts officer. All in all, there were a lot of people whose brains you could pick. Things changed a lot in my second two years, because USAID/Kenya got a new mission director. Remember the head of the contracts office in Vietnam? Well he became the mission director in Nairobi. He had lots of problems.

Q: Was that known before he got there?

LESTER: His reputation was agency wide. I talked to a guy, Bob Perkins, in our GC office in D.C. who backstopped the IG's office and Perk told me that when I just started to describe this guy, and he said, "Oh you mean so and so." "Yeah, that's who it is." Everybody knew about him. He never should have been put in a position of responsibility but AID, for some reason, didn't want to fire him. Before we get to him, it's pretty fascinating as to why the job was open in the first place.

Q: You will be able to edit it so that if a name slips you can take it out when you look at the transcript.

LESTER: Okay, good. Sometime during my first year Ed Hogan and his wife leased a very, very nice house. The USAID mission director had not leased a house and was staying in an apartment in downtown Nairobi. When they saw that Hogan had leased a house they decided that they needed to a house, as well. So they did a search. The homes in Nairobi are gorgeous and the gardens are fantastic but they needed a particular house, and they finally found one. They weren't completely satisfied and so they had some renovations done. They had walls taken out and moved somewhere else in the home. They would did lots and lots of landscaping, $20 thousand for landscaping; that was a lot of money in those days. They did about $75,000 in renovations with a one year lease and no option to renew. The last straw was that he or she decided that they didn't like the carpeting and so they sought permission from AID/W to pull up the wall-to-wall carpeting and have new, plusher carpeting put in in its place. Finally, after conversations with the bureau, GC, the admin officer, and me, we decided to pull the plug. He was recalled and someone told me while on the plane back to Washington, he was busy writing his appeal, which came to nothing. This is the same guy whose wife went into the mission's admin office, asked for a GSA catalogue, and ordered supplies for her new house. For example, she ordered 2 units of embossed paper napkins, 1 unit of lawnmowers, things like that. The problem was, that the GSA catalogue is used for bulk orders. Two units of paper napkins equals 2-1/2 tons of paper napkins. We figured out if they had a dinner party every night and invited ten people over, it would take them four years to use up all the paper napkins. One unit of lawnmowers is 12. They, because I think both she and the mission director were involved, got the admin officer to place the order. Months later, when the order had been filled, the director refused to allow others in the mission to use the goodies. The result was, after he was fired, that the goods were placed in a warehouse and eventually used by others in the mission. One wishes that the admin officer had consulted with legal or that his superiors back in Washington had worked with GC. It's a difficult position to be in when the mission director and spouse browbeat you into doing something. You need the cover that Washington can provide. Unfortunately, that didn't happen in this case, either because of political connections the director had (he was political, not career) or some other reason. Sometimes if you're in a tight spot you can use Washington to back you up or seemingly make the decision for you. It's a lot easier now to do that given modern communications than it was then when all cable traffic was accessible by the mission director.

Q: Right. That was truly disgraceful but there were others that were not as obviously venal but clearly not up to snuff?

LESTER: Yeah, the mission director in Tanzania was a hell of a nice guy, and I think he had a degree in economics from some reputable school, but he was, to put it kindly, past his prime. There were people like that throughout it was too bad because I always got the sense that Africa was a dumping ground for people who couldn't perform elsewhere. I don't know how true that was but that's the sense I got. But at the same time there were some really first rate people who really cared about development. I mentioned several of those. The USAID/Kenya had a young—at that time—controller named Bob Bonnaffon who was excellent. He did more than ledger sheets—he participated actively in project reviews, and made himself available to anyone who wanted financial management

assistance. So, when I came back from home leave, one of the first people I met was the former head of the contracts office in Saigon, who was now the USAID/Kenya mission director. I sort of suspected that nothing good would come of this, but there's nothing you can do in that situation except try to mitigate the damage. The new mission director didn't disappoint. Do you know Dee Dee Blane?

Q: Yup.

LESTER: You do?

Q: I mean not well I certainly know her name.

LESTER: Her ex-husband John Blake was the DCM at the embassy in Nairobi. Dee Dee was an AID direct-hire. There was this Christmas party at their home and essentially the entire State and AID missions were invited. This mission director came in to the party with a hooker on each arm, absolutely drunk. And it wasn't just AID employees and State employees at the party, there were Kenyan officials there, this was a representational event and this person goes to the punch bowl and does the thing about pouring the punch down the front of his shirt. He was kindly escorted away. John was furious and eventually the mission director was sent back to Washington, as well. Was he fired? No, he was given a job under an IPA we have with universities. He was given a job to teach something, I don't know what it could have been, at a school somewhere. So we got him out of AID even though AID was still paying him his salary while he was teaching, but we inflicted him on…

Q: Young impressionable minds.

LESTER: …exactly, exactly right. If you sit down and talk to Bob Perkins he can tell you more stories about this guy because at the time this guy was in Saigon, Bob was backstopping their contracts portfolio. There was another time this mission director walked into a very large meeting with AID and contractor personnel. The subject was USAID/Kenya's largest ag project. The mission director walks into the meeting when it was halfway through, sits in the back of the room, tea cup and saucer in hand, stands up and says "Chickens. What this project needs is more chickens." And then he walks out.

Q: I'm sure he has.

LESTER: But the quality of the people it just wasn't there.

Q: What about the quality of the program? Did you feel that notwithstanding some of the clunkers that the programming was pretty good?

LESTER: It's hard for me to judge because we covered so many different countries and we dealt mostly with the front end of the projects—the design and agreement stages—and some implementation problems as they arose. We did have some good mission directors. We did have some excellent people: Princeton Lyman was the mission director

in Ethiopia and Ethiopia's program was first rate because the staff was so good. Larry Saiers was on the staff, Tom and Roberta Worrick, the program was first rate because the staff was good and the Ethiopian counterparts were outstanding. Now, as far as Ethiopian counterparts are concerned that all changed when the governments changed in Ethiopia but the program was first rate. I think in southern Africa the programs were good, as I recall. We had a large program in Malawi but as to the success of those programs I just don't recall. I know that we funded Bunda College which, I believe, was an agricultural college. We had two programs: Bunda College I and Bunda College II, and I don't know how successful those were. I do recall a sort of funny story. Well, funny and sad. Bunda I was mostly about constructing dorms for students. And, of course, missions were under a lot of pressure to Buy America. So, for example, all the bathroom fixtures came from the U.S. Unfortunately, Malawi bought most if not all of its bathroom fixtures from the UK. So, when bathroom fixtures broke, the Malawi government or the university couldn't find replacement parts. UK fixtures and US fixtures weren't compatible. Bunda II remedied that problem, I think we processed the largest source/origin waiver ever done by AID. As I said earlier, at a point in AID's history NGO grantees were only marginally involved in the programs. I can recall many times where the grantee representative would come into my office and we would have to sit down together and rewrite grant proposals because either they didn't know what AID's requirements were or they were unable to explain what they wanted to do in a way that would satisfy those requirements. So we were at the real beginnings of grantees participating in the AID program. Unlike today you didn't have the same kind of close collaboration with grantees on either the project or program level. Similarly, I question how much input we received or sought from the host government. I believe it largely depended on the competency of individual government ministries. In Ethiopia, the ministry that dealt with roads was first rate. In Kenya, the Ministry of Finance and the ag ministry were also excellent. In Lesotho, when dealing with a roads project, we found ourselves negotiating with an AID-funded contractor seconded to the relevant Lesotho ministry.

Q: This is my interview with Bob Lester again and I'm guessing you left Kenya to go back to the States?

LESTER: I left Kenya in September of '79 to go back to the States. When I got there whoever the GC was at the time, I think it was Norm Holmes, called me into his office and said "We are going to put you into the GC office that is responsible for legislation and policy. I told him I didn't want to do it. I told him that I didn't want to do it, that it didn't have anything to do with development which is what I was really interested in, and that I would rather be in GC/Africa. He said that GC didn't have room for me in GC/Africa so why not work in GC/LP for six months and if you don't like it then we will get you out of there. I said that that sounded fair, so I agreed. And then for the next 26 years I was in GC legislation.

Q: I guess you liked it?

LESTER: Oh yeah, someone a lot smarter than me realized that this was a perfect job for me given my background in political science and the political process. I liked the

development work, but I don't like to be speaking in front of a lot of people, as you probably know, so it was a really great job because I didn't have to be in front of a lot of people. I could be behind the scenes and I much preferred that. As an aside, it turns out that after I retired I came down to Florida and I really wasn't doing too well emotionally so I saw a shrink. The shrink said she's never seen a worse case of what she called general anxiety disorder. So she put me on some pills and eventually we found a pill that worked and I've got to tell you there is wisdom in the phrase 'Better living through chemistry." Anyway, it was the absolute perfect job for me and I loved it.

Q: You saw some amazing legislative changes and I think you were behind an awful lot of them but can you just talk a little bit about you obviously had to learn on the job I suspect as there wasn't a whole lot of instruction. You probably had to develop your network of people on the Hill you could work with on legislative language.

LESTER: I was fortunate I had a great teacher Kelly, Kelly Kammerer, and Kelly had a great teacher in Dennis Neil. Plus at that time the AA in the Legislative Affairs office was Genta Hawkins who was just first rate and really knew how to deal with folks on the Hill. Genta had recruited an outstanding staff in Legislative Affairs. Staffing in LPA has been a mixed bag over the years. Sometimes very good, sometimes very bad. I remember two, in my early years, in particular. One was Bill McIntyre who unfortunately was killed in the bombing of the embassy compound in Lebanon, and the other was Kimberly Gamble, who has since gone on to work for UNICEF. All these people taught me a lot, particularly Kelly.

Q: Right.

LESTER: These were the early days, early '80s. These were the days when the authorizing committees--House Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations, actually worked on authorizing legislation for foreign aid. Their staffs were very, very good and I'm not just saying that because you are on the phone, they really were excellent. Full committee and subcommittee staffs knew their stuff, and sometimes they knew a lot more than the AID people that were sent up to brief them. 1985 was the last year a regular foreign aid authorization bill was enacted into law, and that pretty much marks the beginning of the decline of those two committees. We didn't spend nearly as much time with the appropriations committees as we do today. It was hard working with the authorizing committees particularly the House of Foreign Affairs because there were so many staff and each subcommittee, particularly on the House side, had its own set of issues that they cared about. But it was challenging and it was a world of fun. I think what started me off on the right track was probably back in 1980 or thereabouts. The House Foreign Affairs had just reported their authorizing bill for foreign aid and Democratic and Republican staff were in 2172 Rayburn to put the bill and the report together. After markups, bill and report language that had been accepted by the full committee had to be integrated into two documents—the committee's bill and its report. Everybody else had gone home--all the lobbyists, the people from the State Department and other agencies, had all gone home. So I asked Kelly what he wanted to do and he said that we should hang around. I think Kelly was the Deputy GC at the time or the acting

head of LPA. So we hung around and hung around, seemingly for hours. We sat in the committee's reception area in 2170 Rayburn, and let the staff know that we were there if they needed some help. So we are still hanging around when someone comes out and says, "Can you guys get us some coffee and some Coca Cola?" We said, "Sure." So we went down, got some Coca Cola and coffee. In the meantime, Denis Neill, who was now a lobbyist representing such countries as Pakistan and Egypt, had pizza delivered. Then, his work done, Dennis went home. So we gave them the cokes and coffee and went back out to the reception area. Soon some of the staff came out and asked if we could help with a question. So we did. Then we were invited in. So now we were the only two administration people in a room with Republican and Democratic staff who are putting together the committee report and putting the final touches on their bill. I started writing committee report language. Even though I think the committee staff was first rate and probably the best committee staff I've worked with, they didn't work for AID so they didn't really understand all the nuances of AID-speak and the significance of a lot of the words they were using. So we helped write their report and we were there till one or two o'clock I the morning. I think that the committee staff appreciated the fact that we were there as a resource whereas everybody else had taken off. From that point on, working with Republicans and Democrats on the committee was never an issue.

Just a little digression. One lesson from all this is that it always paid to be around when things were happening. Even if you weren't asked to do something, the fact that you were there when committee staff were working was appreciated by them. And sometimes your presence or absence was more consequential than that. In the early 1980s there was a conference on our appropriations bill. The conference took place in a Senate appropriations committee office on a snowy, Sunday morning in December. The conference was closed, meaning that only members and staff were allowed into the room. (Those were the good old days before sunshine rules, when members could have free and open debate without the glare of cameras on them and without the inevitable social media backlash on whatever was negotiated. Sometimes, as far as I'm concerned, government in the sunshine is not a good thing.) In any event, a staff person came out of the room and asked questions about a State Department account. The staffer wanted help in fending off a proposed cut to the account. There was no State person there. The result was that the account was cut. You have to be where the action is. There was another interesting thing that occurred during this conference. Remember, that this is the early 1980s before terrorism made getting into the Capitol like breaking into Fort Knox. It was 9 a.m., and into the Capitol (where the Senate appropriations officers were) walks Dennis Neill with two large brown paper bags filled with donuts. He shares some donuts with the rest of us waiting, and knocks on the door and is let in to the supposedly closed conference. Now he didn't stay long—just long enough to make members aware that he was around representing his clients and that they should be alert to that. Dennis left the room and took his place with the rest of us. An hour or so later, people starting complaining that there wasn't any coffee. So, Dennis goes to his car which was parked in the Capitol parking lot and comes back with a Mr. Coffee machine, coffee, cups, cream and sugar. He set up Mr. Coffee in the hallway and pretty soon anyone who wanted some coffee was enjoying some. Then it gets on to 1 p.m. It's 1 p.m. in Washington in December. Football. We start complaining that there's a game going on and we don't have a TV. Not

to worry—Dennis goes back to his car, brings back a TV, and sets it up in the hallway. When the members took a break, we're watching the Redskins, drinking coffee and, generally, turning a bad situation (for us) into some fun. The members join us. So now you have Dennis, other lobbyists (lobbyists for Greece, Turkey, AIPAC), and House and Senate members and staff, watching TV and drinking coffee in a hallway of the Capitol, all courtesy of Dennis Neill. Dennis was always able to do a good job for his clients.

House Foreign Affairs was blessed with probably the best legislative draftsperson there was--Bill Mohrman, so they didn't need me for drafting statutory language. Of course, I was involved in writing bill language for the administration and report language for the committee. Most importantly, staff would call my office for and explaining to them the significance of what it is that they were contemplating doing. That was a pretty valuable contact since we were able to mitigate the more harmful effects of proposed legislation and report language. I don't know what it was like on other committees, but on Foreign Affairs and Foreign Relations, when it came to foreign assistance, the legislation was pretty much all staffs' work. Working closely with staff enabled us to modify, or in some cases get rid of, legislation or report language harmful to the program. The Senate Foreign Relations committee in those early days was chaired by Frank Church. We didn't do as much work with that committee until Senator Sarbanes became chair of the subcommittee that dealt with foreign aid issues. The lowest ranking member on the Republican side was Jesse Helms. There was one Senate markup I remember early on in early 1980s that was really interesting. The administration had requested funds for a land reform program in El Salvador. Helms came up with an amendment in the Senate Foreign Relations committee markup which he hadn't shared with anyone, no other members, and no other staffers. This was contrary to the way in which the Senate Foreign Relations committee normally worked. Normally amendments were circulated in advance to other Senators and the administration. This allowed for a fuller discussion at the time the amendment was introduced.

Q: Right.

LESTER: In this case Helms didn't because that was the way Helms was. The amendment would have gutted the land reform program that the administration wanted to fund in El Salvador.

Q: This was his administration this was Reagan years wasn't it?

LESTER: That's correct, it was his administration but that didn't make any difference. Helms had friends in Central America and they would have been adversely affected by the land reform program. In any event, we were all scurrying around, after we finally saw the amendment, trying to see what we could to fix it when Jacob Javits, who was on the Senate Foreign Relations committee, sought recognition in support of the amendment. Of course Helms getting Jacob Javits, a liberal Republican to agree with him would be quite a coup for Helms. Javits agreed to the amendment on the condition that Helms make one change to it. Helms looked at the change and agreed. The amendment passed. The thing is, that the change Javits made completely nullified the intent of the Helms amendment.

In other words, the amendment had no impact at all. You learn from at an early stage what difference the change in a word or even punctuation can have on a provision. (I'll give you another example. A few years later, the House Foreign Affairs Committee was marking up the foreign aid authorization. Congressman, later Senator, Torricelli was on the committee. Torricelli asked Bill Mohrman to be a witness and then publicly berated Bill for omitting or deleting—I forget which—a comma in some bill language that Torricelli had written that completely changed the meaning of the provision. Bill just sat that and took it. You have little choice if you're a staffer. Well, Bill's a pretty careful guy. He went back to his office and collected the correspondence he'd had with Torricelli's staff person about this very issue. The correspondence showed that it was Torricelli's staff person, not Bill, who had instigated the change. Bill showed this to Torricelli after the markup. Torricelli never apologized to Bill in public or private. I don't think anyone on the committee staff would have done anything for Torricelli after that. I think much later I remember where Torricelli, Democrat from New Jersey, was being investigated for something. Don't recall whether he spent time in jail.)

Q: And Helms didn't realize it?

LESTER: And he didn't realize what had happened to him; he was skunked I guess. It really teaches you the value about what a simple word change or a simple punctuation change could mean to the substance of an amendment it could change it from one that is bad to one that is good. If you can do it in such a way that the other side doesn't know you are doing it to them it is all the better. Years later, I think in the context of the FREEDOM Support Act markup, Senator Brownback (now governor of Kansas) wanted the administration to be allowed to provide aid to Azerbaijan. He knew that this was a contentious issue, especially with Senator Sarbanes who opposed it. So, Brownback thought he could hide a waiver of the prohibition in a much larger amendment. He had us draft a multi-page amendment and bury what he was really after somewhere in the middle. Sarbanes and his staffer, Marcia Verville, were no dummies. They easily spotted the offending language and moved to strike the Azerbaijan language. The committee did, but the rest of the amendment was adopted. Thus, we now have in the Foreign Assistance Act, a chapter 12 of part I—6 or 7 pages of meaningless and redundant legislation. This time, a Senator couldn't get away with a fast one.

Q: So much the better. You were involved in a lot of the fancy footwork when it came to legislation. I'd be curious which bills you were particularly proud of but I do hope you will talk a little bit about the development fund for Africa because I know a lot of people say you were critical to getting that legislation through.

LESTER: That's nice but I don't think that's true, but in any event I guess we'll get to it. There isn't a single bill that I could say that I was really most proud of because 99 times out of 100 the administration bills on foreign assistance that I worked on were never enacted into law. Individual provisions were, but the bills in their entirety weren't. The way I looked at my job was that I had a responsibility to the agency, to AID, and to AID employees to try and make their lives easier. It was a tough job but to the extent I could I would try. I couldn't do it by myself, that is, I couldn't do it unless the committee staffs

agreed that what I was suggesting should happen but to the extent they did I hope it helped. Sometimes it took years to get the change I was after. As a result of programs in Vietnam and Chile, Congress prohibited AID from providing assistance for police, even if that assistance was beneficial. We couldn't provide assistance to prisons or prisoners. That was the law for at least a decade. But during that time, and later, development thinking had evolved to the point where it was thought beneficial to train police to better perform their duties and to relate better to local communities. For a number of years after that we tried to convince staff to either repeal or modify the prohibition. Even within the administration there was bureaucratic disagreement. Some offices in State opposed our proposal. In fact, I had never before seen offices within the administration opposing a provision that would have increased administration flexibility in delivering assistance. In any event, after years of trying we convinced appropriations committee staff to include a provision headed "Administration of Justice" but which really had the effect of significantly weakening the prohibition. A few years later I got a phone call from a project officer in India. She said that she wasn't able to provide aid to police to educate them on how to deal with rape victims. I spoke with Len Rogers in the bureau, we drafted some language, and the appropriations committee included this as an exception to the police prohibition, as well.

I had always thought that foreign governments don't make foreign policy decisions on the basis of whether or not AID provides development assistance to them. My experience was that for host governments, development was not a make or break issue when it comes to foreign policy. Maybe the just didn't care that much whether the poorest people in their countries benefited from foreign aid. So it always struck me as odd that Congress would legislate all these prohibitions on assistance to countries when it was the political actions of governments, not the people of a country, that precipitated the prohibition. That political action would be take place regardless of whether or not the country was receiving development assistance. So, while I couldn't do anything directly about the prohibition, my long term goal was to try and make sure that all development assistance was available "notwithstanding any provision of law." This would allow policy people to decide whether they wanted to provide assistance, in light of the prohibition, which legally they could do because assistance was available notwithstanding any provision of law. By the time I left, pretty much all of development assistance was provided on a notwithstanding basis, as was assistance to the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe. The exceptions are probably in the agriculture and higher education sectors.

Q: And that gave AID more flexibility. But a question for you because AID doesn't always speak with one voice and…

LESTER: Oh yeah, it never does.

Q: …it never does so sometimes you probably had to just fall back on your own sense of what was going to be best for the agency or obviously you don't have to tell me anything you don't want but there had to be times…

LESTER: By the end of this oral history you will know more about me than I do. Okay. Go ahead I'm sorry.

Q: But just sorting through things and trying to figure out what's the best way to free up AID to do what it needs to do. It's not always obvious and I'm just wondering how you approached some of these issues. I will ask you about a specific one which I don't think we've ever talked about which was some language that sneaked into a committee report about technical advisors for child survival which ended up being a gate that opened up basically program funding for technical advisors and you had to have had a role in that.

LESTER: Operating expenses have always been a sensitive issue for AID. To a large extent, our programs are our people. The saddest thing, to me, about the cutbacks in staff over the years, and the size of missions, is that it has constrained us in our ability to interact with counterparts in the host country. It was very common for the agriculturalists in the REDSO I worked in to go over to the Kenya Ministry of Agriculture and have discussions with the people there. Same holds for our economists and the Ministry of Finance in Kenya and elsewhere. We've lost that ability to a very great extent. The TAACS program you're referring to was just one example of a way in which we could artificially raise the OE funding level. To the extent we could use program funds for operating expense purposes, we saved operating expense funds. Obviously, this had repercussions on the program side and had repercussions in terms of transparency, i.e., how much did it really cost to run the agency? Nevertheless, it was thought that the tradeoff was worth it. We did this primarily through the appropriations process because by this time the authorizing committees were nonfunctional. If someone came up with a good idea, be it TAACS or any other program, where we thought there was a modicum of justification to charge the program accounts, we would see what we could do to get cover by including language in committee reports. And the committees, more so than OMB which always cut our OE requests, were obliging. Since Jan Miller was the lawyer primarily responsible for backstopping FM, you know Jan would be as flexible as possible in justifying a charge to program accounts for what might otherwise have been an operating expense. Whenever the committees considered a supplemental, or special legislation like the Global AIDS bill, the FREEDOM Support Act, the SEED Act, we always tried, and were mostly successfully, in getting the committees to include language that either allowed us to use a portion of the appropriation for operating expense purposes, or language that directly appropriated funds to the OE account. In addition, there were other things that were annoyances, like shutting down the agency when a CR hadn't been signed. We addressed that issue by asking the staffs to include bill language that would make a portion of our OE appropriation available on a two-year basis. That way, technically you had money available to obligate during a shutdown and then it became a political decision on whether to allow AID to do it. Also, the end of the fiscal year rush didn't become so much of a rush when all of our program funds were appropriated on a two-year basis.

In my experience dealing with host countries, particularly in Africa, getting everybody to sign everything by the end of the fiscal year was regularly a chore and sometimes it forced people to obligate funds either for projects or for grants that were unwise. That is,

if they had more time to think about it they might not have obligated the funds or they may not have obligated the funds for the same thing. So we tried to extend the availability of funds and eventually Congress began to appropriate pretty much all our money to remain available for two years. I wasn't really satisfied with that because the issue would come up, and it came up several times, what happens if a project just isn't going well? Wouldn't you like to be able to de-obligate that money and re-obligate it for something that is? So I discussed it with committee staff and we came up with this formulation that if AID's money was obligated during the two year period, the original two year period in which it was appropriated, at the moment it was obligated it became no-year money. What that meant was that AID program and OE funds could be obligated and deobligated and reobligated until it was actually spent, without it having to be returned to Treasury on deobligation. For the longest time, that little change stayed in the law. It's now been pared to an additional four years, I understand, but if actually used by AID could be a great implementation tool. That was a provision that I really, really liked doing.

Then there was this conference on a foreign aid authorization. Congressman Torricelli, not my favorite person, offered an amendment and the bottom line was that it would have subjected AID's cash transfer assistance program, except for the program in Israel, to cargo preference rules. All I can say is for purposes of this that the provision doesn't work. The two concepts are totally incompatible--you can't provide a country with cash to use as it sees fit and then say to the country oh but by the way anything you buy with that currency you have to ship on U.S. carriers. The authorization language was never enacted into law. (In fact, I had to testify about the provision in conference. No other administration people present wanted to, so I was chosen. In the course of questioning, Chairman Fascell asked Torricelli and Senator Sarbanes to work out compromise language. And he added that the administration should be involved in the discussions, including the bald-headed guy who's a good lawyer.) But in an appropriations bill the same issue came up and I remember the committee staffs and I drafted this provision in dealing with putting cash into separate accounts. What I explained to them was if you put cash into separate account that means that the use of the cash is exposed and people will expect that you apply AID's rules and regulations and statutory requirements to that cash when, in fact, the whole idea of a cash payment is simply for balance of payments of support. So we wrote a provision that said that the cash transfer assistance is not subject to any rule, regulation, statute that is contrary to the cash transfer nature of the assistance. Then in the committee report language we identified some of those provisions of law that would not apply and one of those provisions was cargo preference. It was the first time that I'm aware of that by statute and helpful report language that cargo preference has been avoided.

Q: Right.

LESTER: I got a kick out of that. It also applied to the Africa bureaus policy reform programs as well. But I don't think the authority was ever used, but anyway it's still in law. It's just one of the little pleasures you get in doing this job because 95 percent of the stuff you write never sees the light of day.

Q: But you were clearly trusted on both sides and I think a lot of people don't know how it happened but all of a sudden things are easier. But on the development fund for Africa I think what I heard people talk a lot about is program assistance that is not everything had to be projectized and was that a hard sell?

LESTER: Yeah, it was a very hard sell and largely it was Larry Saiers doing the selling. Larry had a lot of credibility on the Hill and I think this was done before a lot of the international community thought maybe doing all project assistance wasn't a good idea. People began to accept the notion that program assistance, which linked assistance disbursements to policy reforms, could be another useful development tool. I think it was just continually going up to the Hill and dealing with some of the skeptics Gary Bombardier, on Matt McHugh's staff, who was eventually I think turned around on this and was also an extremely important person in getting debt forgiveness through. Gary was the House Foreign Ops staff person who was most interested in Africa issues. It was just a continuing effort and the change was done as an amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act but I'm not sure that the authorizing committees were involved. I think it was done as a provision in an appropriations that amended the Foreign Assistance Act. At this time, we were dealing mostly with the appropriations committee staffs but we still had to deal with the authorizing committee staff so it was a hard tell. But on the substance, it was Larry who was the primary lead, but the thing is I think by that time we had developed a trust and committee staff were willing to give what we proposed a chance. I learned early on that you had to treat all sides—authorizers, appropriators, Republicans, Democrats, openly and honestly. There were obviously some things you couldn't share with all. But if there was information you could share, it was fine. They would ask, sometimes, for my opinion on a piece of legislation and I could give them my opinion and what the administration position was. It was up to the staffs to make the final calls. I remember one year, we were working on an omnibus CR, where an authorization bill was to be folded into the CR. That year, I was up on the Hill working on the text of the authorization bill and the appropriations bill, at the same time. Sometimes it was difficult to remember which was which. At the end of the day, though, I could only write what the staffs wanted me to write. Could I go up there and write a provision dealing with the construction of settlements in the West Bank? I couldn't do that by myself--that was above my pay grade and besides that's not an area staff would trust me with. If the committee staff asked me to write a provision that dealt with settlements and guarantees, etc. I would gladly do it since it was their idea. In fact, that is what happened with one provision that was very sensitive that became law.

Q: How did you keep say the AID administrator or AID informed or didn't you?

LESTER: It depends on the administrator. For example, Peter McPherson used to get in to work very early in the morning, as did I. Usually I'd be sitting on the front stoop of the 23rd entrance of Main State at about 6:30 a.m. Peter would get there around 10 to 15 minutes later. I walked to work so I'd be in jeans and a sweatshirt. Peter would, of course, be in a suit. I'd be sitting on the stoop (my NY upbringing) reading the paper when Peter would sit down next to me and we'd chat about what was going on, what to

expect, and things like that. Brian Atwood was always available for a phone call or a meeting. The other thing was, that I could always share information with Kelly. A lot of the stuff I did involved very technical issues that senior staff didn't have to bother about. Other things were more significant. When Kelly was head of LPA or was the counselor, I could always talk to him about all legislative issues. I always kept Kelly informed about what was going on because I could trust him. He understood that my credibility with the Hill depended on him not telling them what he knew from me. If he had another source of information, then it was fine to chat with them. It was sort of like The Washington Post method of publishing--he wouldn't betray my confidence or put my role in jeopardy; he would always try to get another source. And Kelly was very good about getting that other source. It gave us a heads up on things that were coming but I could talk to him about where the bills were going in terms of the budget and things like that. We had a really close working relationship that I didn't have that with other heads of LPA. And sometimes it became very awkward especially when you had an AA who was very well connected and didn't mind putting me in a bind with my boss. That was the issue with an AA, can't remember her name but her father was a senator from Nevada.

Q: Oh yes.

LESTER: What was her name?

Q: She didn't last very long did she?

LESTER: No, no, no and she drove poor John Mullen crazy but I just can't remember her name right now.

Q: Not Cheney?

LESTER: Excuse me?

Q: Cheney?

LESTER: No, no Laxalt, Michele Laxalt. She was very close with John Bolton who at that time was probably the GC.

Q: Oh yes.

LESTER: We had a pretty decent relationship but I couldn't really talk to her as I did with Kelly, for one she didn't know AID like Kelly did. But keeping administrators informed I always thought that was Kelly's job. Sometimes it got pretty awkward when we had a General Counsel who wanted to know a lot more than I thought he could be trusted with. I know that sounds a little presumptuous on my part, but you develop a sense about who cares for the program and who doesn't. For example, we had one GC, who's name I won't mention but he was the last GC I had before I retired, who gave me my worst personnel evaluation because I hadn't kept him informed. And he was right about that. So, I developed a strategy—I would tell him only stuff that was more or less

common knowledge or would be in the next day or so. That was he was on top of things, I didn't betray any confidences, and my evaluation went up. As I said, Peter McPherson might have been the easiest guy I've ever had to work with as head of the agency. There was one day, a Saturday, and I jogged in because I was going to do some work at home and I had forgotten some papers. I went to my office to pick up the papers and the phone rang, so like an idiot I picked up the phone and it was Kelly. He said that we had a meeting with the administrator in 10 minutes. I told him that I was in sweats. That didn't faze him a bit. So I went downstairs to meet Kelly in front of McPherson's office. And here comes Kelly toddling along and Kelly, as you know, is a really snappy dresser…

Q: Yes, right.

LESTER: …and so he had on a coat and tie and looked very good. We went into McPherson's office and McPherson is sitting behind his desk in his pajamas. I think he had had a fight with his wife and he had spent the night in the office. McPherson had stomach issues and so had a very strange and bland diet. So he was eating a bowl of cereal and was behind this big desk and all you could see was the bowl of cereal and McPherson in his pajama tops sitting behind the desk. I'm standing there and thinking I hope this guy is wearing pants.. Why we were having this meeting was interesting. Both Kelly and I knew we were going to be under CR, continuing resolution, for a long time. In those days how much money you were appropriated under a CR depended a lot on how much you requested against what was available the previous year. Congress would use a one paragraph formula rather than putting the whole bill into a continuing resolution that you could use to determine how much money you received under the CR. We knew that we were going to be under a CR and we knew what the formula was going to be. PPC had proposed a budget for the coming year that would have meant something on the order of a $80, 90 or $100 million less than if we requested funding differently for the different AID accounts. So McPherson showed us what PPC was requesting and we told him what the implications were for a CR. So we changed the numbers around and McPherson gave instructions to PPC to use our numbers. I don't know what that did to the programs but the agency as a whole got $100 million more than it otherwise would have. So with McPherson it was really easy to shortstop the process a little bit and at the same time keeps him informed and hopefully not do too much damage. With other administrators I almost hate to use this name, Ron Rosen's, it was impossible.

Q: Right, well he didn't trust anyone.

LESTER: No one had any access to Roskens. I remember one hearing in front of Dave Obey's subcommittee, Congressman Smith asked Roskens a lot of questions which Roskens couldn't answer. Finally, Smith gave up and left, but before he did he whispered something to Obey. After the hearing was over one of Obey's staff people came up to me and asked whether I wanted to know what Smith had said. I said sure, and the staffer said that Smith whispered to Obey, "Do you believe this guy? The man's an idiot." That's what Larry Smith, Congressman, on our Appropriations Sub-committee thought of the Administrator of AID. You didn't have access to Roskens and it wouldn't have made a

difference if you'd had, he only cared about having his picture taken with heads of state during his many trips abroad.

Q: Absolutely he never cared. What about Brian what was your relationship with him?

LESTER: I think it was pretty good because Brian was also an easy person to get access to. I could call his office and say that I needed to talk with him right away and, if it was at all possible, we would. The person I couldn't talk with was Larry Byrne. To the agency's detriment and to Brian's own detriment, Brian never got rid of Larry. Larry would sit on the edge of his desk and twirl a lanyard around his finger and then try to browbeat whoever he was meeting with. Larry thought he was the administrator. The most difficult time I had at AID was the RIF, the reduction in force.

Q: It was unnecessary.

LESTER: Because it was unnecessary, exactly right, and it cost the agency its middle management people its FS-1s and FS-2s. It was just wrong.

Q: Did you have any dealings with H or did you try to avoid them?

LESTER: We interacted with H all the time, both H and State/L, State Legal. Obviously, there were things that I obviously couldn't talk to H and things they couldn't talk to me about. But for the most part our relationship was a good one. As for L, we drafted a lot of legislation together, including the SEED Act. Some legislation we couldn't draft together. For instance, the FREEDOM Support Act was drafted by L and they were under instructions not to share it with AID. Nonetheless, let's just say that we did have some input into it. Many years earlier, before we had PCs at our desks, both State and AID used Wang word processors. Our office and L were on the same floor at Main State and so when we were drafting, say, the administration's authorization bill, I would go over to L or the L lawyer would come to my office, and we'd work on the bill. Jim Thessin, Libby Keefer, Todd Buchwald were some of the best lawyers you'd ever want to work with. In fact, after Jim became ambassador to Paraguay, I'd still get phone calls or emails asking questions. We also did a lot of work with State's budget office—I think it was called Resources and Planning or Resources and Policy. Bob Bauerlein and Skip Boyce were in charge. When Bob went on an extended leave, he recommended that I take his place. That was pretty heady stuff since the office worked directly for the Deputy Secretary. In those days, it was Larry Eagleburger who was not your typical deputy secretary. He was clearly an advocate of hard power, but mostly (at least in the time I was there) he was forced to deal with State management issues. I can't remember the names of the people I worked with, then, but I recall one briefing that I and one other person had to give for a couple of undersecretaries. Eagleburger was supposed to chair the meeting, but couldn't make it. Anyway, the briefing was a fiasco because the two undersecretaries really disliked one another. Eagleburger came in during the briefing and quickly shut it down. After everyone had left except us two briefers, he got really agitated and said that if there was one thing he wanted to do it was to get the two undersecretaries on the same page. We tactfully explained that it would be a cold day before he would achieve that,

and gave him the reasons why. Eagleburger was the kind of person you could talk directly to and he didn't care about your rank.

Q: When do you think the relationship started to change between AID and State?

LESTER: It started to change, I think, because of two events. The first was the SEED and FREEDOM Support programs which established the concept of a State Department coordinator. Objectively, it made some sense since both programs were multi-agency programs. We had hoped that State coordinators would use AID as an executive secretariat, where AID would provide the technical and policy counsel to coordinator. In a couple of cases, depending on the personality of the coordinator, that might have happened. But I think in most cases, coordinators (who viewed the programs as political programs and not developmental ones) staffed up their offices and made their funding and program decisions with less input from AID than should have been the case. The coordinator trend spread much later to AIDS programs, clean water, Afghanistan, Iraq, and I'm sure quite a few others. The second event occurred when Jesse Helms became chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee and decided that he wanted to merge ACDA, AID, and USIA into the Department. State worked with Helms' staff on the legislation.

Q: So stabbed in the back?

LESTER: We even had a meeting with Senator Biden who probably doesn't remember the meeting and may not even remember the circumstances. Helms was using the merger bill as leverage with Biden. Helms would support authorization for payment of U.S. arrearages to the U.N. in return for Biden's vote on the merger. Biden really wanted the U.N. arrearages cleared up and we had nothing to offer. He was sympathetic but in the end supported Helms with some changes to the Helms bill which had language permitting the merger but not requiring it. USIA and ACDA were not so lucky. Both were incorporated into the Department and AID remained pretty much as it was for a little bit. One thing that did result, and it gets too complex for an oral history, that the legislation required a modification in existing executive orders and delegation of authorities. Up until the legislation, almost all of AID's authorities were derived directly by EO from the President (I won't muddy things up by referencing IDCA). After the legislation, EO's had to be redrafted and they were redrafted so that AID's authorities were derived by delegation from the Secretary. AID lost its direct, legal, line to the President. It also meant that State had the authority, although it didn't exercise it at this time, to take direct control over AID's budget. These two events were the slippery slope of State control over AID activities. It led to a lot of nasty confrontation with the Department. First with Secretary Albright's predecessor and then with her.

Q: He was head of the transition Warren Christopher.

LESTER: Warren Christopher right. The first confrontation was with Christopher and then less effectively with Albright. With Christopher it was an all-out brawl, with rival op-eds in the papers, etc. I think largely because Brian and Albright were close and Brian

couldn't fight as hard with Albright as he did with Christopher, we began to lose control over our own budget and, with joint admin offices overseas, control over some very basic mission support requirements. I think that it all started five to ten years earlier with that initial Helms legislation.

Q: When did you retire from AID?

LESTER: I think it was 2005.

Q: Okay so you went into the Bush W. years.

LESTER: Yep.

Q: I think that was probably when AID had lost most of its authority, the budget authority, the policy authority had gone on to State.

LESTER: Oh yeah, it was a gradual erosion. With regard to the coordinators it depended on who the coordinator was, how much authority the coordinator wanted to exercise over the programs. Some of the Eastern Europe coordinators didn't really care that much and they deferred a lot to USAID. Some of the others were just the opposite and then, of course, State particularly under Bush created this F bureau and that sort of meant that AID didn't have control over its budget and there were so many coordinators that were riffed, so HIV/AIDS, Europe, Eastern Europe, Russia, there is a coordinator for education now, there is more basic education, I think there is a coordinator for gender issues, it just goes on and on. It's unfortunate but that's the way it's devolved. So that is where we are today.

Q: I think some of the budget authority has come back and also some of the policy planning but it certainly is very circumscribed compared to what you saw back in the '70s and '80s. Can I just ask sort of your biggest success but maybe your biggest disappointment? There have been some wonderful themes that have gone through this including that bureaucracies don't necessarily let the brightest rise to the top that you're effectiveness and I may be putting words in your mouth but it was partly because you were absolutely straight with everyone and you would make a distinction between what you thought and then just what you were asked to do. I think that is right people knew they could trust you and the position you had, at least during your time in Washington, trust was vital.

LESTER: Well it was kind of unique position to be in--to be able to work for the administration and then work in effect for the Hill and try your best to see that no one screwed up too badly. I think the year I remember the most was 1988. Richard Collins, working for Senator Inouye, was the clerk of the Senate Foreign Ops. He called me up one day and asked if I would help him put together the bill and report. I said sure, and met him in his office at about 5 p.m. For the next 2-3 months, Richard and I worked on the bill and report. I would finish my AID work and make it up to his office at 5 p.m.,

have some Chinese food or pizza, and start working with Richard. Richard's idea was to produce a report that went into depth on what the different funding accounts meant, as well as the general provisions. In 1988, our office did not have computers. We used word processors that were lined up in a hallway. You had to wait your turn to get on one. The Hill had computers and they were using WordPerfect software for word processing. I learned WordPerfect on the fly, so to speak. Anyway, it was a laborious project. What made it very difficult for me was that my dad was very ill at the time, and I really should have been down in Florida where he was.

Anyway, the bill passed the Senate on October 1 and I was in Richard's office, pretty exhausted. I was talking with a guy named Carl Rather who worked for H While we were talking I hear these words in the background and it was Richard, and he's reading something about me—it was a two-column piece that Senator Inouye inserted in the Congressional Record. What Richard was reading from was the original text. Later on, Richard, Jim Bond, Rand Fishbein, Mazie Mattson, and Juanita Rilling gave me a framed version with some nice comments by the Senator. I only kept two things from my job when we moved to Florida. This was one, and a framed copy of the transcript where Chairman Fascell talked about the bald headed guy being a good lawyer. I sent a copy of the Record page to my mom who was with my father in Florida. I guess I really didn't understand just how ill he was. Later she told me that when she read this to him, he cried, and it was the only time she'd seen him cry when it wasn't because of the pain he was in. It means everything to me, and it and the Fascell transcript will always be hanging on the wall.

I had the great opportunity, first, to see how Congress works—or doesn't. And, second, the experience of working with some true professionals. And I was able, I hope, to learn a little bit from each of them. I'll give you some examples. There was one year when a CR was inevitable, but first the Senate had to pass their bill. In those days, it was not uncommon at the end of a fiscal year, for the Senate to be in session round the clock. Kelly, who was then the head of LPA but was suffering from some illness, couldn't go to the Hill. So he lay in his office, telling people what to do and getting reports back from them on what was going on. Lesson: if you have a good staff, trust them by delegating responsibility to them. He was like an octopus, getting information and parceling out assignments. Anyway, this was before the day of C-SPAN so people had to be in the gallery to see what was going on. In the Senate, amendments could come up at any time—there was no particular order. I drew the midnight to 4 a.m. shift. Boring, except when an amendment unrelated to AID but something near and dear to the AMA came up. In the gallery with me were about 10 lobbyists for the AMA, each one had had responsibility for 10 senators. As the votes were cast, there they were making mental notes as to who did what, and talking about how they would penalize those who voted against them. The amendment passed, much to the chagrin of the AMA. Lesson: these folks take it very seriously. Okay, I was working with only a few hours sleep each day the CR was on the Senate floor. Staff could often be found sleeping on cots in their offices. I can tell you that Jim Bond snores. Anyway, the CR passed and the next step was conference.

The committee broke up in working groups—each group responsible for one appropriations bill. Terry Peel, the clerk for the House Foreign Ops subcommittee was in charge of the staff meetings on the foreign assistance portion of the CR. To make a long story a little shorter, I got to work at 6 a.m. on Thursday. I got home at 11 a.m. on Saturday. I saw two sunrises from the Capitol. Putting together a bill and conference report is a time consuming process, less so now than it was then. By the time we got done (I think there were about 13 or 14 committee staff and me), we could barely stand up. The CR passed, and the members and all the staff went home as Congress adjourned. I got home, collapsed on a sofa and was sound asleep when the phone rang. The upshot of the call was that we had made a mistake—the bill appropriated about $400 million in military assistance than it should have. Since Congress had adjourned, there's was nothing to be done until they returned for the next session. In the meantime, OMB would have to go through the laborious process of sequestering from each account in the bill, an amount equal to the overage. A lot of trees were killed in this process, but the law required it. The reaction of the staff was interesting when we reconvened later that day. Some said that they weren't in the room when it happened, another held his belly and said that his boss would fire him, Terry said that he was in charge of the staff conference so it was his fault. Lesson: you earn respect by taking responsibility, even for things that no one would suggest are entirely your fault. I have tremendous respect for Terry.

Another example deals with Haiti. At the time, Haiti was not thought highly of by Republican members. Mr. Aristide was president of the country and he was not well liked on that side of the aisle. In fact, an amendment to the Foreign Ops bill had been included that prohibited all but humanitarian assistance for Haiti. There was no definition of "humanitarian assistance". In fact, that term had never been defined I think to allow Congress to revisit the issue of what was allowable should circumstances warrant. Steve Allen, in GC, had done research on the number of different statutory uses of the term which, at times had permitted family planning assistance, health assistance, and even assistance to the private sector. Senator Dole's staff, whose name I won't mention, called a meeting to discuss an administration proposal to fund an activity in Haiti. Dole was the majority leader at the time. Tim Rieser, on Senator Leahy's staff, the ranking member on Foreign Ops, was also there. There were a number of other staff present. I was the only administration person there. It was a nasty meeting. I explained what the law was, and how the identical language had been used in the past. Dole's person went after Tim since Tim was the only one who spoke up on behalf of the proposal. You can disagree without browbeating, something that the Dole person obviously hadn't learned. Tim stood his ground because he thought that aid to Haiti was the right thing to do. I can't recall what happened, but I gained huge respect for Tim.

Robin Cleveland worked for Senator McConnell when Senator McConnell chaired the Foreign Ops subcommittee. Robin was/is very, very smart but sometimes has a short temper. I don't believe she cared that much about development aid, but she knew she could use the Democrats' liking for it as a negotiating tool to get more military aid. There was one day when an AID mission director went up to the Hill to brief Robin one aspect of the programs in her country. Robin did not feel constrained about limiting the

conversation to that one subject. She began to ask more general questions about other economic aid possibilities and the political situation in the country. The mission director couldn't answer any of them. Robin kept on asking about circumstances in the country and the mission director had no answers. (Robin's father had been ambassador to that country so she knew quite a bit about it.) After the meeting, I got a call from Robin asking me to draft language earmarking funding for the country at levels significantly higher than requested. It wouldn't have happened had the mission director known her stuff.

I could tell you many stories about Jim Bond, the "iron marshmallow" (a name given to him by Dave Rodgers who used to write for the Wall Street Journal), aside from the fact that he snores. I'll just limit myself to one. Jim was one of the most imaginative staff people I worked with. You could always trust Jim to come up with some innovative idea to get around a limitation or requirement. Back in the day, budget legislation was more restrictive than it is now concerning how much budget authority, and accompanying outlays, could be appropriated. It's an arcane subject, the kind of thing that the CBO and other green eye shade people love. Well, the bill that Jim had constructed was over budget. We needed to find savings or accounts would have to be cut. Jim's idea was to go back into the previous year's bill and change the availability of ExIm money. Since ExIm would not be using all the funds it had gotten the previous year, by going back and making those funds two-year money, Jim could reduce the current year appropriation to ExIm, thereby making room for other accounts in the bill. I drafted the language and we discussed it against the current budget legislation, and we went with it. Jim's idea was so innovative, even earning the respect of one of my favorite people, the CBO examiner Joe Whitehill, that CBO had to adopt a special scoring rule to prevent this from happening again.

At markups, amendments come at you from all sides and you have to be prepared to do some quick drafting at a moment's notice. We were in a markup one day and a staffer came by and asked me to draft an amendment earmarking funds for the Charles Darwin Center. I said that I would but only if she told me what it was. She didn't know, and went back to her boss, Rep. Jerry Lewis. She came back and explained what it was. I asked her why the congressman was so interested. It seems Lewis had taken the red-eye from California to get back in time for the markup. While on the plane he read the airlines in-flight magazine. There happened to be a story about the Darwin Center. The earmark passed and stayed in the law for a number of years. A good example of how our laws are made?

I could go on and on about all of the committee and subcommittee staff, authorization and appropriations. I'm sure I would be leaving a lot of people and a lot of events out. Some events might prove embarrassing to people so I won't go into those. Suffice to say that these staff people were uniformly first rate.

What I learned mostly, and it's something you don't get in the typical government class, is the different pressures administration and Hill staff face, and how they respond to those

pressures. AID is made up of professionals, many of whom have degrees in technical specialties. There are health people, agriculturalists, people whose life focus has been on family planning. What these and others share is a dedication to development and helping the poor in countries that few in this country or the Hill really care about. I admire them, and their ability to work in some truly difficult circumstances—both overseas and in the U.S. I added the U.S. because, with scarce resources, they're having to deal with the State Department bureaucracy, administration "initiatives", demands of NGOs, and conflicts within their own bureaucracy. That can be pretty daunting. The primary driver, however, is to achieve development results. They are analytic people who, increasingly with input from the host country, develop plans that achieve equitable economic growth in developing countries. That's the pressure they operate under.

But the drivers that pressure the Hill staff are different. Unlike AID, which has a staff of around 3,000 direct-hire and many more FSNs, the appropriations committee staff overseeing development operations amount to about 3 on the Senate side, and maybe the same number on the House side. Their world, given where they sit, is naturally more political. When I left AID, I spent almost a year working on the Senate Foreign Ops staff. This was at a time when the movement to curtail earmarking was just beginning and limitations were just being considered. One of my responsibilities was to keep tabs on all congressional and private party "requests" for statutory earmarks and report language. After 9 months, those requests took up two loose-leaf binders an inch or two thick each. Each page contained numerous requests. It was up to the staff to balance these with what limited time they were able to spend in the field, and the administration's requests. These requests from members and outside groups did not reflect an interest in overall development—they were requests for appropriations for specific groups, countries, sectors, programs, you name it. (I'm reminded of a time that Kelly and I worked on one of several abortive attempts to rewrite the Foreign Assistance Act. The most difficult aspect of it was trying to get the development community to think in terms of development rather than each group's particular piece of the pie. Each group wanted reference to their own particular area of interest. Some wanted us to include earmarks. It was much easier getting the draft bill through the administration than it was running the gauntlet of development groups.) Hill staff has no choice but to accommodate the wishes of the members of the committees they work for. They might be able to water things down a bit—change a "shall" to a "should"—but for the most part what those members want, they get. As far as NGOs are concerned, the smart ones use members to represent their interests. Those, too, are accommodated. Foreign assistance is not a popular bill. (Dave Obey, when appropriations bills were actually considered on the House floor, used to bring his bill to the floor and when it was time for a vote his staff would be holding up signs in waiting rooms just off the floor asking for a "aye" vote because the bill had cut funds from the administration's request.) Voting for foreign aid requires building a consensus, and one way you do that is to accommodate the wishes of those whose votes you're soliciting, giving them a stake in the outcome. So, the accommodations are made.

The committee staffs are under no illusion that these are "good" bills from a development standpoint—but that's not the standpoint that, at the end of the day, on which they will be judged. Did the bill pass? That's the bottom line. Staff are also constrained by their

ability to gather information. They have the administration providing them information for sure. (In one case, I remember sitting in the office of the Senate Foreign Ops clerk Eric Newsom, when his phone rang. I motioned to leave and he shook his head. So I sat down and listened to his end of the conversation. Eric made it very clear to me with whom he was speaking because he used the caller's very distinctive first name. The purpose of the call—to ask Eric to include an earmark in the bill for his programs. This kind of end around was not uncommon. Even the administration—off the record, of course—got into the business of earmarking.) But increasingly, committee staffs have relied on NGOs for their information. They have little choice. Clearly, just as the administration's information will have a bias, the NGO's does, as well. It makes it pretty tough on staff to choose from these and other sources. And staff have, like everyone else, their own biases. Paul Grove, who's currently staff clerk on Senate Foreign Ops, has promoted assistance to East Asia and democracy programs. Tim Rieser's interests are more wide ranging geographically, but his focus has been at times at the micro level. It's no wonder, given all these competing pressures, that the bill is far from the perfect developmental piece of legislation the AID professionals would like.

Q: That's probably a good place to stop it is to my mind a very beguine view of the Hill and I absolutely appreciate how spread thin they are. Some of them didn't seem that nice to me but it could be…

LESTER: My guess is those were not committee staff. My guess is they were personal staff. I tried to distinguish between the two. I have very little regard for personal staff. These people are on the job for a year and many of them are just trying to enact their PhD dissertation or something like that. They have no idea about the context, they have a particular bug or bee in their bonnet and they want that addressed. Committee staff aren't like that. Committee staff I've always found to be very, very professional, even Charlie Flickner, you may not understand what Charlie says sometimes but there are pearls in there. But you asked my most disappointing.

Q: Right.

LESTER: I guess my biggest disappointment has to do with the decline of the authorization process and the failure to rewrite the FAA. Over time, both the SFRC and HFAC have become less and less relevant. The fact that they have not passed a general foreign aid reauthorization since 1985 is just one indicator. The failure to do comprehensive oversight is another. To be sure, there have been institutional reasons for this decline—the importance of the budget process and the work of the budget committees has shrunk the window during which the authorizing committees can produce and report a bill. The discordance in both the House and Senate has meant that administrations have been reluctant to see an authorization bill be marked up and voted on on the floor of either house, arguing (and I think rightly) that the process would only make a bad situation much worse. And the quality of membership on both committees, I believe, just isn't the same as it was when I first started out. Claiborne Pell was a nice man but was not an effective choice as chairman of the SFRC. Nor was Senator Helms an

effective chair. In the House, increased authority give to the subcommittees meant that the full committee chairmen lost much of their control over the work product of their committee. I remember once that we had worked with the full HFAC committee staff on a major foreign aid reauthorization that rewrote much of the FAA. We came up with a clean bill, about an inch thick. Then the subcommittees got their hands on it. After amendment after amendment was incorporated into the bill, it was about 3 inches thick and filled with provisions that no administration could possibly accept. (Now, before you go back to Mike on this, the Near East subcommittee chaired by Lee Hamilton, was the most responsible of the subcommittees.) Chairman Fascell, frustrated by the whole process, asked the administration at the end of the markup what it's views on the bill were. Skip Boyce was the senior administration person present, went to the microphone and said something like, "Mr. Chairman, the administration has only two problems with bill—the words and the numbers." And, of course, without administration support, the bill went nowhere.

There were several other efforts to make wholesale changes to the FAA, but they all failed. There was a process that Fascell used to come to agreement on a bill where administration people and members with their staffs, sat in a conference room and discussed various issues raised by the FAA and a potential rewrite. While it was helpful in terms of clearing the air on a number of issues, this was the bill that eventually had a problem with the words and the numbers.

My disappointment is in the disintegration of the congressional law-making process, coupled with a decline in the quality of the members, which has continued to today. The authorization process seems to be dead with nothing on the horizon to bring it back to life. Appropriations bills are folded into much larger CRs—in some cases either the Senate version of a fiscal year appropriations bill has not been considered on the Senate floor, sometimes it's the House bill that has not made it that far, and sometimes it's both. The sad thing is that from a policy standpoint, that's probably a good thing. There would be no value-added in having members of either house consider the foreign aid appropriations bill; in fact, it would likely be a value-minus, if that's a term. So, from a process standpoint things are very disappointing. You see bills being prepared in secret and being brought to the floor without hearings, the Speaker stripping an amendment out of a bill that has already passed, or in my day, a Speaker adding a provision to a CR that had already been conferenced. That's not how it's supposed to work and, while it may be a good result from a foreign aid standpoint the result may be a good one, for the most part I think that avoiding the established process makes legislation less legitimate in the eyes of the public and is not good for the country.

Q: I understand it's a very different Congress from the one you and I started out with and people don't even know in Civics 101 before. There was one crazy poll that said that some very large percentage couldn't name the three branches of government just for starters.

LESTER: The Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria.

Q: Something like that. Bob thank you so much for this if you find there is more that you want to say just shoot me an email and we can talk some more but I think the process will be that sometime in the next three-four weeks you'll get the transcript and then you have time to mark it up and get it back. Okay?

LESTER: Okay, see you in December.

Q: Yeah, I'll see you in a month.

LESTER: That's right.

Q: Okay, take care.

End of interview