

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

BURTON LEVIN

*Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: I'll start this going and we'll just plug away from there. Today is the 21st of July, 2010, with Burton, and is it Levon or Levine?

LEVIN: Levin.

Q: Levin. L-E-V-I-N-E?

LEVIN: No "E" at the end.

Q: L-E-V-I-N.

LEVIN: Right.

Q: This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. And you go by Burt?

LEVIN: Right.

Q: Burt, in the first place can you tell me about---this is being done by telephone, which is a new phase for me, anyway. Burt, can you tell me when and where you were born?

LEVIN: I was born in New York City on September 28, 1930.

Q: All right. Let's do a bit about your family. What do you know about your father's side?

LEVIN: My father came to the United States when he was very young, less than a year old, as was the case with my mother. My grandfather came from the Ukraine and came here mostly as a political refugee from czarist Russia.

Q: Do you know about when they---?

LEVIN: It must have been about 1902.

Q: Now, did they come from a small town or a---

LEVIN: From Kiev. My grandfather came from a commercial family. They owned a silk factory and he was fairly educated. That was not the case on my mother's side. My father's family was bourgeois; put it that way.

Q: Now were they of Jewish extraction?

LEVIN: Yes, yes, both sides.

Q: On both sides. Okay, then---

LEVIN: My father's family was Russified; they spoke Russian and they were secular. My mother's family came from a very orthodox background.

Q: Okay. Let's take your father first. Your grandfather, when he arrived here, what did the family do and how did that work out, and then we'll move to your father.

LEVIN: I'm not clear on my grandfather. He separated from my grandmother and he was a very shadowy figure in my life. I met him only a few times and he was kind of the black sheep of the family. My father graduated high school; he never went---did a year at Columbia, I think, night school. He was in a bank, was doing fairly well in banking and then the bank collapsed during the depression. During the depression he went from job to job. He was with WPA (Works Progress Administration) as a teacher and ended up in the New York City transit system. First he was a change taker in a subway booth, making change, then as a conductor on the subway trains and then as a motorman on the train and ultimately ended up as a signalman in the tower. That was his life's work. Very modest background.

Q: How about on your mother's side? What do you know?

LEVIN: My mother's family was essentially uneducated. My grandmother on my mother's side could not really speak English, was not literate, either---basically illiterate. My grandfather was a glazer but was blinded in his late 40s or early 50s and pretty much did nothing. They were in very difficult economic straits. My mother, I think, went as far as eighth grade and went to work. I'm not sure what she did and then ended up marrying my father.

Q: Well then---

LEVIN: I was raised in Brooklyn, New York.

Q: You know, you're two years younger than I am but for all of us who were born around that time, I was born in '28, the depression was probably the major factor.

LEVIN: Absolutely.

Q: Can you tell me about your impressions of your life as a very early kid?

LEVIN: It was a life of always struggling in terms of money. It was never a sense of material comfort but on the other hand we never went hungry; we never missed meals. We never were cold. I went to a public school, walked to school and, although the family was of very modest means, my father, particularly my father, put great stress on my education. He scared the hell out of me if I didn't do well in school. I was an only child and grew up very active in sports. We played all kinds of sports on the streets of Brooklyn, be it stickball, be it baseball on some sandlots, be it touch football, roller hockey; I was very active in that respect; a fanatical Brooklyn Dodger fan. As I grew older and had a little bit of money earned from working---I worked from the time I was fourteen; I worked every summer, fourteen being the age when you could get working papers in New York State. I worked every summer. While going to college I worked in the post office four hours a night in a job that I hated but paid very well. It was not a life whereby one went traveling in the summer or off to Cape Cod or anything like that. It was a life where the family had very little in terms of material comfort but it was a close family.

Q: Well then?

LEVIN: By the way, it was a very secular family. My father pretty much dominated that and coming from his background overwhelmed my mother's orthodox background.

Q: I would have thought you would have had, growing up in---it was Brooklyn, was it?

LEVIN: Brooklyn, New York.

Q: You must have been---most of your friends were Jewish, weren't they, or not?

LEVIN: No, it was a mixed crowd actually. It was an Italian-Jewish neighborhood: a lot of Italians around, a few Greeks. Probably the majority were Jewish but it was not entirely such. It was not a neighborhood; it was a lower middle class neighborhood but there were no such things as gangs or violence or anything like that. That was unheard of. It was absolutely one hundred percent safe. Even as a teenager when you started out on dates you'd come home 3:00, 4:00 in the morning on the subway and not give a second thought to it, no sense of danger or worry about being mugged or anything like this.

Q: This is one of the things that comes through people of our generation and a little younger: the fact that in the cities or in the country you were turned loose as a kid. We had dinner at 6:30 and had to be home by then.

LEVIN: Absolutely. You ran out into the streets; there were no organized Little League. I could play baseball for the police athletic league but it was---you came home from school, you dropped your books, you changed out of your school clothes, which were

fairly decent, and into your play clothes and bing!, you were out on the street until it got dark, which in the summer was later and in the winter was earlier and you played. There were no adults getting in the way and there were no---you're absolutely right. You played according to the season: in fall it was touch football, in winter when there was no snow there was roller hockey, baseball in the summer and marbles and things like that.

Q: The games added up. For those who read this later on you provided your own umpires and you abided your own rules.

LEVIN: Absolutely, that's right. We had our little neighborhood and we had our softball team; we played other neighborhoods. We used to put in maybe 50 cents a player and buy a new softball and the team we played, whoever won, got the softball. We did a lot of sports, a huge amount of sports, very active physically.

Q: How about movies? Were movies important?

LEVIN: Oh, movies, definitely on a Saturday. Saturday my mother would give me thirty cents and we would go---a number of us---we would first go to have Chinese food at a local chop suey place. That would cost twenty cents. We'd get a bowl of soup; we'd get chicken chow mein as we called it. Then ice cream and then with the remaining ten cents we'd go off to the movies and we'd see double features and cartoons and shorts. We'd be away five-six hours and I guess it was worth the thirty cents for my mother to get rid of me for five or six hours. That was life growing up.

Then when the war started they raised the fee to the movie to eleven cents; it was a ten percent amusement tax. The depression and the war, these were the major, major factors in my life growing up in Brooklyn, New York.

Q: Did you go through the experience (I did) of getting probably the world's greatest geography lesson by following the war news?

LEVIN: Absolutely. I remember the war, following the war news, listening to the radio, the 8:00 a.m., the CBS morning news and just focusing so deeply. I kept a scrapbook on the war and, as a matter of fact, I think that that preoccupation with that, that tremendous focus on the war was a major factor in my subsequently going into the Foreign Service.

Q: I imagine you had a map pinned up to the wall.

LEVIN: Oh yes. Right, absolutely. You think back on a lifetime now of almost eighty years and the things that pop into mind were the news accounts of the attack on Pearl Harbor December 7. I was listening to a football game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers; there was a Brooklyn Dodgers football team in the National Football League when they interrupted that program. The announcement of D-Day, of the news that we had landed in Europe, and VJ Day; what excitement that was. These were the high points of the most searing memories I have of growing up. I'm sure you share them.

Q: What about going back to when you were beginning to go to school and all, what about reading? Were you much of a reader?

LEVIN: Oh yes, yes, yes, I used to get the textbook and read them in a few days and then be bored for the rest of the term. Yes, I was pretty good; I was an avid reader, absolutely.

Q: Do you recall any books, particularly early on, that impressed you?

LEVIN: Of course Mark Twain and then there was---I forget who the author was but there was an account of the Mutiny on the Bounty that I read with great interest.

Q: An account of what?

LEVIN: Mutiny on the Bounty.

Q: Sure, Nordhoff and Hall.

LEVIN: Yes, probably that was it. Then my father pointed me---by the way, I was a regular goer to the public library. I used to walk about a mile, a mile and a half almost to get to the public library as a kid. A group of us would go to the library about every Friday and get books out, but my father put me on to someone by the name of Altsheler. Altsheler. I never---I haven't heard---

Q: Actually Joseph Altsheler wrote popular children's fiction---

LEVIN: He wrote on a western theme.

Q: Western theme. I was interviewing a man who later was ambassador; he's at the second level of the judicial system. He went to Belgrade as our ambassador there and he's now---he a circuit or appeals judge. He talks about Altsheler. Oh yes, I remember those books, oh yes.

LEVIN: I read them all and of course the Hardy Boys. I was a very avid reader. The Readers' Digest, newspapers, of course; I read a lot.

Q: Did your family together---You were the only child?

LEVIN: Only child.

Q: That was sort of unusual for that era, wasn't it?

LEVIN: I'm not quite sure the reason and I guess I never had the courage to ask, but I was the only one. It might have been economic. I don't know.

Q: That of course was a major factor. Were there sort of discussions around the dining table about what was going on?

LEVIN: Not in a deep way, no. I wouldn't say that, no. My father, from time to time, I mean we all of course focused on the war. There were cousins who were off in the service; there were the neighbors who had their children in the service so it was very much part of our life. We'd sit down and discuss the political issues, but not in any great depth. The course of the war, the headlines of the day; we were all aware of that, but I can't say they were deep discussions of events around the dinner table.

Q: I assume, and I may be wrong, your family was very solidly Democratic and FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) was your god, more or less.

LEVIN: Yes. Actually though, for a brief while, my father told me that he was a Republican because FDR closed the banks. You remember the bank holiday?

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: His bank never reopened. So for a while he had some resentment, was overwhelmingly resentful. One of my earliest memories in terms of politics was going with my father to a barbershop where the polls were. I don't know why they were in---

Q: Often barbershops were; also schools, churches and barber shops.

LEVIN: Yes. He bought me an American flag and I went with him when he voted in the Roosevelt/Landon 1936 election.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: Yes, that's my earliest. We were solidly Democratic, absolutely. Roosevelt was a demigod, absolutely.

Q: Let's talk about school a bit. Let's stick to elementary school first. What kind of student were you?

LEVIN: I was an excellent student. I skipped a grade; they skipped me. In those days we had classes, which were, let's say, segregated. They had a class for the brightest, which was the one class and I was consistently in the one class. So I was a good student. There again I have this memory of the first grade; we had this teacher, a Miss Doylan (I still remember the name) who for some reason was very much taken with Abraham Lincoln and taught us a lot about Abraham Lincoln. I remember we speculated as kids because she seemed so old but she probably was in her 40s. She seemed ancient to us and we speculated at one time whether she actually knew Abraham Lincoln, but it was a school that worked hard on educating the kids. These were children mostly of immigrants and it was this---I guess what you call---what the Chinese kids know. It was the Jewish kids in

those days that were striving to make it in society and most of us, but not all, worked hard in school. It was a serious thing and our parents took it very seriously.

Q: Do you remember the name or the number or whatever it was?

LEVIN: PS 177.

Q: Public School 177.

LEVIN: One seventy-seven, right. In Brooklyn. The neighborhood was probably Bensonhurst, on the fringes of Bensonhurst. Bensonhurst and Flatbush boundary; there was such a thing.

Q: At the time were there any Hispanics or African-Americans?

LEVIN: No, no, no, I don't recall a single black kid in the whole school, and as far as Hispanics I don't even think we knew what the term was. No, it was Italian, Jewish and some Greek.

Q: How did girls fit in the equation in school?

LEVIN: The classes were all co-ed, of course, and they were there. They were there; they were either your friends, or your relatives but they had their own little world and their own little games. Of course they were always the better students.

Q: They could always spell better, which was annoying.

LEVIN: Yes, they studied, but I mean recess. Some boys were doing this and the girls were doing something else. Never was there the sense that they both were human beings and should be together. Never that.

Q: No. Did you go to a junior high?

LEVIN: Yes. After the sixth grade graduation I then went to Boody Junior High School, Boody Junior High.

Q: How did you find the---was it a different level of education, would you say?

LEVIN: Yes. Then you begin to get into your lower teens and it was the---somehow you didn't take school as seriously. There were more things to do; there was hanging out on the street corner and getting into fervent arguments and debates about whether Duke Snider or Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays was a better---

Q: We're talking about baseball players.

LEVIN: Yes, absolutely. It was, to use a word that was never used in those days, cool; it was cool not to be a grind, not to really study. I still enjoyed my history classes and social science classes and I still read a lot, which had very little to do with my classes. I do recall, of course, we always listened to the radio. There were the adventure stories in late afternoon and then in the evening there were the Bob Hope and Edgar Bergen and Jack Benny and the Lux Radio Theater. I always did my homework listening to the radio and my mother would constantly yell at me, "How can you concentrate on your homework when you're listening to the radio?" I assured her I could. I'm not sure that I did, but in any event all these are memories that are flooding back now that you mention them.

Q: Yes. I think about Jack Armstrong and the Lone Ranger.

LEVIN: Tom Mix.

Q: Tom Mix, oh yes.

LEVIN: Sending away the box tops, waiting anxiously.

Q: Little Orphan Annie and the decoder pins.

LEVIN: Absolutely. Disguise kits and things like that, yes, yes. Junior high was fun. It was there I guess I had my first, in a sense, stumble, which again shaped my career. I had an algebra teacher; we started algebra and I didn't think he was a very good teacher. I mean I blame it all on the teacher; it was probably my fault just as much if not more. I was great at arithmetic but once we got into algebra and they started putting Xs in and things like that, somehow I just couldn't really get involved in it. So my focus was even more directed toward the social sciences than it was towards math and subsequently the physical sciences, which required a certain amount of math. I just wasn't very good in math and that, of course, was a factor in shaping my outlook in terms of a career.

Q: Obviously the war was going on; what was the attitude from your family towards the Soviet Union during the war?

LEVIN: We looked at Russia as a great ally. Anything---That's another memory: when it was announced that the Germans had invaded Russia. Anything---this is before we had gotten into the war and of course as Jews we were very, very aggrieved about Nazi Germany and the whole policy towards Jews and this whole issue of the America First Party with Lindbergh and all of that. We---my father had family that he still had contact with. So anything that would help in defeating Nazi Germany was welcome. This whole concept of Stalin purges in '37, it just---it certainly didn't register with me; I'm not sure to what degree it registered with my father. As far as we were concerned the Soviet Union was an ally and was inflicting damage on Nazi Germany and we cheered it on. It was the Uncle Joe image of the Soviet Union.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: So many Americans had it at that time.

Q: Oh, I did too. Did China, which later became a focus of your career, did that have---

LEVIN: It registered, yes. In 19---Yes. I remember as a kid listening---One of my early, again, early memories of a news event was listening to a news broadcast of the Japanese attack on the American gunboat, the Panay, in the Yangtze River in 1937, an American gunboat.

I remember sitting in a chair in my aunt's house and listening to a radio and being outraged by a Japanese attack on an American boat. Apart from that we were---in some way I was very much aware of the Japanese aggression against China. We used to get what I call---now they call them playing cards. They had baseball players and everything but we also had playing cards, which had scenes or depictions of the Japanese, and the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s. We were all very strongly sympathetic to the Chinese and particularly because Japan was getting closer to Germany; we saw it in that whole light of fascism against freedom. Well before we got into the Pacific war, in the beginning, in 1937, I think I had an awareness of the Sino-Japanese War and very strong sympathy for China.

Now did I know anything about China? No.

Q: You had chow mein.

LEVIN: That's *chow mein*. There were maybe two Chinese families in the whole neighborhood and one of them ran the laundry and the other ran the chop suey place. That was it. That was it.

Q: As you got older, in your early teens, how about the charms of New York City? Did that get---

LEVIN: There was always the sense that we really---We didn't have the money to take advantage of all of the charms but certainly there were the concerts in Prospect Park on a Friday night, free concerts which we would go to; there were the movie theaters; there was at Times Square the occasional foray into the Square to take in a movie that had a stage show with it. That was a big, big deal.

Q: Oh yes, the Paramount.

LEVIN: Yes, the Paramount and the Capitol Theater; there was a Capitol Theater then. The museums! I was a regular at---the age of eight, nine, getting on the subway with a friend and traveling up to Manhattan to the Museum of Natural History and to the Hayden Planetarium and to the zoo in Prospect Park. All of this, nine, ten years old by yourself without any adult supervision because it was perfectly safe, and these are the things---later, as we got a little older, we would go to the concerts, the New York Philharmonic. Basically it was like summertime; they had concerns in Lewisohn

Stadium, which was uptown Manhattan where you could sit on stone benches, and listen to the Philharmonic, all for very, very cheap prices. The City Center Ballet that was life, absolutely.

Q: Then where did you go to high school?

LEVIN: I went to Lafayette High School. Lafayette High School was built in 1939 and when I went there in 1944, it was still a fairly new school. It has now lost its accreditation; that's what I heard lately. In that time it was one of the newer high schools in New York City; it was in Brooklyn, and it was a walk of about almost a mile and a half to two miles. We had no buses; we walked. Occasionally when it was very cold, very snowy, it was a roundabout public transportation that got you near the school but basically I walked every day to school at least a mile and a half walk. It was good for us, probably. It was a fine school; again, it was mostly Italian and Jewish. As high school students we didn't take it all very seriously. I coasted, I guess, relying basically on my reading from when I was in elementary school. I didn't do all that well in high school but I got by.

Q: Yes. Were you getting into girls at that time?

LEVIN: Sure, you'd get girls and go out on dates and figure out how you could do things as cheaply as possible without seeming to be cheap. It all began and we all formed our little social club, athletic team, part social club, and we all had very grandiose ideas of romancing the girls, usually without great success. It was there, yes, definitely your friend's sister, yes.

Q: Well, did you have---

LEVIN: It was all very chaste, I might say---

Q: Oh my God, yes.

LEVIN: ---compared to what it is today.

Q: Also not only chaste but ill-informed, too.

LEVIN: You tried your best but you didn't get very far.

Q: Were you, particularly by your father but also by your mother, were you pointed toward a college education?

LEVIN: It was expected of me, yes. It was just assumed I would go to college. Now, at that time certainly I was the---I had a cousin, an older cousin---I had, let's say, I'll grab it out of the air, maybe 12 cousins, 11 cousins. One other cousin slightly older than I started college, never finished it, and so I was really the first in the entire family, the extended family of uncles and aunts, cousins, to go to college. It was just assumed I would go to

college but did I get direction? Did I get any guidance as to what college to go to? Or even how to go about going to college? Absolutely not. No, but they assumed I would go to college. Going to college, I did it all on my own. I made no applications; my whole assumption was I would have to go to a municipal college and live at home because we certainly couldn't afford tuition and living in a college dorm, room and board. Very few people, very few kids in the neighborhood had any thoughts of going away for college. Going to college meant going to one of the municipal colleges in New York and I ended up in Brooklyn College. I had no---what do we call them now---standby school, no contingency if I didn't get into college; nothing of that sort. College in those days, getting into Brooklyn College wasn't easy. This was 1947 and all the veterans were coming back.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: Yes. It meant you had to have a combined score consisting of your high school average and there was an entrance exam. My high school average was not very impressive but I took the entrance exam and did very well on that. So the combined score was enough to gain me admission into Brooklyn College, for which the fee I think was---the tuition was \$5 a semester, if I'm not mistaken. And I lived at home.

Q: How would you describe Brooklyn College in those days?

LEVIN: Oh, it was a beehive of intellectual activity. You had this heavy component, sizeable component of returned veterans and these were people whose education had been interrupted in the late '30s or early '40s. There was still that element coming out of the depression, that cohort that was influenced by the depression and turned to socialism, to communism, to anarchy, to a whole bewildering variety of political views, Trotskyites, pro-Soviet socialists. It was a *mélange* of all kinds of views there.

It was in part intellectually stimulating but the other side of the coin was that the student body---certainly let's say the non-veterans by and large came from this lower middle class but obviously were intellectually gifted kids. They came from a background where the whole emphasis was a consequence of the depression: get a job that gives you security. That meant either being a teacher or somehow---Of course a doctor was the epitome of a doctor, a pharmacist, a teacher or some form of civil service thing because the whole concept was security. Security so there was a large number of students, the non-veteran component, who were taking education courses. The goal was to be a teacher, not so much a commitment to teaching or a fierce desire to educate the next generation but security, security. I thought---I remember that was a bit of a damper on the school but otherwise it was intellectually---some of the older students were wonderful to be around.

Q: Did you get at all infected by New York City and Brooklyn and all? From what I gather it was this European, sort of German Socialism, like the newspaper full of arts and all that; did that---?

LEVIN: No, no, no, no, no. No, no. Of course, as a teenager, one of the books that made such a tremendous impression on me was this book Looking Backwards by Bellamy.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: It was such a wonderful view of a possible world. Of course it was utopian socialism; it had a profound influence on me, but then when I was eighteen, 1940, eighteen, I got a temporary job at the post office for the Christmas season and that turned into a steady part-time job, four hours a night, five days a week. My stint at the post office brought home the realization that the only way socialism could work is if you had every individual totally committed to the common good. That was not possible on the basis of the way I saw people working in the post office. They were people who were scamming the system; people were goofing off. I just realized that socialism was utopian unless everybody was totally idealistic and working on behalf of the common good. It just couldn't and wouldn't work and I abandoned my thoughts of socialism and my belief in it as a way of advancing the cause of---

Q: Another book that was going around, particularly the student body, still reverberating was Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead, which is rampant individualism.

LEVIN: Right, the antithesis. No, no, I still---I came out of college, I would say, with the view of the rights of workers and the need to combat exploitation, etc., etc., but not as a socialist. I guess you might describe me as a conforming Brooklyn liberal, Brooklyn Jewish liberal at that time.

Q: Did you major in anything? Obviously you had---

LEVIN: Oh, I didn't know what I wanted. I went to college without any clear idea. My mother, of course, wanted me to be a doctor.

Q: Of course.

LEVIN: So I took a biology course as a freshman and the lab was 8:00 in the morning, which meant I left my house about 6:30. We had to dissect a fetal pig and we kept our specimen in a formaldehyde barrel. Somehow my dissecting efforts---my pig didn't have the organs that other pigs had. I botched the whole thing and I grew to hate it. I quickly realized that I was not going to be a doctor; I had no interest in it. So I switched; for a brief while I switched to physical education because I was a fairly decent athlete but that didn't last too long. I realized there was more to the world than throwing a ball around. I zeroed in on American history. I was always interested in American history; I always took delight in reading history. So I ended up, maybe as a sophomore, majoring in American history. That was my major. The thought was of an academic career, teaching at the college level, teaching American history. From my sophomore year I began to point toward that.

Q: Any particular area of American history that you---?

LEVIN: No, not really. What always used to interest me and excite me was to see developments that happened in the 18th and 19th century and see that influence and that trend still evident in American society. Somehow I found that interesting. Not any particular history, just American history. That was my thought; I was going to be a professor of American history.

Q: Did any professor influence you that you can think of?

LEVIN: Absolutely, absolutely. Two professors shaped my life. As I went on with this thought about American history I realized that I was not cut out for an academic career. I didn't see myself spending the next eight, nine years in libraries working toward a PhD degree and so I---I must have been a junior at the time. I went to a professor; she taught English history and that's---her classes really got me going as a student; I loved her; she was terrific. I went to her and I said that I couldn't follow through on my idea of being a college professor. I enjoyed American history, I would keep on studying American history but I had no idea how I would use it once I graduated. She reached into her desk and gave me a pamphlet; she said this came in the mail the other day, and the pamphlet was a career in the Foreign Service.

Q: Good God.

LEVIN: I read it and hey, this sounds interesting. Of course with that background, the same background you had during the war of following this and knowing this and looking at that, I thought that'd be great. At that time I think the Korean War was underway, maybe just before; anyway the Cold War certainly was in and I looked at that and I said hey, this is great. It's very interesting and moreover now if I do this I can have a direct role in preserving peace for mankind. That was---

Q: A modest endeavor but---

LEVIN: So I said hey, why not? So it was that pamphlet that led me to apply for the Foreign Service. I'd never heard of the Foreign Service, and, of course, growing up in Brooklyn in a lower middle class Jewish family, whoever even aspired to be a diplomat?

Q: Was this talking today about women fighting against the glass ceiling coming from your background? Things were changing but to most people it wasn't that apparent.

LEVIN: Some of the acquaintances, family and others asked, "Are you crazy? They don't take Jews in the Foreign Service." I just never even gave it a thought. I just---Maybe I was ignorant or maybe I was idealistic somehow; it just never entered my mind that my background would be a barrier to getting into the Foreign Service. I think probably by then things had begun to change and then I just assumed that they had changed enough.

Now I do remember as a kid, in my teens in summers you went out looking for jobs and there were some companies you just never went to: Wall Street in particular, any

companies on Wall Street. They didn't take any Jewish kids for summer jobs. It was--- How true it was I don't know but this was the legend and so you never even tried. At that time I guess I was---I had the impression that things had changed sufficiently to the point that anti-Semitism would not be a barrier to a career in the Foreign Service. Naïve or not I was right.

Q: You graduated, what, in '52, would it be?

LEVIN: I got out in '52, yes. I graduated after four and a half years, like '52; I got out in '52.

Q: Were you working at night or doing anything like that?

LEVIN: Yes, four hours a night, five days a week, in the post office. I would take the subway from home; it would take me about 50 minutes, 45 minutes to get there. Four hours a night I had drudgery beyond belief. I was at the New York State box; we'd get all letters destined for New York state and we'd sort them out according to the cities or towns that they were going to, by hand, throwing them. Oh, this is Rochester; throw it into a Rochester box; Utica, boom, boom, boom, boom. It was tedious and time would go so slowly but I was making \$1.50 an hour and that was tremendous money in those days. It was very, very useful for the family and for me, as well. So I did that until I graduated college.

Q: Did you rise in the civil service?

LEVIN: No, no, this was---

Q: You couldn't.

LEVIN: This was part-time; it was not as permanent civil service. Again, I might have applied but again the work was mind numbing. I'd be there and I'd figure that's another hour gone by and I'd look at my watch; it was five minutes since I last checked. I hated it. I hated it. I would eagerly volunteer for certain---during holiday seasons they had trucks coming in and trucks had to be unloaded. For everyone, most of the old timers there, that was labor; that was hard work. You couldn't goof off as much as you could otherwise so I eagerly would volunteer for that, finding that a very welcome relief from what I was customarily doing. I hated it but I did it for two and a half years.

Q: Okay, Burt, you're graduated from college what year?

LEVIN: Nineteen fifty-two, June of '52.

Q: Okay. We really haven't---

LEVIN: That's my bachelor's degree.

Q: Yes. We really haven't done anything since. What did you do then?

LEVIN: Okay, while I was at college that's where I heard about the Foreign Service, and we went into that. I took the Foreign Service exam. I took the Foreign Service exam as a senior. I was still a senior in college and I took the exam in '52, in late spring or early summer 1952.

Q: That must have been a three and a half day exam.

LEVIN: That's exactly right. That's what it was, three and a half days.

Q: That's the one I took, too.

LEVIN: Yes indeed, with a load of essays---

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: ---to do, not just multiple choice; we had essays. I remember that. One of the essays was to explain the workings of the Federal Reserve System, which I---I took the exam in the summer or late spring of 1952; I took the exam in New York City in the Federal Building. I remember going there for the exam. In the meantime I had decided on going for a master's degree, a masters in international affairs at Columbia University. I had gotten interested in international affairs. I was a history major and I was also very interested in China. This was the result of a professor in my senior year who was teaching one of these survey courses on East Asia. I thought that as a history major I should learn something about East Asia. I had never really known very much about it so I took his course and he was absolutely stimulating. He was a veteran of World War II; he had gotten involved in Asia because as a naval officer you were sent to Boulder, Colorado to study Japanese and that began his involvement with Asia.

In any event, he got me very interested in China. We would meet after class over a cup of coffee and he would tell me that China is going to be a very important country in the future. This was when we were still in the midst of the Korean War. He said, "You know, China, that's the big issue in the future." He got me excited about it. I decided I would go to Columbia; I would major in international affairs, two-year graduate degree, but I would focus on modern Chinese history and also start studying Chinese. I recall he told me that right now, with the situation between U.S. and China, you won't be able to get to China for a while but in three, four years it should be all right. That was 1952. My first trip to China, to Beijing, was in 1978 so that three or four years stretched a long time.

In any event I took the exam. I was not in the service; I never went into military service. Too young in World War II and then during the Korean War I had broken my leg pretty badly, shattered a shinbone playing football and was on crutches for about a year and a half and therefore deferred or rejected, 4F. I remember the classification. That kept me out of the draft during the Korean War period. I imagine you must have served, Stu.

Q: Yes, I did. I actually---I got to Korea.

LEVIN: I kept out of that because of this injury.

In any event, I took the exam, started at Columbia and then in September or October of 1952 I got the test results, which showed that I had passed. I then sat back and waited for my oral and the call for orals did not come until late, maybe spring of 1954, a year and a half I waited.

Q: Yes, this is McCarthy time.

LEVIN: That's right. The State Department was in chaos at the time and of course while waiting and never knowing whether or not I'd passed the orals I went on and I finished my studies at Columbia. This is when I started studying Chinese and I can't recall whether I discussed this earlier but---

Q: No.

LEVIN: ---in those days very, very few undergraduate institutions offered courses in Chinese. You could only---by and large it was a graduate---it was at the graduate level that you could get Chinese. Then they were teaching Chinese as a tool for you to become a Sinologist, studying the classic texts and so I never even---they never put any stress whatsoever on learning how to speak Chinese. The whole focus was on learning how to read Chinese and basically directed toward classical Chinese. It was an onerous study of Chinese, which left you incapable of speaking Chinese.

In any event, in March---it must have been March of 1954---I was called to Washington for my oral exam. At that time the orals consisted of---I'm sure your experience was the same, I think about six---around six senior officers sitting more or less in a semi-circle and you in the middle of it. They were just asking you questions and getting into discussions. That was the entire extent of the oral exam.

Q: Do you remember any of the people in it by any chance?

LEVIN: Oh, you know, I don't.

Q: All I can remember is when I took it there was somebody from the Labor Department but the chairman was a man named Cromwell Riches, who was the chairman of the panel.

LEVIN: No, I was in a total fog when I walked into that. I don't recall any people from any other agencies. I do recall some of the questions they asked.

Q: Yes; what were they?

LEVIN: One of them asked me about the Dravidian culture of South India. I told them all I know is that the Dravidians are dark skinned and probably shorter than the other Indians. That's about all I know about that, except that it was one of the earlier cultures of India. That was the extent of my knowledge. I told them I really didn't know much about another one. I don't know how we got into this; he asked me about Kosciusko, a nobleman who fought on the side of the Americans---

Q: He was an engineering officer, wasn't he?

LEVIN: Right. I told them who he was and all, and he said how did you know that? I said, "In Brooklyn there's a bridge named after him. It's such a strange name that I found out who he was." That got a bit of a laugh.

The question that I really, really remember was to me a very poignant and traumatic one. They had seen that I was studying Chinese at Columbia University that I was in modern Chinese history and studying the language, and so one of them asked my views on the U.S.-China policy. Now, keep in mind this is McCarthy---

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: We were getting out of the real depths of the McCarthyism; this was in March of '54 but still that atmosphere of conformity and strong anti-communist orthodoxy was very much the thing. I heard the question and I thought to myself, I remember I said, "here goes my career in the Foreign Service" because then I went on to say that I thought that the present policy of no contact with communist China was wrong, that we ought to be trying to work with them and recognize the reality of blah, blah, blah, and all of that. I basically was putting forth a policy that was diametrically opposed to the existing one of absolutely no contact with China and seeing Taiwan as the only legitimate Chinese government. I said I thought with that, given the atmosphere in this country, given the atmosphere in Washington, that's going to end my Foreign Service career.

Well it didn't. It didn't. Reflecting on it, after it was all over, here were senior Foreign Service officers, who had seen the devastation and the personal tragedies caused by McCarthyism in the State Department. They were not about to perpetuate that so looking back it should have come as no surprise but at the time I do remember.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: ---it's the end of my career. Here I go. The career ended before it began. Anyway I finished the orals. I was told to come back after lunch and they would let me know the results. And so I---So they'd be coming out. At the Department of Interior, there's a little park alongside it with some benches and a little water fountain. It was a hot day, sitting there, just waiting with great expectancy about how I did. I kept staring at my watch, whether it was time to go back or not. Then I traipsed back to hear my fate and there was this secretary in the outer office. She said, "They're not back from lunch yet but I'll tell you something; you passed. You've got to promise to act surprised and

excited when you hear this because I don't want them to know that I told you." So I played the part. That's how I learned about having passed the oral exam from this delightful Southern---she was Southern girl with a Southern accent. With that I was told by the board to expect a summons sometime in the fall of '54, in the fall; that's when they thought that I would probably be called up for duty.

I went back to Columbia and I think within at most two weeks, maybe even a week, I got a telegram---that's how they communicated, no internet, no long distance---a telegram asking me to come to Washington at once and report for duty. Here it was about two months left for my Master's degree so I got back to them and asked whether I could have a stay of a couple of months until I finished my Master's degree because I was so close to getting it. They allowed that and so I finished in late May, early June. Of all coincidences the speaker at the Columbia graduation that year was John Foster Dulles. Finished that, I went almost immediately to Washington where virtually upon my first day I was given orders for Taipei, Taiwan. Within three weeks I was on my way to Taipei, Taiwan. I had absolutely no training. There was no---there were no courses at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) because of the chaos of the McCarthy years. I was sent---while waiting for all the paperwork to be done and most importantly for the series of inoculations to take place---I was sent off to FSI for some individualized training in Chinese.

Q: I can add to that: the first class in the Class One started in July of 1955 because I was in that class.

LEVIN: Okay then.

Q: Before that people like yourself were used like infantry replacements. You were thrown into the battle in an individual manner.

LEVIN: Thrown into the fray without training. Absolutely. I was assigned as chief of the consular section of Embassy Taipei.

Q: Did you have any trepidation? Here you are, a kid from Brooklyn---

LEVIN: Not yet twenty-four, still twenty-three, almost twenty-four, going out to---I'd never been further west than Pennsylvania. I'd never been on an airplane. That was not all that unusual in those days.

Q: No, but still----

LEVIN: Yes. It was a totally new experience; I had no idea what was to come. I do recall so vividly while at FSI doing two or three weeks of Chinese because they really didn't know what to do with me. It was a good idea because I was going---I had some Chinese. Anyway, I was taking these classes, individualized classes with the Chinese teachers at FSI. Then a linguist would come in to see how I was doing and this linguist would drive me crazy. Your tongue's got to be here, your teeth have got to be there. He was so

disdainful, and I'm not going to give names. He was so disdainful of my efforts at Chinese that I came out feeling that I would never be able to speak Chinese.

To fast forward just a bit: in 1955 after I'd been on Taiwan about a year, I had continued with Chinese lessons. I'd made a circle of Chinese friends. I was using it every day. This guy came out; they came out for purposes of setting up Chinese language school in Taiwan and I was assigned as the control officer because I was one of the few officers in the embassy who spoke some Chinese. And lo and behold, to my great delight, I discovered the guy could barely speak Chinese. I just flaunted my Chinese. It was a good feeling of satisfaction.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: That guy became a good friend of mine. Anyway, I got out---I started my trip to Taiwan in July of 1954 and in those days traveling to Asia was about a three or four day experience. Of course it was all first class and you'd fly from---my first leg was from New York to L.A., first class. This was the second day of non-stop, east coast to west coast service. They had inaugurated it the day before, non-stop. It was on the second day of it, I think, on a DC-6 four-engine prop plane, where my seat companion was Charles Laughton of all things.

Q: Oh my gosh.

LEVIN: Delightful conversation with a good man. I spent the night in L.A. You'd be met at the plane by the bus, taken to a fine hotel, next day off to Hawaii. I spent the night in Hawaii, the same thing: bus meeting the passengers, taking us to one of the best hotels in town, and the same thing in Tokyo, from Honolulu to Tokyo with a stopover in Wake or Midway. The last leg of the flight was from Tokyo to Taiwan in a two-engine plane through some God-awful storms, a very unpleasant flight of about ten hours, I recall. I think now the flight's about three, four hours.

I arrived in Taiwan in the morning, the morning of either the 13th or 14th of July. When they opened the door to the airplane I remember, 7:00 a.m. in the morning, I will never forget that flash of hot, humid and smelly air that came just---came into the airplane and almost overwhelmed me. To be so hot, to be so humid and to have that awful stench, I soon learned the reason for that. The airport was surrounded by rice paddies and this was the time when they were using night soil as a fertilizer for the growing of rice---

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: ---and in essence it just stank. It stank like a---

Q: When I was in Korea about---a little earlier, they used what they call honey wagons.

LEVIN: Absolutely. They had that in Taiwan, the honey wagons, and they spread the stuff in the fields. I walk off the plane, was taken to the hotel in town, the finest hotel, the

Grand Hotel. It was about three stories high, maybe at that time maybe twenty-thirty rooms, no air conditioning. I wasn't really used to air conditioning back in the States in those days but nevertheless wasn't used to this high heat and humidity. The constant raucous background noise of the, oh what the heck, the katydids, I forget the real name for them, these insects that buzz; you must have heard that in Korea---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: ---in summer, just this loud screeching. It was so totally different. The room had no bathroom; it was a common bathroom and shower down the hall. This was my first couple of nights in Taiwan and I was wondering what the hell have I gotten myself into.

In any event, I was head, chief of the consular section. I got there and there was an officer already working in the consular section but he had not been confirmed yet by the Senate. There's all this administrative mess created by McCarthyism. He was sent out on what I would call an emergency, doing a refugee program. They sent out a number---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: You remember that?

Q: It's called a refugee relief officer.

LEVIN: Something, yes.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: He had been in Taiwan a year already; he was waiting confirmation and here I come. He had taken the exam a year or so earlier than I, and here I come. Because I had been confirmed I was his senior. I was the chief of the section. He was a great guy and we became friends. We remained friends ever since. As a matter of fact, we shared housing together as soon as I came; we got together, put our housing allowance together and rented one of the grandest, fanciest Japanese houses in Taipei. We had a bachelor pad there, the two of us.

But I'm head of this section; I know not the slightest thing, not the difference between a visa and a passport. I know nothing about consular work and basically learned on the job. Basically, totally learned on the job with, of course, a good assist from this fellow who was there, and most importantly from my chief local. He had been trained in Malaya under the British. His father worked for some British company and he had been educated in British schools. So looking back on it this was a man who was operating with---mostly immune from this Chinese nexus of favors, corruption and doing something for the relatives because I could have been taken silly as a novice had I had a local staff which was not as good and devoted as the one I did have.

It took me a while to learn what consular work was. Not that long; I mean, basically our whole issue was visas. There were very few American citizens and almost no American business with Taiwan then. We had a huge AID (Agency for International Development) program and military assistance but in terms of commerce not very much. I do recall the first few days that---maybe the second or third night---I was taken to a restaurant, and this restaurant was northern Chinese, Beijing food. It was located right on the side of railroad tracks, maybe ten feet from the railroad tracks. Every time a train came the whole place would tremble. It was basically a shack with a dirt floor and three legged stools. I remember walking in with a couple of colleagues from the embassy; they were taking me out as a newcomer. A waiter took us to this table, which was littered with scraps of food and bones and things like that and just taking a towel, a dirty, greasy towel, sweeping it off onto the floor. There, surrounded by refuse and cats and dogs and the occasional rat scurrying and grazing on this stuff, I sat down and had a great meal. The surroundings were something, and again, to go back to the---here's this kid from Brooklyn just---oh boy, what a totally different experience.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: The first few weeks I'd look in the mirror, I'd be shaving and I'd say to myself, what the hell am I doing here? I want to go home. I didn't act on it but that was on my mind.

Q: Was it an embassy or was it a provisional---

LEVIN: No, it was a full embassy. We had moved the embassy from China, I'm not sure the year, probably in the late '40s, and it was an embassy; it was a full embassy. We had an ambassador, a DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission), all the sections; it was an embassy, full embassy. The issue in the consular section, the thing that took up almost all our time and the main issue that we faced was the overwhelming demand for visas to go to the United States. Taiwan at that time was a Third World country, devastated by the war. I don't mean physically. There was some bomb damage; it wasn't heavily damaged physically but the economy had been ruined. Then came the Chinese civil war and the pouring onto the island of huge numbers of troops and some civilians---not bystanders, civilian dependents.

So you had in Taiwan---you had a sizeable number of young people who saw absolutely no future in Taiwan. It was a military dictatorship; the economy was weak; the island was poor, and there was nothing on the horizon to even remotely indicate that these conditions would change and that subsequently Taiwan would undergo an economic miracle. None of that. Moreover, this group of young people was people who were from mainland China. Alone or most likely with their families in tow they had fled the communist armies because either their---most of the time because their parents were involved with the nationalist government. You had this group of young people who saw the only hope for the future was to get to the United States. Therefore they did anything and everything (1) to get accepted by an American educational institution, and (2) to get the visa to go to the United States.

Now at the time there was this Walter-McCarran Act.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: We were supposed to be one hundred percent sure that whoever was coming to apply for a non-immigrant visa to the United States was a *bona fide* non-immigrant, that he or she would return to Taiwan and had no intention of staying in the United States. We knew that virtually every single one---we knew from return rates that were maybe only one one-hundredth percent return---not that statistics that were kept for about three, four years---nobody was coming back. We knew nobody would come back. So you're faced with this quandary: if you try to uphold the letter of the law you basically wouldn't give out any non-immigrant visas. On the other hand is this whole public relations issue and this whole sense of how can you just turn off visas completely. So we had to exercise our best judgment as to---as a question of issuing visas.

Subsequently I look back on it somewhat jocularly because I think the statute of limitations is already in effect. I put aside the law of the land, the law of the United States, and substituted Levin's Law in determining whether or not visas would be issued. Now Levin's Law was very simple. We gave every---every applicant we spoke to personally and we tested their English to see how educated they were and to get a feel for the person. We looked at the college admissions, where were they going to go to school prospectively. I will tell you that I based my judgment on (1) is this fellow or lady a true student? (2) is he or she going to a halfway decent American university? and (3), if or when (I shouldn't say if) when she or he stays in the United States, is this going to be beneficial to our country? These are the criteria to use in judging visas. Those who were serious students with admission to a decent school and whom I felt were going to be an asset to the United States got the visas, and those who didn't---who weren't didn't get visas. It was seat of the pants but putting the national interest first but maybe not---

Q: Just for the record, I'll put in here we had something in the immigration law called the Asia Pacific Triangle, which essentially included all---it was a Chinese exclusion act--

LEVIN: Basically.

Q:---and it allowed for 100---

LEVIN: That's right.

Q: ---visas a year to go to that, which was---

LEVIN: I think Walter-McCarran modified that, allowed---doubled it to 200; 200, but these were basically immigrant visas.

Q: Yes. So there was essentially no immigration unless---and that became quite a thing---you had a relative---

LEVIN: Right.

Q: ---and that became a cottage industry in Hong Kong.

LEVIN: Hong Kong had to deal with that, yes, everyone claiming that his father was an American citizen, came back to visit the village, impregnated the mother and boom, I'm really an American citizen. It was an awful lot---We didn't have that issue in Taiwan. Thank God for that, but it was---

So here I was twenty-three, not yet twenty-four, looking at these people, deciding on lives---

Q: Was anybody supervising you?

LEVIN: No. I was chief of the consular section. Oh, there was---Every now and then somebody from the political section or the ambassador, or the DCM, would say so-and-so is coming in and his daughter is blah, blah, blah, blah. In other words basically telling me to treat this person differently because he or she was in some way or another a VIP (very important person). But no, not really, no. I was---from a distance, no. I was running the section with this other guy. I think we did a pretty good job.

Q: That's the way you should do it. Of course you were completely disrespectful of the law but----

LEVIN: What are you going to do?

Q: ---when you have an asinine law---

LEVIN: And the statute of limitations has run out so therefore I'm telling you about it. Anyway, I do remember there were a couple of instances---cases.

Q: Yes?

LEVIN: One of them was this: It was a very small American community, very small, and so I---we got to know most of the members of the American community. I knew this guy, not well, but I did know him. One day I get a phone call from the Chinese police telling me the guy's in jail; he's being held on charges of attempted murder. You know somebody; you don't think he's going to try and---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: How can anybody I know be a murderer---attempt to---try to murder somebody? Anyway, I went down to see him because that was part of my duties, protection and

welfare of American citizens. I had a talk with him and the charge was he tried to kill his mistress, his Chinese mistress. I went down and he told me no, it's all a mistake and this and that. She fell out of the car and it was an accident and all of that. Very convincing, and since I knew him I more than half believed his story. I thought that maybe the Chinese police were overreacting because there is a long history of foreigners committing crimes and in the old days getting away with it. Now, of course, with a more nationalistic Chinese they wanted to let that happen. So I thought I'll work this out but walked away basically feeling that it really was an accident. The guy---I visited him again---the guy looked very scraggly, and needed a shave, so I suggested I bring him a razor. The guards said no razor; you're not allowed to bring a razor. I thought this was carrying things too far, but of course I didn't bring the razor. Then on one of the visits he complained of a pain in his back and so I requested that I take him for a medical evaluation. While under escort he broke away from his guards and managed to get to the tallest building in Taipei, which was four stories at that time, tallest building, four stories, and jumped off head first and killed himself.

Q: Ew.

LEVIN: I mean I didn't know this was all happening but then I was called to identify the body, which I did, which was a rather unpleasant task. I basically found out that indeed he had tried to kill his mistress, that there were witnesses that he pushed her out of the car and tried to run her over, etc., etc. About a week or two later I get this box of ashes; he's been cremated. This box of ashes is on my desk for the next few days while I finally locate the kin and talk to his mother. She's all upset that---I told her that her son was cremated and she tells me that it's a good Catholic family; we don't go for cremation and all of that. Then she asked me, "How did he die?" I was oh my God. I'm thinking quickly and I didn't tell her; I just said he had an accident. I hid that fact from her.

Q: Yes. Because being Catholic and a suicide, you know, would compound the---

LEVIN: Yes. Suicide, attempted murder and then suicide. I just didn't have the heart to tell a mother that. I got away with it, I must say, but that too sticks in my mind.

Anyway, there was the one instance where we were supposed to protect American seamen. Some sailor had gone berserk on an American ship in the harbor of Keelung and going out on a---It was a dark stormy night, climbing up the ladder and trying to keep things quiet. That was it. I did that for about a year, slightly more than a year and I was then transferred to the economic section.

One of the things I did, when I came into the embassy as head of the consular section, I was a member of the country team. We would have these country team meetings and after a few weeks it became very apparent to me that at this country team meeting there was almost an uncritical acceptance of the Chiang Kai-shek government account of some continuing hostilities with the PRC (People's Republic of China) and other aspects of the China situation. I thought to myself that we are uncritically accepting what I thought to

be Chinese nationalist propaganda and that it was because of an emotional involvement on the part of the ambassador and some of the key members.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LEVIN: Karl Rankin who really had no experience with China.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: Came out of Greece. Our whole China corps had been devastated during the McCarthy years and so it was a rather simplistic anti-communist---pro anti-communist versus communist totalitarianism. We were rooting for the good guys but we were just uncritically championing their cause even though there was a collapse of democracy and human rights on Taiwan. It was just a federal black and white picture that was being painted and accepted in the embassy.

So I went to the DCM, and this is coming out of Columbia University and having had some exposure to modern Chinese history, and to what the PRC (the People's Republic of China) was claiming that they were accomplishing. I said hey, look, there's another side to this story. I'm not saying that the communists are putting out unvarnished stuff but when Chiang Kai-shek claims they shot down 10 communist planes in the same instance, communist planes _____ about 15 nationalists. We don't know what the hell's going---I said but I just thought that it would add some balance to the thinking in the embassy if, at every country team meeting, I could present a rundown of highlights from the PRC press. The DCM just totally agreed, totally agreed. So we got into that practice and of course we would get the---we would get---at that time the American consulate general in Hong Kong was putting out this wonderful publication called "Survey of the China Mainland Press," SCMP. They had a whole body of Chinese getting the communist press and translating it into English and putting it out almost as a bulletin. We'd get it once a week, a whole slew of reporting from China, what was going on in China, the official version. This was very interesting reference material.

Throughout my tour in Taiwan one of the things I did was to present at country team meetings the other view of what was going on in China and between China and Taiwan so that---and this DCM was just a wonderful man who, again, he had no background in China but---

Q: Who was that?

LEVIN: A guy by the name of Bill Cochran, William Cochran, a wonderful guy. I don't know subsequently what happened to him but a man for whom I had a tremendous amount of respect. He was interested in trying to get, I wouldn't call it objective, but certainly another view out there.

So I---within the year I went to the economic section and did a year's work of economic work in Taiwan. I had, again, I was not an economist but I worked largely on the Taiwan

agricultural situation. I did one report, a brilliant, brilliant report on the shrimp industry of Taiwan. The Department of Commerce, I don't know why or how, sent a copy of that report to my parents. I don't know how they ever did that but I do remember. My father wrote a letter; he said is this what you went to Columbia University for, reporting on the shrimp?

I do remember one of the most, to me, one of the---what I recall as a wonderful, incisive report on the economy of Taiwan. It drew attention to the fact that the population was exploding, huge growth in population, that the economy was stagnant, that the government's policy had everything to do with military and no interest in the economy whatsoever, and that the Taiwanese business class was thoroughly discouraged and the government was just not providing either the policies or the environment. Therefore I went on to predict that with a worsening economic situation, with a population that had known better under the Japanese period, under Japanese control and who already had risen up in 1947 against the mainland rulers, I said that this thing is pointing toward catastrophe. It was such a brilliant, incisive, but totally wrong, analysis of the situation because within a few years the Taiwan economy began to take off and all the dire consequences of the then evident trend never came to pass. Nonetheless it was quite a report that I wrote.

Q: Burt, when you were doing this, did you find that you were able to bridge the divide between the mainland Chinese, mainly military, and the Taiwanese? Were the Taiwanese left out of the equation?

LEVIN: Yes, there were a few Taiwanese. One of my jobs in the economic section was as the representative to the joint-JCRR (Joint Committee on Rural Reconstruction), which consisted of American agronomists and economists and Chinese agronomists and economists dealing mainly with the agrarian situation in China. In that committee, which met either weekly or every other week, a number of the technocrats were Taiwanese. There were some Taiwanese at the technocratic level of government that I came into contact with. There were a few Taiwanese educators and some businessmen but you hit the nail on the head; the overwhelming contact was with the mainland Chinese.

These were the Chinese who constituted government, both the military and the civil side of the government. Effectively Taiwan was little more than a military dictatorship then, which changed over the years. This was the ruling group. The mainlanders were the ruling group and this was the group that we had most of our contact, social and official, with. That was the group. Moreover the Taiwanese at that time very few of them spoke Mandarin, very few. Their two languages were the Taiwanese dialect, which was similar to the Amoy dialect, and Japanese. So here I am and here a couple of my younger colleagues all keen on learning Chinese and the only way to do that was stay with the mainland Chinese crowd because that's where Mandarin was spoken. Our contact with the Taiwanese was very limited, very limited, from the ambassador on down, very limited.

Q: Were you feeling, just through the embassy and all, the pressure of Senator Nolan, the China lobby and all?

LEVIN: Not feeling the pressure because the embassy at that time, the leadership of the embassy from the ambassador on through to the head of the MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) all were onboard. All were onboard with what essentially was a pro-Taiwan policy. So Nolan and the judge and all of them, they received a warm welcome from the embassy. They were part of the club. They had nothing to complain about in terms of how this embassy was functioning because the embassy saw its mission as building up, supporting and, in any other way, assisting the KMT (Kuomintang or the Nationalist Party or Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP), the Chiang Kai-shek group, in its struggle against the PRC. We had only been a year---by the time I got in Taiwan it had only been a year since the Korean War was halted through an armistice so the PRC was still very much the enemy. So there was no pressure there; there was uniformity, conformity and uniformity. That's how I would put it.

Q: Was anybody---

LEVIN: There was---I remember the offshore island crisis, Quemoy.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: Remember that---

Q: Quemoy and Matsu.

LEVIN: Yes. Here I am, at that time I'm still in the consular section. I'm thinking to myself that this---for this tiny little island in the mouth of the harbor of Quemoy we're going to risk war for something like that? There was an officer in the political section who wrote what to me was just---hit the nail on---a brilliant, incisive analysis of advocating that we not defend these islands; that it is not in our interest. He submitted that paper; it went through to Washington but---and there was a great deal of wavering in Washington as to what she would do about it but eventually we ended up inferring, let it be inferred, that we would come to the assistance of the---

Q: One of the presidential debates between Kennedy and Nixon was on Quemoy-Matsu in 1960.

LEVIN: Yes, yes, right, right. It was cast in terms by the orthodox, let's say the pro-KMT and the pro Chiang Kai-shek groups in the United States as equivalent to the Munich situation---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: ---appeasement, etc., etc. I myself, I thought that was nonsense, that was nonsense. At that time being in the consular section and with the political officer taking

up the cause, what I thought was the right cause, I really wasn't---I was too junior to be an influence on the thing.

Q: How about as an economic officer? Were you able to discern any sort of sprouts of the new economy that was going to come out of this culture?

LEVIN: No, no, no, no, absolutely not. I mean, looking back on it, sort of Monday morning quarterbacking, there were things there. Although what to me was really a Third World situation---in reality, compared to China, Taiwan was so much better educated and had a much better infrastructure because of the Japanese fifty years there. The level of education of the Taiwanese was much more impressive than in China itself. The refugees that came out of the mainland with Chiang Kai-shek were basically---if they weren't military then they were a very substantial sprinkling of the educated technocratic elements of the Chinese population. The mainland refugees apart from the military were some very accomplished people. With the United States providing economic assistance and, more importantly, as it became apparent to the people of Taiwan that we were going to put this security blanket around Taiwan their sense of confidence in investing and carrying on business grew.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: So all this came together in a critical mass, maybe in the early '60s. In '55 when I did that analysis on the economic situation it looked bleak. You didn't---I didn't see those sprouts and I don't think anybody else saw those sprouts.

Q: How about you personally as a young bachelor out of Brooklyn? I would have thought the charms of the oriental lassies there would have been overwhelming.

LEVIN: Absolutely. Not only that, I was making, I think I started about \$3,500.

Q: Yes, that was about where I started, yes.

LEVIN: Thirty-five hundred dollars. I was paying a loan back to Columbia University; I had borrowed my tuition and so maybe putting in my pocket, after taxes, maybe 50 bucks a week and I lived like a Saudi Arabian prince. I had come---just talking about transitions in life, I'd come out of Columbia three weeks earlier; I was mopping floors and serving food in the Lion's Den of Columbia University. That was one of the beer joints and the food and all; there weren't pizzas in those days but hamburgers and things like that. I was working there for room and board at Columbia. Three weeks later I'm in Taiwan; I've got a car picking me up for work and taking me back and I've got---I'm sharing this huge Japanese style house, one of the largest ones in Taiwan, and we've got two servants, two servants. A transition within three weeks that is just---I think a Hollywood movie couldn't capture it.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: Anyway. With what I was making I must have been in the top one-one thousandth percentile of income earners on the island of Taiwan and that fifty bucks a week, I couldn't spend it all if I had wanted to. I have never felt so wealthy, so materially blessed as those first couple of years in Taiwan. Everything was so inexpensive. We'd go out, we'd get---a typical Chinese meal would be a table of anywhere from ten to twelve sumptuous dishes with some of the guests Chinese and some of them on the _____ side, and drinks, food, everything; if it came to ten bucks it was a lot. It was quite something.

I did meet some very lovely young ladies, one of whom ended up as my wife. That's an interesting story in itself because I met this young girl who had a certain attraction for me. This attraction deepened to the point where, (1) I was able to get her a job; they were looking for someone as a receptionist who could speak some English and she could speak some English. So I introduced her to the personnel officer at the embassy and she was hired as receptionist. (2) I had proposed and was accepted and for that---that entailed requesting permission to marry a foreigner. In those days the Department of State had a life or death hold on anyone wanting to marry an alien.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: You had to get permission. I remember submitting this request along with the wording that in the event I married without the requisite permission this would constitute my resignation from the Foreign Service. So I submitted that not really knowing---As a matter of fact, I was somewhat pessimistic that I would get the permission because not only was she an alien (and we're talking about 1956, '55, '56) not only was she an alien but she was of a different race. In those days intermarriage had become somewhat commonplace with the GIs bringing back Japanese brides and then subsequently Korean brides but it still was not the thing that most Americans looked on---

Q: You know, the movie "Sayonara" was very symbolic of the period.

LEVIN: That's right, that's right. To my great surprise I got permission; I got permission to marry. I didn't marry her until four years later; there were a few ups and downs, but I got permission. They went out and they did all kinds of inquiries and questioned people and I got permission. You can see things were changing. This lower-middle class Jewish guy from Brooklyn gets in the Foreign Service and then requests permission to marry a Chinese and gets the permission. We were married in 1960 and stayed together since.

The interesting---You know the background to this story about alien marriages is I (as I subsequently found out)---I can't vouch 100 percent for the---was that in 1939 or late 1930s the ambassador to the Soviet Union, I think it might have been Bullitt, William Bullitt, Bill Bullitt. Anyway, whoever it was sent a message to President Roosevelt in effect saying that most of his senior people in the embassy were married to foreigners and that he, Bullitt or whoever it was, didn't think that this was proper, that the wives should be out there representing---as representatives of the American nation, just like their husbands. So with that came the provision that permission was required to marry an alien

and very often was not given, but I did get the permission. Of course nowadays all they require is that you inform them in advance and if you don't hear in 30 days you can just go ahead and do it.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: I don't imagine it was---

Q: Well sometimes security problems but---

LEVIN: Yes, that's it, but I kind of doubt it would stand up in court.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: Now, interestingly, then the policy was that if you were married to a former national of a country you would never be sent back to that---to your spouse's native land because that would constitute conflict of interest. In 1965, of course, I was sent to Hong Kong to do reporting on China but I guess you could say that still was Britain. In 1969 I was sent to Embassy Taiwan with my China-born wife, who had spent a few years as a refugee in Taiwan. So that policy was---when and how I don't know---it was put aside. So that's a little sidelight on some aspects of the Foreign Service.

Q: I just want to say today is the 2nd of August, 2010, with Burt Levin. Burt, you were in Taipei from when to when the first time?

LEVIN: From July of '54 through to about August of '56.

Q: All right. So you want to pick up---You wanted to embellish a bit on what you were up to.

LEVIN: Yes, just a couple of reminiscences and a general observation. One of the things that I recall was that during the middle of this offshore island crisis, I think it was 1955, I was driving home with a buddy, my fellow vice consul in the consular section. We were driving back home in his jeep, and this must have been about, oh, 12:00, 1:00 in the morning. It was after some kind of party or something or other. All of a sudden, seemingly 50 yards in back of this thing, anti-aircraft guns started opening fire. This of course came in the midst of this offshore island offensive as to whether we could get involved, whether the Chinese communists would invade. So with that lead we assumed that things really had broken out and we immediately drove to the embassy. We got there and there were a few people there, drifting in, because they too had heard the gunfire. We were just sitting on the lawn of the embassy and just speculating what was happening and seeing off in the distance some flashes of what we assumed to be gunfire, and wondering how life might be as prisoners of the Chinese communists, just wondering what the heck was going on. After a few hours, which nobody really knew what the situation was, we went home and the next morning found out that the anti-aircraft defense units had been---had picked up some kind of strange inversion of the atmosphere on the radar and was

shooting basically at the clouds. So that situation resolved itself. I do remember sort of the sense of excitement. I don't think it was much fear but it was just the wonder of whether or not we were about to become involved in a war, and thankfully it did not turn out to be.

The next observation that comes to mind is that as vice consul in those days, when an American citizen married a foreigner, you had to be present there at the wedding to make sure there was no fraud involved. That meant I would go to these marriages between the GIs who were stationed on Taiwan and their Chinese fiancées. Of course most of them were bar girls from local establishments, some of whom, let's say, my friend and I recognized from social evenings out. We were just sort of smiling at each other while they were being married to somebody else. Of course the conventional view was that---of these poor GIs, they're ending up with some hard-bitten pros and how was that going to work out when they get back to Nebraska or to Utah or whatever it was. In reality a lot of these young ladies were there for economic necessity and in some cases you began to wonder how they would fare---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: ---once they---what was going to be a totally alien environment. It was sort of an interesting little---

Q: Did you have a problem? Of course, the McCarran-Walter Act (immigration act) didn't allow for women who engaged in prostitution.

LEVIN: You couldn't really---You couldn't really call them pros. It would be very difficult to make the case because, let's say, a lot of them were amateurs. In any event, the practice had been going on before I got there and no one raised the issue. It was just an unusual situation from time to time.

Q: I remember when I was in Frankfurt and one of my friends who was a visa officer (it didn't happen to me), but when he told a GI the GI thought for a minute and said, "Well, would it make any difference if I was the guy she was selling it to?"

LEVIN: Oh well.

Q: We learned a lot in those days.

LEVIN: We certainly did, yes. In the more general vein---First of all, it was a small embassy too. My license plate, which was based on ranking (I was the lowest on the diplomatic list because I was the most junior) although subsequently my friend---my number was 0026. That means that the entire American diplomatic list, including the attachés, including probably the chief of MAAG, who had diplomatic status; I was number 26. It was a rather small embassy and it was an embassy where you knew your locals, particularly if you were working in the consular section and then the people in the admin section. It was a close, friendly relationship between the officers and the locals and

it was a community that saw each other socially and felt very good about each other, basically. A lot of that, of course, is lost in the posts as they get larger and larger but at that time I do recall it was a close-knit family and that family included FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals).

Q: Did you find yourself, as often happens, getting imbued with localitis? In other words, obviously the, you know, I mean we had these relations with Taiwan as being “the China” and all.

LEVIN: That’s exactly a point that I wanted to address. Localitis, interest in the culture, interest in the language; oh I was very much interested, particularly so, because I had studied Chinese at university. I went out to Taiwan because I had that Chinese background. While in Taiwan I just did my best to learn the language and learn more about the people and mix with the people. In that sense I had a deep, abiding curiosity, an interest in local culture and in getting to know as many of the local population as possible. I must say in the future, when I went out to Hong Kong and was one of those China watchers, I think one of the most valuable resources I had in trying to find out what was going on in China was basically from textual information, from what they were publishing and occasionally from some eyewitness who had been there and all. The thing that stood me in---best in doing this was my sense of knowledge, how the Chinese behaved in a political context and in a social context, which I gathered during my years in Taiwan. The basic thing was that you would be dealing with Chinese. It didn’t matter whether they were communist Chinese, or if they were nationalist Chinese, there was a core element of Chinese culture and Chinese history that was shaping their behavior and pattern. That knowledge, which I got in Taiwan, was---to me was one of the most important tools that I could bring to bear in trying to analyze what was going on in China. That was in the ‘60s. So in that sense localitis served me very well.

The other thing, which you touched on and which I thought was a tremendous disservice in a sense was a product of the times. It was a product of this tremendous anti-communist attitude that permeated American society at the time; it was heightened by the ideological excesses of China and by a bombastic propagandistic language, where---one could say the rhetoric was---the bark was far worse than the bite. It added up however to this impression of a fanatical ideology totally aligned with the Soviet Union and therefore a great menace to a United States with interests in Asia. We had to get not only in bed with Taiwan but actually almost had to regard it as if its interests and its survival were equal to that of our own survival and interests. That disturbed me. It was conventional. It was over the top in terms of identification with Taiwan. It took too seriously this propagandist thing of free China versus communist China. It prevented and it hindered an objective view of the situation and efforts to try and establish some form of, if not relations, at least then contacts, communication channels to discuss problems and issues with China. It put blinders on our China policy, blinders that were reinforced by the domestic political atmosphere in the United States, by the loud voices of those pro-Taiwan in the Congress, by a wonderfully manipulated Taiwan propaganda campaign in the United States, by this whole atmosphere which prevented us from dealing with the issue of the rise of a revolutionary movement in China in realistic terms and in terms which would have

avoided, at least I think, this over-emphasis on the menace that we saw in China. I think it was the embassy---elements of the embassy---the leadership of the embassy was caught up right in the middle of that thing. There were some officers who scratched their heads over identification with Taiwan but the leadership in the embassy just moved in that direction, just---not only went along with this current of opinion in the United States, but actually believed it.

Q: Was---

LEVIN: That to me was a tremendous shortcoming and I felt that while I was in the embassy.

Q: Did you find a phenomenon that continues? It's probably going on in Iraq and Afghanistan, in that the senior officers are more likely to buy whatever the line is and the political where the junior officers---this is a generational thing---and the junior officers are saying you know---When I came in the Foreign Service, we came in about the same time, and though I never dealt with China I came in with the idea that gee, we've got to be talking to the Chinese and why don't we? This Taiwan thing is one thing but Chiang Kai-shek, particularly in those days, was no great liberal. In practical terms, let's do what we can to talk to the Chinese.

LEVIN: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Q: Was that happening at your post?

LEVIN: I think a few of us had that view but it certainly wasn't expressed very forcefully in the reporting. The reporting pretty much hewed to the existing line on China, which went through the ambassador. There wasn't really any room for the expression of---

Q: You had---who was the senator from Taiwan in California?

LEVIN: Senator Nolan.

Q: Nolan and then you had Judd and then you had, was it Walters, who was Mr. South Asian Affairs?

LEVIN: In the Congress or---

Q: No, in---

LEVIN: Oh, Walter Robinson, Walter Robinson.

Q: Walter Robinson, yes.

LEVIN: You had John Foster Dulles who essentially took a very moralistic view of it. Eisenhower was a little more nuanced than that, as you read some of the diplomatic

histories and things like that. The whole atmosphere was one of total rejection of the idea of bringing diplomacy to dealing with communist China. There were a few in the embassy who thought we were going overboard and one of my---one of the young officers in the political section did a very brilliant paper on why we should stay aloof on this offshore island involvement. I mean you would have thought that the islands of Quemoy and Matsu which were in sight of the Chinese mainland, had no business remaining as outposts of Taiwan, that their fate was as important to the United States as the fate of Manhattan or Los Angeles or something like that.

Q: You know, in 1960, Kennedy and Nixon debated those damn islands.

LEVIN: You have the whole analogy to Munich there. If we tried to compromise on this it would be like giving in to Hitler and just encourage greater aggression. There was no sense in putting this in terms of "Well look". These things, these islands are blockading one of the most important ports of China, Amoyan, and what country is going to stand for enemy forces three or four miles from its coast? But no, it was put into these global things, the same way we did with the war in Vietnam, this domino thing, which of course had----

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: That was the mood; that was the mood in the embassy. As a result of that (I must say that my boss there was a decent man in every respect, Karl Rankin) I really didn't have much respect for him in terms of (1) his knowledge of China, and (2) his total overwhelming identification of the interests of Taiwan with those of the United States. You would have thought that Taiwan was just vital to the United States and that it was of the utmost urgency and importance that we adopt a policy that totally favored Taiwan, whatever it did. This I found disturbing, I must say, even as a very young officer.

Q: Were you there before or after or during when the embassy was sacked?

LEVIN: I had left by then; I had left by then.

Q: You mentioned Chinese rhetoric, e.g., the running dogs of capitalism; they're wonderfully descriptive phrases. Was this communist or was this Chinese?

LEVIN: This is Chinese; this is Chinese. Let me jump ahead; let me jump into the 1960s when I was in Hong Kong, '65 to '69, analyzing the PRC, communist China. You'd get these editorials and propaganda blasts that the situation is excellent and that the world is waiting for revolution. One might say that this Peruvian Communist Party has declared itself in favor of Mao in this struggle between the Chinese and the Russians by then. You'd get accounts of Albania. Albania was a tremendous thing. All of that, and it was just---You knew that this rhetoric was designed first of all to be self-comforting, and secondly to demonstrate to the Chinese people how important China was and what a great job the leadership was doing. The counterpart to that was in the 1950s in Taiwan where you've got the KMT, with controlled press, and huge headlines "Archbishop of Lithuania

Visiting Taiwan and Showing Solidarity of the Communist---anti-Communist Cause.” You had the world anti-communist league, of which Taiwan was a member, just as you had in the PRC the revolutionary movement; this was the anticommunist. Yet the most obscure figures from the most obscure exile communities came to Taiwan. Huge banner headlines were meant to show the people of Taiwan that the world forces are moving in their direction, show what tremendous respect and attention are being paid to their country and leadership.

It was just so obvious that this was the bombast of somebody who had a need to try and show how important he was rather than affect---than show any reflection of reality. That was so Chinese on both sides; it was Chinese. You go back and you read some of the old Chinese imperial edicts and that whole flavor is still there, how the emperor created such an aura of invincibility before enemies that they’re trembling. Then his words spread throughout and everyone pays respect to it. It’s very Chinese, but we took it as an expression of communist fanaticism.

Q: Something that troubles me today is that recently we’ve had---there are always incidents between the two countries. You had this surveillance plane heading and all, but all of a sudden you end up with three days of quite nasty demonstrations against our embassy. There was another time when our---during the Yugoslav war, the bombing of the embassy, but the fact that there is this chauvinism that can be almost as though---it’s really more spontaneous than not.

LEVIN: Let me just address this in a way. What’s happening now in China is---and we’re getting a little bit away from the history but it’s all right; there is now the sense---China is coming out of this period where it feels that it has been victimized by the west for the last one hundred-one hundred fifty years: this whole thing of the unequal treaties and extra-territoriality and concessions and how weak China was and how everybody tried to take advantage---the opium war, etc., etc. Now China is looking around and saying we’re making it; we’re moving ahead and we’re not going to take guff anymore from anybody.

What they see as guff in particular has been this constant lecturing on human rights, on this issue, on the trade issues, be it currency issues, or be it the sense on the part of the Chinese. I’m not saying it’s right or it’s wrong but it’s there. The sense of---particularly in terms of the United States, who for years has been harping on this issue, hit human rights very hard, human rights, this and that and that. With the Chinese, particularly a population which looks at its present government in a largely favorable light, particularly the educated, there is this sense of when the United States lectures we’ve had enough. We’re not going to take that guff anymore. China gets this nationalistic feeling and then you get against this background of the sense of nationalism and this sense of we’re standing up to you. We’re not this supine, weak country we once were, and then you add to it an incident like the bombing of the Chinese embassy---which, you know, if anyone bombed one of our embassies would produce outrage in the United States.

In this surveillance plane, you go okay, fine; we were in international waters, we were flying thirteen miles or fourteen miles, whatever outside the twelve-mile limit. The Navy

was doing 300 of these flights a year, 300. Who knows what the Air Force was doing, but I saw somewhere the Navy was doing 300 of these flights. While one can say that technically we have the right to do this, could you imagine what the reaction would be if the Chinese air force were flying 300 flights fourteen miles off the coast of California? Then if one of its aircraft crashed into one of our planes that we sent up to challenge it or keep it at a respectful distance! You've got to look at this and say other countries have feelings, other countries have interests and just put the United States in the place of being constantly observed by aircraft, foreign aircraft, aircraft from a nation with which we've not always had a smooth relationship and constantly flying on our borders. That we wouldn't stand for. So you know, you've got to put a little perspective.

Of course you look at the American foreign policy and it's always, to me, the shortcoming. One of the great shortcomings is to say: take into account that other countries have interests and these interests are not always the same as ours. Other countries come from a different cultural and historical background and do things differently. If you want this world to correspond to what we consider the ideals and practices that we embrace, you're going to get yourself into a lot of trouble, which I think we have.

But anyway---

Q: Okay, well let's go back to---

LEVIN: Yes, let's go back to Taiwan. There's one thing I've got to tell you and it shows how green I was. I came out there, as I said: I had no training, absolutely no training. Then, I don't know, I was out there a few months and I was invited by one of the political officers to his house. We were sitting around and the only other couple there was the ambassador, the ambassador and his wife. This dinner went on. It was dull and all of that, and I had a party at the---younger people at the embassy were going on, so at about 10:00, or whatever it was, I excused myself and left. Now nobody said a thing to me at the time. It took me---I learned on my own, maybe years later, that hey, at least in those days you never leave before the ambassador.

Q: Of course you didn't.

LEVIN: Thankfully, I was so ignorant I didn't even realize subsequently what a gaff I had committed. I blame the system because I wasn't given any training.

Q: This brings up a point that I have found that in the Foreign Service we lead by indirection. You know---it's not---the military always spells things out. Something I've had to tell, particularly the junior officers when I was still doing this. You know, I would say, "I'd like to see a report on this or that" what I'm really saying is I want a report. But you know---It makes us sound like it's optional, which it ain't.

LEVIN: Yes, yes.

Q: That's the Foreign Service culture.

LEVIN: Again we were so cut off. I mean Taiwan was---thinking back on it, compared to what it is today with people flying to the States on leave or things like that. First of all, we couldn't go back to the States until our tour was finished. They had this requirement: You would lose your home leave if you went back to the States on your own time. Secondly, it was the distances involved in the age of the propeller airplane. At that time we had in Taiwan we had two flights a week coming in - Northwest flights. That was only to the United States. So you really felt that you were overseas and the contact with the States was---that the States was a very remote entity; that was the sense. Not like subsequently when you'd fly back and forth a few times a year and you'd have the wireless filing. You had---Now, of course, the computer and all kinds of TV links and things like that. You didn't have that in those days and even making a phone call back to the States was a very difficult and very expensive proposition. So you had a sense that you were really abroad and you were really in a foreign land, something that over the years has become less evident.

So that was it. I left Taiwan in 1956.

Q: And where did you go?

LEVIN: I was assigned to the INR, Bureau of Intelligence and Research. I was there about a year and a half. I was in the China division, working under a wonderful guy by the name of Jake Jacobson and his boss, right above him, a guy by the name of Joe Jaeger. These people were veterans of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services). A number of people in that - in the China section - came from the OSS. I spent my time there working on the NIS. Do you remember the NIS?

Q: National Intelligence Survey?

LEVIN: Survey, right.

Q: Which was funded by the CIA as a matter---

LEVIN: Yes. These were handbooks, basically, that we were producing on a number of countries of interest to us in our foreign policy. I worked on sections of the Taiwan NIS. I think I wrote one on the politics of Taiwan and one on the, if I'm not mistaken, the cultural education system of Taiwan. It was like going back to university doing research and writing it up in the form of a handbook, which presumably was being prepared in the case something broke out or something changed. People would go rushing to the handbooks to find out what was going---what Taiwan was like before we could---I mean, as an aid to how we would respond to any situation. That's what I did for about a year and a half.

It was interesting; a number of characters there, people who had, you know, the equivalent of the sneakers. I forget the expression but people who'd been for ten, fifteen,

twenty years doing one particular thing. There was a woman there who was “the” expert on Outer Mongolia, who did nothing but Outer Mongolia for twenty years. There were a number of characters there.

Q: Yes, there's a lady who was there for many years.

LEVIN: Rhea Blue.

Q: Yes, I think this was a different one; I've interviewed her.

LEVIN: Evelyn Colbert?

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: Yes, she's wonderful. She's wonderful. She was very knowledgeable. Yes, she was part of the crowd there.

Q: You're off in a sort of esoteric area but did you get involved in debates with the rest of the office. I don't know if it's the right term but debates about whither our relations and all?

LEVIN: No, no, no, no. No. We were up there in the garret working on these papers. I guess---looking back on it---it wasn't the best way to advance one's career, but it was an assignment. I didn't know very well how to deal with assignments. It was my second assignment and again it involved Taiwan and things China so off I went.

Q: You know this is for so many of us. I had on my third tour. I was in INR dealing with the Horn of Africa. You know, we were all-- it was sort of a rite of passage for many of us.

LEVIN: Right, right. What year was that?

Q: I was doing this 1960 to '61, and then I went to Yugoslavia.

LEVIN: Okay. I have to jump ahead on this story. In 19--- (I think it must have been 1963 or maybe early '64) I was working on the Asian Communist Affairs desk, which was a euphemism. It really was the China desk; we had a Taiwan desk, which we called the Republic of China desk. This was the Kennedy years with some glimmer of some movement on the thought that we ought to try and deal with the communist Chinese; we ought to try and move the relationship. It didn't go very far because I guess Kennedy judged that the domestic political climate where he won the election so narrowly that he really couldn't move very far on that. In any event, it was enough of a slight change in the atmosphere that they decided that they would have a Communist China desk but they couldn't call it a Communist China desk. They couldn't call it a China desk because that would make all the pro-Taiwan, the free China, that whole crowd just go ballistic to think that we would even---by nomenclature even acknowledge that there was another China.

So it was called the Asian Communist Affairs desk and I was on that desk. The Africa Bureau was faced with a visit of Chou En Lai. Chou En Lai was the prime minister of China, this great asset we thought, foreign policy, a man who was a diplomatic wizard; he was going to visit Africa and so the African Bureau had a meeting on how to deal with this whole thing. I was sent by the East Asian Bureau to represent the Bureau and I was on the Communist Asian desk, Asian Communist Affairs.

Anyway, I went to this meeting and the assistant secretary of African Affairs, whose name escapes me at this time, made a presentation. From that presentation there was this tremendous sense of fear on how do we deal with this visit of Chou En Lai, who might foreshadow the complete sublimation or subordination of Africa to Chinese designs. Somehow China was just going to sweep over the continent of Africa and this was the beginning of that. This trip was something of tremendous and harmful portent for the United States. I got up there and said, "Hey, you're talking about a country that has almost no resources; it has some economic assistance; it knows nothing about Africa. The Chinese really don't like blacks very much. They don't have a very high opinion of them, and if you think in terms of what we've done in Africa, the millions if not- well it wasn't billions, the millions in money that we spent and the total lack of influence that we have had, why do you think that these rulers of Africa who have their own interests, personal, whatever, are going to be swept away by the Chinese?" I said if we can't sweep the Africans into our camp, how the hell are the Chinese going to do it? And boy, they thought I was a nut case for thinking that. There was really nothing to worry about this trip by Chou En Lai; the Africans would take the Chinese for whatever they could get out of them and that would be that. There was no way that either through economic assistance or through a close ideology---or whatever it was---that there was no real foundation for a close---whatever the country in Africa/China---relationship. It just wouldn't be there. And oh my, my. You would have thought that I was coming in there as a co-irresponsible nut case not to view the seriousness of the Chou En Lai visit to Africa. Of course he went, came back, did very little, but that was still the attitude in the 1960s, certainly in the African Bureau.

But anyway, I digressed and jumped ahead.

Q: I think it's important---Africa; we've used it with the Soviets.

LEVIN: Nobody's going to bend Africa to his will.

Q: It's driven our policy for so long; it drove our policy for so long.

LEVIN: Of course, of course.

Q: One wonders what the fuss was about.

LEVIN: There were times with The Congo; what was there? It was countering Sovietism; I said give The Congo to the Soviets. What a wonderful present that would be. Nobody can get an African nation in their corner and have them stay there, but that was moot.

Anyway, I was in this INR outfit for about a year and a half.

Q: Did you have any responsibility or look at North Korea during that time?

LEVIN: No, no, no. That was---I forget who was doing that. No, I did not do much in North Korea. What I did do, of course, is follow very closely the events that were going on in China but my overwhelming responsibility was NISes on Taiwan.

Q: Did you pick up anything---I've interviewed quite a few people who went on about the opening to China business. These were that whole crew. As a matter of fact, if you read this book, Nixon and Mao, you'll find many quotes from it. I think the thing that struck me was the sort of the awe in which they went and met Mao. All I kept thinking is this guy's a monster. You know, he's responsible for more deaths than Hitler and Stalin combined. You know they almost bought the little red book syndrome or something. Were you getting that at the time you were there?

LEVIN: No, no. It was not---If you look at PRC in 1949, when Mao got up there and declared in October '49 that the People's Republic of China was formed, the Chinese people stood up, and from '49 through to '56, one could have looked at that regime. For all the deaths in the revolutionary situation and some of the excesses, you could say that there was a record of accomplishment. They brought back the Chinese economy from the devastation from 1937 right on through '49; they, the Chinese army, fought the U.S. army to a standstill in Korea. There was a sense of élan on the part of the Chinese people. From that period one could look at the accomplishments of the People's Republic of China and say this is fairly impressive. He started to go off the rails in 1956 with his attack on writers and carried that forward through this great leap forward in 1958. That was this idealistic, romantic effort to get every Chinese to plant food closer, crops closer, to do steel in the backyard, to work under lights for 12-14 hours, and to bring China in one great exercise of popular effort and struggle to the level of the British economy in a few years. It was a disaster. From '56 on he went off the rails, completely off the rails; the government and the policies went off the rails. In the early period you could look at it and say hey, they're accomplishing some things there but that was during the first, in my opinion, first five, six years.

Q: We're talking about 1961-62; where were you in China?

LEVIN: No, I finished INR and of course that was when Wristonization was taking place.

Q: Yes?

LEVIN: And you know---

Q: That was the amalgamation of the Civil Service into the Foreign Service.

LEVIN: Of course, I just---perhaps you had the same thoughts but as someone who came in what was considered the hard way, there was a certain amount of unhappiness with the plan. Then that passed rather quickly but I do recall feeling then that I had to work hard and really scramble to get into this outfit. Now they're just picking some---But some very fine people got in as a result.

In any event, I left INR after about a year and a half because I was then sent to the Chinese language school in Taichung in Taiwan for Chinese language training. I spent a little more than a year there. It was supposed to be a two-year tour where you did nothing but study Chinese. The school was located in Taichung, which was in the middle of the island of Taiwan. The embassy was in Taipei, which is in the northern part of Taiwan. I do recall when they first started thinking about and even subsequently their establishing the school. I was part of that whole thing because at that time I was still with the embassy in Taipei. The team that they sent out to consider where to locate the school was---I had to take care of it as a junior officer and also because I did have some background in the Chinese language. I strongly argued for the establishment of the school in Taipei, not in Taichung. Taiwan at that time had a population maybe of twelve-fourteen million, I forget exactly, of whom maybe two million were the refugees from the Chinese mainland. They were the core elements of Chiang Kai-shek's government, some businesspeople and of course the military. These were the people who spoke Mandarin, who spoke the national language of both Taiwan and of People's Republic of China, both the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China. The Taiwanese, who were the vast majority of the population, spoke their local dialect, Taiwanese, which was basically Amoy dialect or Japanese. So if you wanted to be students coming out and to live in at least the semblance of a Mandarin-speaking environment, society, you had to attend the school in Taipei. The other people argued no, the students would get all involved in the social world of the embassy and the decision was made to put the school in Taichung, where 95 percent of the population, the Chinese population, spoke Taiwanese or Japanese. You were more likely, far more likely, to hear Japanese in Taichung than to hear Mandarin.

In any event the school was set up there. The teachers were all from mainland China, all really from Beijing because that was the standard, that was the best of the pack and the best---the standard Chinese, like Parisian French, Roman Italian, Beijing Mandarin was the best. So we were in the school; there were about, oh, I think that there were roughly twenty to thirty students there, maybe a third from the State Department, a number from CIA, a number from NSA and maybe some from other organizations but basically CIA and State were the student body. It was run by State and it was called the Chinese Language School _____.

Here I was for a year and a half. Taichung in 1958 was basically a city but it was right in the middle of a rural area. Even Taipei in those days was third world. This was even more rural and we lived---I lived---in a Japanese house with a garden outside with mango trees and buffalos would go---water buffalos would go traipsing past my house. It was very peaceful, very bucolic and the school was located in a housing area of the more affluent in Taichung. It was very cozy and we spent six hours a day studying Chinese. I did that

for a year, maybe 15 months, at times punctuated by all-night sessions of poker among some elements of the student body. It was a very nice year or 15 months and I did learn a considerable amount more Chinese.

Q: Were there any bull sessions or remarks about whether---

LEVIN: Sure, sure. Not only that but the relations established among your fellow students carry on. So when you went off to other assignments, particularly in Asia or dealing with China, you were dealing with agency parts or NSA people whom you knew. Or if you didn't know them they still had the Taichung experience. It created ties and relationships that were very useful in terms---subsequently as you went about doing your work. It was a very nice existence and through the years I've maintained friendships with those people who studied with me back in 1958 at the Taichung Language School, very good---

Q: Who were some of those who studied with you?

LEVIN: Well, there was a Paul Poppo, who was State and Calvin Maillard who was a guy whom I served with in the consular section in Taipei in the '50s; Dick Nebicott. There was a guy by the name of Stape Roy who was there; Herb Horowitz was there; there was this guy, John O'Neal, who at that time was in a different organization and who was a dear friend I knew at Columbia University before I even got in the Foreign Service. There were a number of people; I'd have to scratch my mind for some of the names: David Dean, David Dean, wonderful David Dean, who is still around and I'm still in contact with him. A guy by the name of Jim Ireland is retired and was not State but these are the people who come to mind.

Q: Did you find yourself with good, practical Mandarin when you got out of there?

LEVIN: Yes, fairly good. Of course then in 1960 I married a Chinese. She was from the outskirts of Beijing and, if you look at whatever level of Chinese I have, I think that my marriage was the most important factor in advancing and preserving my Chinese.

Yes, I could. Somewhat immodestly let me say this: there were some who were maybe as good as I was, maybe even a little better but not very many. I learned how to---I could read a Chinese newspaper without any great problems, as long as it dealt with international things or political things. When it got onto social things and movie stars and all that they started using a slang that at times even my wife couldn't understand the language. I still can sit down and read a Chinese newspaper and let you know what's going on.

Q: The Chinese have the system that they had in Japan where it's male/female. If you've got a wife and you have guys who learned from their wives they are speaking as if they were female.

LEVIN: No, it's not that distinctive. There's an element of it but it's not as distinctively Chinese as it is with Japanese. The only thing with---when women talk it sometimes is tremendous. We were talking earlier about Chinese rhetoric and a Chinese mother telling her child, you know, I'm going to beat you to death when---

Q: Oh, yes.

LEVIN: It does something wrong. Or I'm hungry until death or I'm freezing to death; it's coming throughout the language, maybe used a little bit more by women but it's not that tremendous.

Q: I served in Korea and there it's very hierarchical. Was Chinese that way or not?

LEVIN: To an extent no, to an extent, yes. I think in many respects the Koreans were more faithful to Confucian traditions than the Chinese were. I think that Korea in many respects was a more conservative society, if you keep in mind that with the Chinese a number of them had been educated in the States. The tremendous influence among a narrow but a very influential segment of Chinese society that a Western missionary institution had in China---all of that, I think, broke down to some extent the more traditional basis of society. Tradition was still there and yes, it was hierarchical.

In any event I was at that school. I was supposed to be there for two years but we had a softball team and it was a pretty good softball team. We played---there were a couple of military, U.S. military teams, organizations that had teams and we played in the league in Taichung. One day, sliding into second base to break up a double play, I broke up the double play; I broke up my leg very badly. I broke up the game. As a matter of fact, it broke up my tour in Taichung because I was first evacuated to Taipei where we had a U.S. military hospital. It was rather primitive, thinking back on it, in terms of what standards are now, but nevertheless staffed by American doctors and they treated the leg; it was pretty badly dislocated. I came back to Taichung but it just wasn't working out. So I was evacuated back to the States and they cut my tour short in Taichung by more than a half a year.

Q: Where did you go?

LEVIN: I went back to the States. I was on medical leave for a few months. In that interim I got married in New York. My wife or my soon-to-be-wife had come to the States in 1956 and studied in Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. She subsequently got herself a job in New York. I had renewed the acquaintance and we got married in 1960. Shortly thereafter I went to Jakarta, Indonesia. Actually I was posted to Jakarta, Indonesia. In those days virtually all of our posts in Asia had Chinese language officers.

Q: Yes, Burma and---some in London and some in New Delhi and---

LEVIN: Right; London---

Q: Thailand.

LEVIN: Right, right. The reason for that, in part, was this tremendous importance that we paid to the overseas Chinese. We were in the middle of this, what we thought was this battle for the allegiance of the old East Chinese, and of course with South Korea on the side of Taiwan. So every post in Asia, certainly, and, as you say, in other places as well, had a Chinese affairs officer. I was the Chinese affairs officer for Indonesia.

Q: For how long were you doing that?

LEVIN: I was in Indonesia for three years.

Q: Oh boy. This was an important time.

LEVIN: Sixty to '63.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: I missed out on Suharto---not Suharto.

Q: Yes, Suharto.

LEVIN: Suharto, Suharto, that bloodletting; that happened in '65. While I was there from '60 to '63 Sukarno was in power.

Q: Before we get to that I was wondering how important were the intellectual people dealing with China? I'm thinking of Fairbanks, Harvard and all the others; were these important figures?

LEVIN: No, not really, not in those days because the tide of pro-Taiwan sentiment was so strong and it was embedded by the policy excesses and the rhetorical excesses of the PRC. Whatever some of these academics were thinking really didn't have much influence on the China policy. They were not a factor in the shaping of China. Not in those days.

There was a report written, the Conlan Report, which advocated that we have another look at China policy and of course, even within the government, when Kennedy took over there was this talk of some movement. Then there were these tentative little efforts to recognize Outer Mongolia, which clashed against a strong anti-communist sentiment and the pro-Chiang Kai-shek lobby. It was floated but it never went anywhere. So outside intellectual academics were insignificant factors in shaping China policy in those days. Where they began to play a role was in bringing attention to the beginning of the Sino-Soviet split that they were focusing on. Now, let's see, the Khrushchev speech, the Chinese reaction to that---

Q: That was the Khrushchev speech on Stalin.

LEVIN: Right, on Stalin. I was in language school when some of this was unfolding and it appears that there was some very interesting developments. There was some talk within government circles of different sentiments of course. Even before they appeared there was this school of thought which was totally overwhelmed by the pro-Chiang Kai-shek and the anti-communist movement but there was this---In 1949-50, the People's Republic of China was being established; that group within the State Department said the Chinese and the Soviets have basically an antagonistic relationship and China is not going to come out of this hugely nationalistic revolution and supporting itself just to be a simple pawn of the Soviet Union. U.S. policy should be directed at weaning China away from its reliance on the Soviet Union. That was there from the beginning but of course it didn't get very far.

Q: Yes. There was this thought, a simplistic thought that we were up against a monolithic power and any of this other talk shows you've got a weak sister or something.

LEVIN: Right, pro-communist. Then people who were skewered by McCarthy, people who had those thoughts, including Atchison, let the dust settle. Then we'll try to work out something with China, but as this is the '50s, I remember reading about this in the Chinese newspapers. We were studying Chinese and we were reading _____ the official organ, and reading these condemnations and denunciations and seeing this thing beginning to build up. Of course bringing this out more into a public forum, the intellectuals played a part in that. In particular the book by a fellow by the name of Donald Zagoria, The Sino-Soviet Split, laid out all this and brought it home. There was still the overwhelming opinion at that time, certainly in the Eisenhower administration, that this was not serious. They believed that the Chinese were still carrying out the---that they were still a pawn of the Soviets and that Chinese interests were intimately tied up with the Soviet Union. The effort to dismiss all of that, either as inconsequential or just tricks played by them to deceive us, that was the opinion that held sway for a long time.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: After it was so evident that the break had taken part, there is where some outside influence of intellectual students of China began to have some influence in bringing home the reality of the Sino-Soviet split. That's what I would say.

Q: Yes, we do get caught up in the group think of---and particularly dealing with communism.

LEVIN: It's group think; it's the assumptions of moral superiority added to military strength added to this missionary impulse that was a tremendous obstacle in realizing that other countries---saying that they have interest and have different perceptions and different histories and backgrounds. That attitude is fostered in the United States: we're number one, number one, whatever you call it in terms of power and morality, etc., etc. We're so good and that's the public perception. It makes it very difficult for a leadership in the United States, which may be inclined to deal with reality, not all are. It makes it

very difficult to carry out a foreign policy in the United States. No politician who becomes president is going to say that: "Hey, wait a minute, you know; maybe we ought to knock off some of this talk about how great we are and listen to some other countries. See how---if we can work out something." That's a difficult, difficult thing; I think it's something that---it's terribly in the way of American foreign policy. The great proponent of what I've just expressed would be George Kennan, with his moaning and bewailing about the obstacles that get in the way of sensible American policy. I fully subscribe to them.

Q: Today is the 9th of August, 2010, with Burt Levin, and I'm Stu Kennedy. Well Burt, we were off to Hong Kong, weren't we?

LEVIN: That's right.

Q: Then you went to Indonesia.

LEVIN: After language school, from language school from Taichung. We had the language school in Taichung, which is in the middle of Taiwan. Then I came back on medical leave to have a broken foot attended to. Originally I was going to go to Bangkok, assigned to Bangkok but because of the delay added by medical treatment my orders were changed and I went to Jakarta, Indonesia.

Q: Did you take Indonesian?

LEVIN: No, I did not. I picked up some. We had a tutor and it wasn't a very difficult language but I didn't get very far with it. I was in the embassy political section---

Q: And you were there from when to when?

LEVIN: From 1960, from about February 1960 to maybe the summer of '63, around--- Oh no, March of '63; a three-year tour.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LEVIN: The Ambassador was Howard Jones. Howard P. Jones had come into the Foreign Service; I think he was appointed as the DCM in Taiwan under Ambassador Rankin. He left Taiwan before I got there about 1963. His background, as I recall, was he was not a career Foreign Service officer; he was very close to Tom Dewey and the New York State Republican Party, if I remember correctly. He was a political appointee. He was the ambassador from 1960 since the time I was there, 1960 to---

Q: He wasn't well established when you got there, was he? You came about the same time?

LEVIN: No, he came earlier than I did. He had a very difficult environment. He came in the aftermath of our deep involvement of encouraging, financing, and providing the

weapons to a rebellion in the outer islands against the Sukarno government. We were up to our necks in that rebellion, including the participation of an American---American aircraft; one of the planes was shot down and one of the pilots was captured, a man by the name of, if I'm not mistaken---I think it was Frank Pope, something like that. In any event, we were blatantly involved and the rebellion was put down. He came in the aftermath of that into a rather difficult situation. His efforts throughout his tenure failed. I was there to try and repair this relationship. He did so by advocating just about anything and everything that the Sukarno government wanted. It was right down the line supportive of Sukarno and his policies in an effort to make amends. I would say, but it was with someone who was there and knew what was going on; it was not an edifying behavior by an ambassador but perhaps he had no other recourse.

Q: How would you describe American relations with Indonesia when you got there?

LEVIN: There were two aspects. Let me start from scratch. Indonesians were making a very loud clamor for the Dutch to leave West Irian and to cede that half of the island to New Guinea. The other half was, at that time, administered by Australia. To cede that very large and rather, if we don't want to use the word primitive, let's say underdeveloped island for the Dutch to get out and turn it over to the New Guineans. The Dutch were recalcitrant; their assumption or their policy was in part based on the belief that they could do better for the natives of West New Guinea than the Indonesians could. In that sense they probably were right, but the time for Dutch colonialism was over. The natives of West New Guinea were Melanesian; they were not racially, ethnically, or culturally tied to the majority Malay group, Indonesian group or any other group. So the Dutch were very reluctant to leave and it took a lot of noise, threats by the Indonesians and finally us putting a tremendous amount of pressure on the Dutch for the Dutch to finally agree to give the territory to the Indonesians. The Indonesians threatened warfare; they dropped paratroopers into West New Guinea. They raised the temperature to the point of threatening armed invasion of West New Guinea. I think the sense that the Dutch really had no more---even though we probably knew that the natives were better off under the Dutch. Nevertheless the time for a Dutch colonial position in that part of the world was over and the Dutch had better get out, particularly given the threat of actual conflict. So we put a lot of pressure on the Dutch and we did get the Dutch to sign over---

Q: Yes, this was Ellsworth Bunker, wasn't it?

LEVIN: This was Ellsworth Bunker leading negotiations back in Washington, back in the States. Our charge, I'm not sure to what extent, but yes, he was carrying the water for us.

The sideline is that we were taking care of the Indonesians' communications because they did not have the ability to communicate instantaneously from Washington to their foreign minister back in Jakarta. So we were giving him a hand with our communications. I was awakened. I was duty officer and I was awakened about 2:00, 3:00 in the morning with news from Washington, a message from the Indonesian foreign minister. He was negotiating back to his---back to Sukarno, probably Sukarno, in effect telling him that the Dutch have agreed to turn over the island.

I was awakened. I went to the embassy, got the message at 3:00 in the morning and went around to the (Indonesian) director of North American Affairs, woke him up, and handed him the message. They had no duty officers; they weren't geared the way we were. I remember waking this sleepy guy up who was asleep and said _____. I can throw that out because a few years later, maybe a year or two later, the Indonesians then went off to visit a campaign---a confrontation with Malaysia. Somehow their sense of it was that parts of Borneo belonged to Indonesia and they picked up about confronting Indonesia. They went on there for---went on the slogan of---confronted Malaysia and then they went on to threaten military action and to swallow Malaysia. That was the expression they used. Our ambassador was sending messages in support of---

Well before it even reached that point I recall writing a memo. I might have told you this but writing a memo saying that we should go into the United Nations right now and make it very clear to them that we would not support them on the issue of Malaysia. This is an entirely different set of circumstances than the West New Guinea: this was not the last remnants of colonial---outdated colonial possession. The Indonesians have no basis for their claims against Malaysia. Having succeeded on West New Guinea by scaring us, and pressuring the Dutch, they are starting on this path again. We should, before they go very far, we should sit down and make it absolutely clear to them that we will not support them _____. I sent the memos to _____ and as a consequence of that he called a meeting of the staff and began his evening by saying there are some people here who do not understand what position the United States is. He went off on to denounce my position, not by name; he was a gentleman. In any event I do remember that with great clarity. In the end we did not support the Indonesians on Malaysia and they backed off. Not too much came of it, but they went pretty far in denunciation and threatening. It ended without conflict and with the _____.

Q: I've talked to people who served there around that time. Again, at least within you might say the lower ranks and even pretty far up in the embassy, there was a great deal of frustration with Ambassador Jones. They felt that he would sit passively while Sukarno would give speech after speech castigating the United States. They ascribed it to wanting the Christian Scientists and believed in passivity or what have you. I mean, how did you find it?

LEVIN: I think it was not a performance that I had great respect for. I certainly felt that this was an extreme, extreme case of clientitis. Again, it was to me in the context of this very unfavorable background of events that he came out. He had to prepare this rather foolhardy, foolish plan involving of the United States in trying to support a rebellion in the central government. That was the main thing that colored his approach. It was the case so prevalent in the Foreign Service that---of clientitis. Any country that the ambassador would think of oh, this country, that's crucial to the interests of the United States and we've got to do this and we've got to do that; we've got to---And it certainly--I certainly, while sympathizing with Howard P. Jones, I would look at that performance as not a very---not the way to go about it in terms of objectivity and of trying to chart a course for the United States. It was too abject and too solicitous of the Indonesians. I

would put it in those terms, which is basically saying yes, I agree with your observation but I add the caveat that he was in a difficult position when he arrived there.

Q: Your job was the China watcher, was it?

LEVIN: That's right. My whole concern was, supposedly, the influence of the Chinese in Indonesia; there was great concern about the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, Communist Party of Indonesia) allegiance. I think it was quite evident, certainly around the time I got out there, that number one, the Indonesians were highly nationalistic. The idea of the Chinese having an effect through their ideology or through their influence, their revolutionary identification of Sukarno that the taking over the country or meaningfully influencing it, I mean, it struck me as too far removed from reality.

More importantly, no sooner than I got there that there was a very pronounced anti-Chinese policy move, anti-Chinese living in Indonesia, and an effort by the Indonesian government to weaken the Chinese hold on the economy of Indonesia by outlawing Chinese carrying out entrepreneurial activities in rural areas. Of course the Chinese were the ones who were running the shops in the villages; the Chinese were the ones who were collecting the rubber or any other products that were either from the States or from the jungles. The Chinese were the cement in terms of the agrarian economy. They were not growers but they were the ones who were doing the transportation, the middlemen and in the larger cities they were they importers and the exporters. So they had a very strong hold on the Indonesian economy and Sukarno, who ruled in Indonesia, was a disaster economically. As things got worse I think there was a view of the Chinese as responsible or simply they tried to make them the scapegoats of the economic deterioration. This was against a background of Indonesian nationalistic resentment against the Chinese because when the Indonesians rose up against (that's in the post-war period) the Chinese living in Indonesia basically supported the Dutch because under the Dutch they had a protected and privileged position. The Indonesians, who were used to years of independence, years of great individualism, looked on the Chinese as the running dogs of the Dutch.

So there was no love there in terms of attitude, and the relationship between China and Indonesia was not all that good after the _____. So I never---In some of my reporting, I made these points. Of course there was even the party---the Indonesian Communist Party, which had a number of Chinese---ethnic Chinese as members. These people over the---couple of years with them expelled from the party so it was quite evident that the _____ party, that was comprised of ethnic _____ and that one need not have _____. Of course there was the concern on the part of the embassy about Moscow and Sukarno, joining the Communist cap----

That's what led to our involvement in the rebellion in '59-'60 and that was still a back current to this whole view of Sukarno and position in Indonesia. The fact that he was influenced, at times he sided with the Soviet Union _____ rhetoric, a huge concern about Sukarno putting Indonesia in the communist camp. I thought it was terribly overblown, but of course the ambassador played on that as part of his efforts to get the United States to go along with anything and everything that the Indonesians wanted.

Q: Well did you feel that the Indonesian security forces were paying particular attention to you because of your job?

LEVIN: No, not really, no. No, I didn't get that---No. I don't think---No. I don't think that---None of us in the embassy had that feeling. It just wasn't there. We had---That ticks my mind on something. We---I do recall once, it might have been in the context of the effort to get back West New Guinea or it might have been in the context of the confrontation with Malaysia. One day I was shopping downtown and I ran into one of the local hires. He said there are demonstrations at the embassy. So I got into my car; I was with my wife, and we drove to the embassy, probably a stupid thing to do. We drove to the embassy and the crowd in front of the embassy kind of parted and waved as I drove in; I was driving in with a---in a Volkswagen Beetle and the atmosphere had the sense that this wasn't that great a hostility, that they were going to---they were demonstrating but it was not an ugly time; they were demonstrating but it was not an ugly one.

I got in to the embassy and there were a number of officers there; our DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) was there and a couple of people from the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) were there, and one of the CIA guys was talking to the DCM. He wanted him to authorize distribution of some of the weapons that the Marines were holding and for the Marines to open fire if anybody tried to scale the fence. I just told the DCM, I said if you do this, if you shoot and somebody is climbing that fence and is shot we are going to have a mob that's going to rip us all apart. Anyway, I strongly opposed it. He was dithering and made no decision and by then after a while the crowd dissipated without anybody trying to get over. I recall that one and I said oh my God; this is crazy. Fortunately nothing came of that. But the things I remember---

Q: Were you sensing a growing closeness between Sukarno and China?

LEVIN: No, no, no. This resentment though was over this expulsion of Chinese merchants from the rural areas and the depiction of the Chinese as exploiting the people of Indonesia and responsible for the economic difficulties between Indonesia and China. The Chinese in Indonesia of course didn't side with the Dutch; they were condescending in their attitude toward the Indonesians. So there was this considerable friction between Indonesia nationalists and the Chinese business community. The sense that the Chinese were dominant and arrogant all came to a head in 1961. One consequence of this was that there was not this close relationship between China and Indonesia. The Indonesians---prohibited the---they had had Chinese schools in Indonesia but they were closed so there was friction.

Again, this was the time in China in the aftermath of the great upheaval and I recall and reported to the Department, we were---some of the Chinese I knew in Indonesia were getting letters from China requesting food packages, citing that things were so bad that they were starving.

Q: Was Bob Martins there when you were there?

LEVIN: Yes, Bob was in the political section, right.

Q: Did you get involved? I had a long interview with Bob a long time ago. It's on the Internet. He talks about having come from Moscow, starting work, using the press and the open facilities of who was what and, in a way, created the first, you might say comprehensive, cataloging of who were the communists in the country.

LEVIN: Yes, yes. I don't recall that but Bob was in the political section; I can't---again I don't recall how long we overlapped but Bob was a very, very capable officer and yet his background was Russian, a Russian specialist.

Q: He became very controversial later because when Sukarno was eased out of office Martins' cataloging of the communists was turned over to the Indonesian authorities of the Suharto group. It's been claimed by some that this is the basis for death lists.

LEVIN: No, I think I was long gone by then. I left Indonesia in early spring of 1963 and that didn't happen until 1965 when Sukarno was deposed by Suharto.

Q: Yes, that was '64, wasn't it, when they---?

LEVIN: Sixty-five.

Q: Sixty-five. Were there any great demonstrations against the American embassy?

LEVIN: That one I was telling you about, the one that was when I came back from a shopping expedition and went into the embassy that was the large one.

Q: Were you there when the British embassy was burned down?

LEVIN: Oh, I'm trying to think. No, I think that happened after I left.

Q: Were we seeing any connection between the war, it was still not a huge war at that time, and the war in Vietnam---

LEVIN: Yes, yes, yes, the Vietnamese War. We ourselves weren't doing much reporting on it. I don't recall any analytical reporting. I do recall having a very strong sense that---as the message was basically coming out of Washington or maybe even Saigon justifying our involvement in Vietnam in terms of the impact that it would have on the rest of Southeast Asia---that if the Viet Minh, the North Vietnamese, were to succeed it would have a very major impact. This was---It was already coming out in '63 as one of the arguing points made for our---the importance of an anti-communist effort in Vietnam. I do recall thinking to myself (I don't think I reported it, I'm not sure why); it's that we just weren't focused on Vietnam. South Vietnamese had an embassy there and a general maybe; maybe both Vietnams were---maybe a consulate general. I knew the South Vietnamese consul general.

I do recall thinking very strongly that the Indonesians couldn't care less about what was going on in Vietnam; it was not in their consciousness. There was no commenting on it in the press. They were tied up with their own issues and their own problems. That is the line that our involvement was of major importance, and that the fate of Vietnam was of major importance in Southeast Asia. Certainly in terms of Indonesia it had absolutely no relevance whatsoever. Now, I don't recall reporting that but that was certainly a strong feeling I had. I don't think we really commented on---I can't recall any real focusing on Vietnam or even reporting on the whole issue of Vietnam in the time that I was at the embassy.

Q: Did you, under Howard Jones, feel any constraints on reporting?

LEVIN: There was this reprimand, not by name alone; there was a total rejection of this memo I sent urging us to make it clear to the Indonesians that we would not support them on Malaysia. In terms of actually reporting back to Washington, not really. I don't recall any restraints. The whole atmosphere, though, was one that this embassy is here to improve our relations and get as close as possible to Sukarno. I at that time was reporting on---looking back on it, reporting probably was a succession of trivial matters. I have no recollection of any personal---of any message that I myself wrote of any great import other than my memo to the ambassador on how we should deal with the Malaysian issue.

Q: Did you get any feel for Indonesia; it's such a diverse country with these thousands of islands---

LEVIN: Right, right.

Q: Did the Chinese tend to dominate any areas or were more important in some areas or--?

LEVIN: No, no. This was interesting because some of these Chinese had Chinese names but they had been in Indonesia so many generations. What would happen is that the family---the founding father of the Indonesian---of the Chinese group in Indonesia---had come over from China, God knows when, 100, 200 years ago, and cohabited with an Indonesian woman. Then all their children would have Chinese surnames. The son with the Chinese surname would also end up with an Indonesian woman because in those days, not because Chinese women came out on there, You had people with Chinese surnames who couldn't read or write Chinese, and couldn't speak Chinese. Even racially they were so often at times indistinguishable from the Indonesians. Their blood probably was six-sevenths Indonesian, nevertheless they looked on themselves as Chinese. To be Chinese was to give you, certainly under the Dutch and historically, a certain higher rung on the social ladder. As Chinese's inherent condescension toward the Indonesians was just part of going with this assertion that you were Chinese even though you were more Indonesian than Chinese.

There was one area where that was different and that was in western Borneo, Kalimantan, the city of Pontianak; there you had a sizeable settlement of Hakka Chinese, a different group than the ones in the rest of Indonesia. The Hakkas were extremely conservative, culturally conservative and held on to their language and held on. Kind of astute but they have a more---a purer sense of Chinese and its mostly racially and culturally. It was the one area where a real---what I would call the oldest of these Chinese presences one would normally think of.

Q: Didn't they come from a port city on the---

LEVIN: No, the majority of Indonesian Chinese came from around Fujian, the Amoy and Fujian, yes. The Hakkas are of the---There are Hakkas all over China; probably came from northern Guangdong, around that area, but that was the only place you really felt that there was a strong Chinese settlement there.

Q: Did you feel personally any sort of identification or brotherhood with the Chinese in Indonesia? In some ways they're replicating the Jewish experience in other places.

LEVIN: No, not really. We had a few local employees in the embassy and USIS (United States Information Service) who were of Chinese background; we got to know a couple of the Chinese businessmen because they basically were the business elite. We got to know some of them, but no, not---I was always on the lookout for anybody who would speak Chinese because I knew it would help me in my Chinese. They would take us to some of the better Chinese restaurants in town; we'd go out in the field, but no, no, no, no; in the context that you put it, no, absolutely not.

Q: Were you sought out by the Chinese community at all?

LEVIN: No, I never went to any Chinese community events or anything like that, no. You know I talked privately to the Chinese: what are their views on the economy, what's going on here, what's the reaction to this move by the---just as an important component of the Indonesian economy, using them as sources for our reporting. That's how I would put it. In terms of global mass friendships, not really. Some but it was not that significant.

I was talking about the Chinese representative whom I saw at a distance, at various cocktail parties or receptions. We could not have any contact with the Chinese embassy and I'm pretty sure they couldn't have any contact with us. In any event, his name was Huang Jen, Huang Jen, and he subsequently became one of the contact points as the Nixon rapprochement got underway. He then became---At one time he was ambassador to---in France and he would queue in this march up to the Nixon visit or in the years afterward as a contact. In any event, he was the ambassador and what struck me about this is that his official car was an old Packard. Now, here was a Chinese constantly denouncing us as imperialists, as aggressors, and this and that, very---robust terms and yet the ambassador, the Chinese ambassador to Indonesia, was driving around in a Packard, an antique Packard. Then I remember asking a Chinese how come? Don't they see the contradiction? He told me that among the Indonesian Chinese community in the

years before the war and the immediate post-war the car in Indonesia was a Packard. Only the people of considerable wealth and prestige had Packards and so as a sign of the power and importance of the Chinese ambassador he was driving around in an imperialist Packard.

During my years in Indonesia a very close buddy---who became a close buddy---was "The New York Times" correspondent there, a fellow by the name of Bernard Powell. He then went on to be a CBS news reporter and Bernard and I would sit down from time to time and of course he used me as a source and I used him as a source so that was a useful relationship. We were pretty tight and as a matter of fact we still are friends.

Q: Was there much in the way of young Indonesians going to the United States to study?

LEVIN: There wasn't this overwhelming demand that was the case in Hong Kong and Taiwan. I'm sure there were but (1) the economic circumstances of the vast majority of Indonesians wouldn't allow it; and (2) there weren't that many people educationally qualified. I just don't recall significant numbers of Indonesians going to the United States for a college education because the society and the economy weren't wealthy enough. I don't think that American universities looked at Indonesia as a place where they would go out and try to attract people. I don't think it was significant numbers, no.

The effort on the part of our military was of course to get the Indonesian military whom we saw as a counter to Sukarno, as a force that would- in the last analysis if Sukarno really was seriously going to take the country communist that the Indonesian armed forces would stand up. Therefore we did have this effort to get closer to the Indonesian armed forces and we did send quite a number of their officers to training in the United States.

Q: Looking at the country, you came from Taiwan which still hadn't made that great a recovery but were you sensing that Indonesia was a country where things were basically falling apart or was it gathering itself up or what?

LEVIN: Falling apart. Going from bad to worse. Here was a leader who had tremendous skills as a speaker, who would come out with slogans and programs and different campaigns, and who would mesmerize an audience of Indonesians, whose economic sense and priorities were totally absent and who was---he and his government---without any meaningful economic policies or even knowledge of economics. The country was in a downward spiral; a downward spiral and I had no sense of any possibility or any promise of economic accomplishment and advance. It was at that time a nation of 90 million; 70 million of whom were concentrated on Java, then regarded probably as the most densely populated place in the world. We saw this population as a huge milestone around the neck of Indonesia. Now I think their population is in the 200 millions; where they put them all I don't know. The economy is of course a lot better than it was then but no, in those days it was a very poor, impoverished country, which had, in terms of services, and infrastructure probably had done better in some respects under the Dutch but now everything was just coming apart slowly---not so slowly, just---

Q: How would you compare and contrast Taipei with Indonesia? Of course the population differences were tremendous but basically how were things?

LEVIN: Jakarta in the more affluent period had this super structure left behind by the Dutch, some grand houses on some avenues, suburbs of leafy places with quite substantial houses. The areas where the next ruling class lived were impressive residential areas. They lived well. You had none of that, really, in Taipei. The Japanese lived of course in their Japanese houses and apart from that Taipei, from 1941 up until 1954. From '41 to '45, World War II economically hurt Taipei significantly over the years. Then came the Chinese civil war and a huge influx of refugees and the tensions between the mainlanders and the Taiwanese. So it was---you had none of the super structure that a colonial---that a Western colonial power left behind. You had a few Victorian buildings built by the Japanese, the Japanese governor's residence, the former presidential---not the presidential---the colonial governor's palace, things like that. You didn't have that sense of superficial residential beauty in Hong Kong where the colonial overlords lived and where it was, in that sense, an attractive piece of the city. You didn't have that in Taiwan. Plus you had, I think you had grinding poverty in both places but none of that superficial residential beauty. Everything was going to pieces: the sidewalks had come apart; things weren't being painted; it was on the way down, clearly in need of assistance. They took over all the Dutch properties. They took over the Dutch corporations and they nationalized them and they really couldn't run them very well.

Q: Then you left there in '63?

LEVIN: I left there in '63.

Q: What was the situation when you left?

LEVIN: Nothing much major had changed. It was still Sukarno. One did not sense any imminent threat to his regime, despite feelings that some in the military were not happy with his politics. One certainly---I'm not sure when they gave up on this Malaysian confrontation, probably after I left, maybe a good while after I left. So nothing really stood out as anything---a dramatic departure from what had been going on for five or six years. I just studied the deterioration of the economy and the government. Sukarno every six months would come out with a new slogan and a new campaign and it was just nonsensical. It would hit the press for a few days and everybody was mumbling about how we're going to carry out this program. Then nothing would come of it and six months later you'd get a new acronym of a policy, which was meaningless. I must say that in some respects some of these proclamations I thought the ambassador took a little bit too seriously.

Q: I think of the politics of confrontatsia.

LEVIN: Confrontatsia against Malaysia.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: It would be _____ Malaysia, which was _____, and then they had _____, which was a combination, a coalition of the forces of Indonesia were going to bring about development. Then you had, I forget, one slogan after another, which they came out with on, I remember one of them, National Day, August 17, 1947--- they got declared on August 17. I forget, 1947, something like that. Anyway they came out with an economic plan, which was divided into eight chapters and 17 subsections and it had 1,947 pages, or something like that. The symbolism was the date of independence. I read through this and I remember being shocked; there was this one section on fisheries and what their production from the fisheries was going to be. So they calculated, whoever made up this plan, of course it was endorsed by Sukarno, that Indonesia was surrounded by X million-square miles of ocean and, according to scientists, there was Y amount of fish in each square mile of ocean and therefore Indonesian ocean production will be blah, blah, blah, blah. I mean, it was just nutty, nutty, but I don't think our ambassador would have been pleased if we went back with a cable saying this is nutty.

Anyway, I left Indonesia in '63. An interesting thing, I went home, I went home via Delhi and then Delhi to Moscow. I went home via Europe and this was the flight from Delhi to Moscow was an inaugural flight by Aeroflot, non-stop inaugural flight. I was on the first flight; first time I'd ever been on a Russian airline. We remember, my wife and I, that the flight attendant was so shall we say ample that you couldn't get past her when she was standing in the aisle. More interestingly we were served lunch; they opened a tin can, gave us the tin can and a plastic spoon and that was lunch. It was just quite something.

But the point that I want to make concerns passing through the Soviet Union. We were there for a few days and we stayed in---everything was run by Intourist, the government agency. We were walking on the street one day, sightseeing, and we were approached by three or four young men, and they started talking to us about both their satisfactions and their unhappiness with the Soviet regime. I just listened, listened, listened. Anyway that was that; they separated. We went our way and that night or the next night we went to the Bolshoi Theater. This of course arranged by Intourist. We came out of the Bolshoi Theater and, lo and behold, there were these same people. They started walking with us and of course they, through the conversation or in some way or another, they figured out we were Americans. Then one of them gave me a letter and said he had a friend in the United States and he hoped that I could give this letter to his friend. I guess I was either naïve or unthinking or a combination of both: I took the letter. When I got in the hotel room I thought to myself, reflecting on this whole thing, that there is something obviously wrong with this. How the hell, other than pre-planned would they---I mean, it couldn't be a coincidence that they knew we were going to be in the Bolshoi. So I took that letter; I didn't even open it. I just ripped it up and flushed it down the toilet. I didn't go to the embassy with it; I didn't even know where the embassy was; I was just that stupid for two or three days. I never really reported this thing but then it just struck me. I said well they obviously---at least what I think they're trying to do is to get me to give this letter to some guy in the embassy who would then contact one of them. Then they'd know who our people in the embassy were and who were trying to recruit and things like

that. In any case, it was just sort of an interesting side light on my first and only visit to Moscow.

Q: Where did you go then, in '63?

LEVIN: I came back to Washington and that's when I was assigned to the---where was I? For a few months, was it then? Anyway, basically I was assigned to the Asian Communist Affairs desk, because that was the desk that was set up in '63 or maybe a little earlier under the Kennedy Administration. It was meant to be a desk for dealing with communist China, not so much of negotiating or contacting or in any way getting involved with communist China. Nevertheless we had the---our China desk was totally off the---was preoccupied with Taiwan. This was our China. This was our official China; this was all our diplomatic activity. So willy- nilly the focus on that desk was Taiwan. There was a sense during the Kennedy Administration that we should have---we should pay more attention to communist China in terms of having a focal point, which would look at communist China. Not that we weren't concentrating on what was going on but something that in essence was a desk to deal with China, not in any direct way but to deal with things that involved communist China. So that desk was formed. It was called Asian Communist Affairs because fear that if they called it the PRC desk or the Communist China desk or whatever you will, if it's designated as something with China, the pro-Taiwan forces in America---in the American political spectrum would be up in arms. There would be great fear of arousing the Nolans and the Nixons of the world, that the American---that the Kennedy Administration, the State Department, was going soft on communism, etc., etc., so it was given this euphemistic name, Asian Communist Affairs, but in effect we were dealing with communist China.

Now, I must say on that desk we had precious little to do. There was another guy on the desk, a fellow by the name of Bill Watson. The desk was run by a man of enormous talent, his name, oh, I can't think of his name all of a sudden.

Q: Was it a man who later became counselor general in Hong Kong?

LEVIN: No. He was sent out---He spent some time in Cyprus.

Q: You can fill this in later.

LEVIN: Yes, yes. In any event, we really had---on that desk I would say that there wasn't a hell of a lot to do. We were getting the analyses from the consular general in Hong Kong of what was going on in China; they were our primary focus. INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research) would come in with papers and things like that but there was--you just sat there and spent a lot of time reading without any real diplomatic activity.

Q: Yes. I mean---

LEVIN: I did a year there; that was enough.

Q: And then what?

LEVIN: Then I was sent to Harvard for mid-career training.

Q: Did you have any feeling, while you were doing this Asian Communist Affairs, that there might be an opportunity to open up things?

LEVIN: No.

Q: How about the Soviet-Chinese unity or lack thereof?

LEVIN: Yes. I think that by then it was evident that this was happening. I must say that I didn't see much of a reflection in terms of a change of policy on China. There was this sense

---Now in the late '40s there was this idea that we could wean China away from the Soviet Union and then deal with China by holding open the option of having a diplomatic relationship. When the crack appeared however and when it became obvious that these two countries were at odds with each other, it certainly had no meaningful impact on what we were doing. We maintained our isolation against China. We were right in bed with Taiwan. I don't know what was happening on the Soviet side; reading some of the history there were times when---there was one time---when the Soviet Union approached us and wanted basically our okay for them, for the Soviets, to bomb Chinese nuclear facilities. We did not give our okay but in terms of what we were doing with China, I don't recall anybody coming up with the thought now is the time to strike and _____ a relationship; it was just not there. The environment was not there; the Kennedy Administration would come in with some hope of changing the policy on China; it backed off completely. They even backed off some thoughts about having a diplomatic relationship with Outer Mongolia and the China relationship. Of course against the background of vituperation on the part of the Chinese toward us, the China policy did not move. As a matter of fact, as our involvement in Vietnam began to grow, which was around this time, there was a sense that if Moscow wasn't behind it we begin to see that the Chinese are behind it. So the changes, the dramatic changes in the Sino-Soviet relationship, which began years before that and which we were very slow to see, really did not have a meaningful impact on our policy toward China at that time. Subsequently it did but not at that time.

So from '64 I went to Harvard; they sent me to Harvard to do---I had Chinese history, modern Chinese history. It was a mid-career training assignment and I spent one year there, which was a very, very---well, one academic year, was a period of time there.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: I studied under John Fairbank, under a Benjamin Schwartz, a great theoretical scholar of China, and under economist Dwight Perkins and Ed _____, some of whom subsequently became pretty good buddies of mine, but that's what I did for the year.

Q: Were you there when you might say the great famine started?

LEVIN: China?

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: That happened. That was in about '60---'59 to '60, the consequence of the failures of the Great Leap Forward. This was a tremendous beehive of ideology-driven activity where they planted crops closer together, where they carved plots out of mountainsides, where they had backyard fire and steel furnaces. The whole thing just collapsed in total economic chaos abetted by some bad weather. The consequence was famine and starvation. That was in maybe '59-60, and that was one of the---that was start to the Cultural Revolution. As a consequence of tremendous chaotic failure of the Great Leap Forward they had the other leaders of the Communist Party, to some extent, push Mao aside. He lost tremendous prestige and he lost power. He was the architect of this failed policy, but that was '59, '60.

Q: Yes, Did you find yourself continually fascinated by China or beginning to lose interest?

LEVIN: No, I was fascinated. I do recall a little sideline, at that time, 1964, maybe even '63, '64. I started to do some translation for the---what was it called? They put out--the Department of Commerce put out these translations. Oh, I forget the name. It was---

Q: Foreign Broadcast-

LEVIN: Information Service, SIS.

Q: FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service).

LEVIN: Yes. Anyway I was doing some translations. They'd send me Chinese articles and magazine and books and newspapers and you'd get X amount of money per word. Because my wife was Chinese we'd spend some time doing these translations. You'd get a newspaper article about China denouncing the United States for its surrealist policies in Panama, and you'd go through that so quickly, so easily. It was just a collection of newspaper articles. You'd make a nice buck out of that. Then one day they gave me an assignment to translate chapters of a book on ornithology by a Chinese author who was a world-known expert on ornithology writing about the birds of China. Now, you go and try and translate different parts of a bird, the worms and the insects and the technical terms for birds and how they lived and what they do. I sweated that one out; I must have made about a nickel an hour on that one.

But interestingly, interestingly years later I was talking to somebody, because the CIA was providing the money for all of this. It was then that it came out under the---like the Commerce Department or something like that. In any event, whoever was doing it, I'm not sure it was FBIS but anyway it was a translation service. I was talking with this guy

and I said why the hell this great interest in the birds of China? He explained to me that this was one of the things they were using to try and determine the extent of Chinese nuclear testing and what was going on there. They would try to get the habitat of these birds to know where they were, to and from where they flew and how. Then they would capture some birds and see whether there was any radioactivity on it. I said oh my gosh; that's really farfetched. I don't know to what degree they would do that but that's one of the reasons why I was translating this Chinese ornithology book, This volume, a scientific tome, still gives me a headache every now and then.

From Harvard I went to China---to Hong Kong in '65.

Q: At last you're actually setting foot in the mainland.

LEVIN: Excuse me?

Q: You're actually setting foot in the mainland or---Hong Kong's really not the mainland.

LEVIN: Kowloon was the mainland. Kowloon is the mainland of China, absolutely, yes.

Q: You were there from when to when?

LEVIN: From '65 to '69.

Let me come out with a few thoughts---

Q: Sure.

LEVIN: ---narrow thoughts. First of all: the China watching bit in Hong Kong from '65 to '69, looking back on it, we did pretty well. That was the time China was caught up in the Cultural Revolution. What we were doing there was poring over text, looking at the language, looking at the adjectives, the adverbs and all of this was---with the knowledge that what was coming out in the official press was supposed to be guidance for the cadres throughout the country. You got a sense of what was going on through the official press; you got the big picture most of the time. You didn't get all the details. You couldn't get into some of the personal issues involved but the big picture, I think we got it and we reported it to Washington and we did pretty well on that---

Q: We just got you going to Hong Kong.

LEVIN: Right, okay.

Q: Now you were there from when to when?

LEVIN: '65 to '69.

Q: Now were you a-?

LEVIN: Political section.

Q: Basically a China watcher.

LEVIN: China watcher; that was my function.

Q: Did you get any feel or had you heard---you're scrutinizing the documents that these people have---the cadre had written for their followers and all---

LEVIN: The leadership.

Q: The leadership. Did you ever get any feel for---that if these guys that literate or that astute they could get political hacks writing stuff they can write some---

LEVIN: You have to wade through bad grammar and clichés and hack comments. If you read it close enough on some major issues you could tell what was going on and what they were trying to do and which group was in ascendancy. You could get a broad picture of what was going on in China. Keep in mind that---whoever controlled the press---that faction, which was the one in power, was the source of editorials. It was putting out information, trying to convince the population or persuade the population that---to do things or to follow a policy course that the faction in control wanted them to carry out. So you could get that. You'd get, for example, let me give you an example. On a less contentious issue, or some of the economic issues, you would get stories, which would begin --editorials and from time to time stories; you'd get stories about the harvest. The harvest was fine. Under the thinking of Mao Zedong the peasants were then great. We are showing how strong we are, what a glorious country under this glorious ideology, etc., etc., for the first three or four paragraphs there would be just this cliché written garbage. Then in the fourth paragraph maybe, or in the fifth paragraph, you would get, after this paean of praise about what was accomplished and about the ideological drive that was behind it. Then you'd get what we would call the "however clause." The 'however clause' would be: "however, in a few localities some of the cadres neglected their work and the peasants weren't diligent," etc. Little things would be thrown in and you'd read that and you'd know: "damn it, they're having problems with their crops this year, their major crops." These little things that would come through a close reading of the--

Q: During this period, what was Mao doing? You know, we went through all sorts of things; did you have a feeling that at the top they knew what they were doing?

LEVIN: Here what was coming through. Here I had a huge argument, a dispute with the number two in the consulate general; I think what---Now in retrospect it was clear but at the time we had the sense, some of us did, of what was going on with this Cultural Revolution. There were two aspects to it. Mao had carried out this Great Leap Forward, this effort from 1958, '59 to try, through an outpouring of human endeavor, to lift China by its boot straps, to bring about cataclysmic, major economic development within a very

short time. This was when they were smelting iron in the backyard; they were melting down pots and pans and producing useless slag of poor quality iron. They were plowing plots three, four feet deep, planting plants close together, and trying to do agriculture in the most inaccessible and poorest soil conceivable. As a result of all that China suffered economic catastrophe in 1960, particularly as famine. Chinese sources, not at the time, subsequently spoke about 20 million or so. Nobody really knows the amount, but death by famine. As a result of that catastrophe Mao lost prestige--

As a result of being the architect of this catastrophe Mao was essentially pushed off to the sidelines. He lost prestige; he lost power. He was sidelined and the effort was by the more orthodox members of the leadership, by people like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, to bring China back into a more orthodox communist form, to get away from this romantic, idealistic effort to jumpstart China into a major economic power. Whatever the Cultural Revolution was then in 1966, I think it's pretty clear it was motivated by two things. It was Mao trying to regain power by appealing to the youth in China, by setting the younger people against the party structure by exploiting his charismatic standing as sort of a George Washington of the People's Republic of China, the founder of the People's Republic of China, the man who had led China through the war against Japan and was successful in the civil war against the Kuomintang. He was appealing or gathering, calling on the youth to overthrow this party structure, this structure that in a sense--

Q: Was this apparent in retrospect or were you observers? Was somebody saying hey wait, something really is going on here?

LEVIN: We caught it in 1966 because it was broadcast through the nation by--again, in some of the press. You had these stories about how Mao felt that he was being treated but somebody published a satire in the Chinese way using an example from ancient history as a means of disparaging Mao. This was about 1962, '63, and then about '66, when the Cultural Revolution started, one of the first opening salvos was a criticism of this article criticizing Mao. It just---We got it from about 1966 when it first came out because the target was a Chinese puppet the Chinese used. We were getting the material then. We sensed, right at the beginning, that something major was going on in China. Mao was trying to use his charisma to mobilize the youth against the traditional party structure, and secondly, there was this sense on the part of Mao that a lot of the old Chinese habits were returning, that the officials were living too sumptuously, that there was a tendency toward favoritism and that the Chinese habits and practices of government and social interaction were beginning to reappear. He was out to stop this kind of revisionism, this return to old practices, so it was a combination of his idealistic view of the Chinese society but more importantly an effort to regain power. It just tore the country apart.

Q: Well-

LEVIN: And we---I think we got it; we got it. Now, you couldn't tell from day to day who was up, who was down and things of that sort but we got the broad picture of the struggle that was going on, who was in the ascendancy, and how much turmoil and chaos. There was this---The argument that I had with the front office when the front office was

this one fellow whom they brought in from academia, a guy by the name of Alan Whiting, who was---

Q: He was consul general wasn't he?

LEVIN: No, he was deputy; he was deputy.

Q: But he became quite a figure in the---

LEVIN: For a while, for a while but then he was wrong; he was wrong on the Cultural Revolution.

Q: Where was he coming from?

LEVIN: He was sitting there and saying what a clever tactician Mao was and he's putting up pins; there was a disturbance in this town, a disturbance in this city. He was just linking it all together and seeing this as the work of a brilliant political tactician maneuvering and carrying it out in a very organized and meaningful way. By that time I was stoutly maintaining that the whole thing is out of control, that forces had been unleashed that were just carrying China into turmoil and that the situation was chaotic. It was. Actually it was happening. Finally one of the ways that the Cultural Revolution was reined in was that the army began to increasingly take over control throughout China from 1967 on. The army---Because army units were being split apart, there was fighting within the army. There were areas of China---this we learned subsequently on some of my trips to China in the late '70s, early '80s, speaking to some of the relatives of my wife---the army units were fighting each other with artillery, with tanks; the only thing missing was with the air power. So we got it. After a while you---the result of this dispute, this very intense dispute I had with this fellow was when I---I think I mentioned this earlier---when I was going on home leave my immediate boss, the head of the political section, assured me that I would get a sterling---

Q: Who was the head of the political section?

LEVIN: A guy who sadly died a few months ago, Dick Nethercut, Richard Nethercut. Very, oh, a wonderful man; he was a gentleman. He was an absolutely sterling character, but whatever he wrote about me was overridden by the number two. When I came back from leave I said, "oh, my God". I went up to the office and I just stood in this guy's office and really vented my anger. In any event it held me back a couple of years, but one of the results was that when a team of inspectors came down and went into this thing, this Whiting, who was supposed to take over the consulate general when Ed Rice left, was shunted aside and then they---then not too long thereafter he was out of the U.S. Government. So he got heard; I got heard.

Q: It's one of the things that I've noticed in my interviews and all, particularly those who, around Kissinger's time, who went and opened China, whatever you want to call it, this feeling of Mao was such a great man. Being able to see Mao they thought---you could

just feel the awe and I kept saying, "This guy's a monster." It was catching, this idea that he was so clever.

LEVIN: That's right, right, right. He and Zhou Enlai and Kissinger worshipped almost the---The context was that China was the forbidden land for so many decades. It was almost like---such a reversal of our policy. This was a person whom we only saw as a distant figure and finally we've been allowed in his august presence. It carried them away; it carried them away when, lord it was like almost like going to see the Dalai Lama, visiting the holy guru. I agree with you, yes.

But in any event, the four years of China watching were---other than a bump in my career----were fascinating.

Q: Okay, I want to talk a little more about the China watchers.

LEVIN: Yes.

Q: Now, in the first place, how were you getting your information? How were you sitting? Was it collegial or did you have bits of the action? How did this work?

LEVIN: I was basically doing the foreign policy aspect, Chinese international relations, but also did some on domestic politics. It worked---We had about four or five people in the heart of our China watching group in the political section. It was very, extremely collegial and there were some wonderful people. Nick Platt was with me at the time. I'm trying to think of some of the other names but Nick stands out. We were together; we sat around; we threw out ideas; we brought items to each other's attention. It was wonderfully collegial and it worked fairly well.

Q: Were you able to talk to your French or British colleagues?

LEVIN: Oh yes.

Q: Or Yugoslav colleagues?

LEVIN: The British, the British, the British, close reliance, close cooperation with the British yes, we were close to the British. The others: no other country at the time was really involved in the very serious--- For no particular reason the Norwegian---the Norwegian consulate general must have been about two or three people. They had one fellow there who was extremely interested in China and was a very perceptive observer of China so I saw a lot of him; we got together and talked things over.

We also had a very active crew of journalists there, some very impressive journalists. Stan Karnow might have been with Time magazine at the time. Stan subsequently ended up with The Washington Post. He wrote "the" book on Vietnam and also did a wonderful book on the U.S. and the Philippines. We had The New York Times there; first Sy Kopping and then Bernie Kalb came out. And The New Yorker, Bob Chaplen was there

and these journalists, we saw a lot of them. We played poker; there was a regular poker game. It was less an exchange of ideas with the journalists than their tapping our knowledge because we were following it much more closely than they were; they had responsibility concerning Vietnam and the war.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: There was lively exchange with the British, with this Norwegian fellow, with journalists, and among ourselves. It was close---

Q: Who was the consul general when you were there?

LEVIN: Ed Rice, Ed Rice. Ed had been involved in Chinese affairs in the '40s, but could not get confirmation, or the Department thought he could not get confirmation, as an ambassador because of his association with John Davies---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: That whole group was pilloried so he ended up as consul general in Hong Kong. He was a good man. I felt let down that he didn't come to my assistance and defense but he was---

Q: Why didn't he?

LEVIN: I don't know.

Q: Was he on the side that Mao was not the clever manipulator or---?

LEVIN: I was accused in a written report that I disregarded the wishes of the front office and was not a team player--something along those lines, which I wore as a badge of honor. In any event, he did not come to my defense and I was disappointed by that. He was one of the---. This was 1965; I'd been in the Foreign Service. I'd gone through two ambassadors: one in Taiwan from '54 to '56, one in Indonesia from '60 to '63, and I really didn't have too much respect for either of them. Ed Rice, however, was a man of some substance; even though I felt he let me down I still feel that he was a man of---whom I could look up to and respect.

I want to bring you an example of what we were doing. In the 1960s-maybe '65 or '66, there was a long article by Lin Biao on--

Q: He was minister of defense, wasn't he?

LEVIN: Head of the armed services, minister of defense, right.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: This was on the Vietnam situation. I remember it was a very lengthy article, reading it, analyzing it and sending back to Washington the analysis that Lin Biao was advocating that the countryside in Vietnam---he was telling the Vietnamese that the countryside should surround the cities. He went on in that people's war mode of carrying out this effort to take over Vietnam. What was apparent to me and what I sent into Washington was that he was doing what he was urging that the Vietnamese to be very cautious doing. In carrying out this effort to reunify Vietnam, they should proceed under a very gradual basis and of course giving them the model of how the Chinese, through people's war, gradually encircled the cities and arguing, in effect, that they not get engaged in large scale battles with the U.S. forces. Don't send regular army units. It was a call for caution because the Chinese did not want to get involved with the United States over Vietnam. They had sent in anti-aircraft units; they had provided some degree of military support, supplies, etc., but the last thing they wanted was a reprise of the Korean War, the---somehow being forced to actually come in militarily. They didn't want an adventure or a policy among the Vietnamese that could lead China into a conflict with the United States over Vietnam. This was the analysis and I think there's no doubt about it. What really struck me and which in a sense was epitomized by the recklessness and failure to take reality into account because we were so seized by ideology from the United States. This Lin Biao piece was seized upon by Walt Rostow and others, this hawk faction of the Vietnam War as evidence of China's Mein Kampf plans for conquering the region. It was seen as completely contrary to what was intended as a call for caution because China didn't want this thing to expand to its own borders. It was seized, however, by Rostow and the people who were the advocates of American---of large scale American intervention in Vietnam as evidence that what was going on in Vietnam was really a part of China's grand plan to communize the region, if not the world. This was the atmosphere we were operating in.

Q: Were you knowledgeable or able to pick up the basic animosity between the Vietnamese, I mean the communist---

LEVIN: Absolutely.

Q: ---and China?

LEVIN: Absolutely. In 1965, mind you this is before we really got involved in a large way, there was---I remember this clearly as---in September of 1965 it was Vietnam National Day, Democratic Republic of Vietnam, DRV, North Vietnam National Day. On National Day these communist countries would send greetings and the Chinese greeting to the Vietnamese went something along the lines of warm friendship, you know, etc., etc., these strings of clichés. Well, as I was saying, the techniques of China watching are that you want to pay close attention to the adjectives used. I went back and I compared the greeting of '65 with the greeting of previous years and what came out was instead of warmest or the highest form of the adjective. This was restraint; it was only warm. It was more than that but they weren't--- the greeting in '65 was not as enthusiastic and not as full-blown as previous greetings. From that I sent in a cable saying that there are differences between China and Vietnam and one of the differences was the fact that the

Chinese were worried that this thing could expand into a war between China and the United States.

The differences would go back to 1954 when the Chinese forced upon the North Vietnamese this Geneva Agreement, which divided the country. The promise of course was that elections would then be held. The North Vietnamese sullenly and reluctantly accepted this compromise in the belief that with the elections they would be---through democratic means---they'd be able to reunify the country and that never happened. There had always been some degree of tension, not to speak of the historical background between these two countries.

In any event, in '65 bingo!, there it was. I wrote that cable; it's probably in the archives and if I had it I'd frame it. In addition to that, as this Cultural Revolution went on, the railroads in China were in such chaotic shape the students, young people were jumping on to trains, traveling back and forth from one city to another city, exchanging revolutionary experiences. Everything was falling apart in China at the time. As a result of this chaos shipments of war materials that the Soviets supplied that were being sent through China into Vietnam were being delayed and _____. This aroused the ire of the North Vietnamese and the ire of the Soviets as well. By then the Chinese and Soviet split was there for everyone to see. That contributed to these major differences between China and Vietnam and yet for years we went on to speak of getting on in terms of China's efforts to communize the region with the Vietnamese as the handmaidens of the Chinese---

Q: Did you feel that you were part of an expert observation point, seeing something in China that was being almost completely discarded by the policymakers in Washington?

LEVIN: On the Vietnam issue, yes, yes. The differences between China and Vietnam. Yes, that was just not---not cranked into our view of Vietnam and the whole policy issue. That was not cranked in.

Q: What about China and the Soviets at this time? You were looking at the foreign policy. How stood that relationship?

LEVIN: Oh, it was frigid; it was 1967. I believe it was, maybe. There were clashes, armed clashes over an island on the Ussuri River, the boundary between China and the Soviet Union, between Siberia and Manchuria, in particular the province of Heilongjiang.

Q: These were the Ussuri River clashes?

LEVIN: Yes, yes. Was it the Ussuri River or the Amur? The dispute was over an island with each one claiming that that particular island was within their boundary. They disputed over where the boundary line on the river should be to the point where there were armed clashes. There was one large-scale clash where the Chinese ambushed a Soviet patrol and out of all of this the Chinese issued an ultimatum that Soviet troops would have to be removed. They gave a specific time and date. I was sitting there in

Hong Kong; I mean, an ultimatum. That's the ultimate form of diplomatic exchange. You don't do this because the assumption is we're going to attack. There's going to be a war. So we're sitting and waiting. The time comes and we are just trying to figure out what the heck---how far the Chinese are going to go with this thing. As the time expires the Chinese, as only the Chinese can do, issued another ultimatum. You can't have two ultimatums, by definition; with that we realized that what we were seeing was mostly rhetoric and there certainly wouldn't be large-scale actions. The relationship was brutal and it was---the rift between the two was absolutely obvious. It took a while for the U.S. government and certainly for the fervent anti-communists in American society to accept the fact of the Sino-Soviet dispute. For a number of years some of the more, shall we say, dogmatic of the anti-communist camp saw this really as a trick by the Chinese and the Russians to lull us into complacency or something to that effect, which of course was sheer nonsense, but the rift was heaven.

Interestingly, here again, was the type of China watching we did. I might have spoken about this earlier but in 1967, as a consequence of the Cultural Revolution, there were groups within Hong Kong, the local communist party apparatus, and the China News Agency. The Agency had a large bureau there and various Chinese trading companies, which were in Hong Kong, set out to prove their revolutionary ardor by mounting a series of demonstrations in China---in Hong Kong. These were accompanied by scattered acts of violence. What's interesting was that in one of these, one of the larger demonstrations, you had a march of several thousand people going right past our consulate general, ignoring us, shouting anti-British slogans, shouting anti-Soviet slogans and not paying us the slightest attention. With that I sent a cable back to Washington saying that this gives evidence that the Russians have replaced us as the number one enemy of China. And that was actually the case. That was, shall we say, the first early signs or the prelude to this Chinese willingness to go along with rapprochement with the United States as a means to achieve some balance against the Soviet Union. There it was; we were no longer the prime enemy; it was the Soviets.

Q: Burt, in a way did you all feel that you were voices shouting in the wilderness, that the political types back in Washington weren't really paying much attention to you?

LEVIN: Certainly on the Vietnam issue, yes, yes. The effort to show that China really was just, in a sense, a witness rather than a motivator, rather than a moving force, on what was going on in Vietnam, yes, that was basically spitting into the wind. On other issues, for example, the Cultural Revolution was so zany and so self-destructive, and it was accompanied or even preceded by these rhetorical Chinese diatribes against the United States. This talk about China supporting the revolutionary movements in the world was empty. Then you had little splits in the communist parties of, you name it, it will happen, in countries, European countries, Latin American countries. There was this group back in the United States, these fervent anti-communists who certainly controlled Vietnamese policy. The pro-Taiwan adherence group had seen China as demons and monsters and their views were in their mind confirmed by this outrageous rhetoric and these boasts of Chinese revolutionary outreach.

What I remember stating in writing back was that this was just sheer rhetoric. The Chinese were very cautious in their foreign policy. They didn't want to get involved with the United States on the Vietnam issue. The last thing they wanted was a military confrontation. Some of it was just an effort to persuade their own people of how important China was, that just as Taiwan was going crazy with these anti-communist forces some Lithuanian bishop in exile from Lithuania would come out as a champion of the anti-communist cause. Then Taiwan set up this worldwide anti-communist league or whatever. Here was China, in a sense the reverse, and all this was less a reflection of China's power and influence and more an effort to convince their own people how important China was, how much the peoples of the world were paying attention to them. If you took all of this seriously you were misreading reality. That's what we were reporting back to Washington, and that really didn't get the type of attention and play that it should have gotten: that China was pursuing a very cautious foreign policy.

Q: Had the real outrages of the Cultural Revolution taken places while you were in Hong Kong or was that a little later?

LEVIN: No, it was while I was in Hong Kong. By the time I left Hong Kong the Cultural Revolution has pretty much been brought under control.

Q: You left what year?

LEVIN: Nineteen sixty-nine.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: You had the army coming to power. That was the only force then that could really bring order into the society, and the army did.

Q: How about in your section, how about the Chinese, the Hong Kong citizens; what sort of role were they playing with you all?

LEVIN: Oh they were following the press. We had a whole---very major operation off in another building translating the Chinese press into English, providing very important, major source material for scholars back in the United States. We had the survey of the China mainland press, (SCMP), which went on for years and years. We had the survey of Chinese mainland magazines and we were putting that out on a regular basis. This was all done by locals. We were subsidizing union research, which was comprised of a number of Chinese intellectuals residing in Hong Kong through the CIA. They were doing analysis on China and plus it was used as a center for academics visiting Hong Kong to do research on China. We were close to that.

Then we had our own little group of locals with whom we would consult; we'd bounce off ideas; we get their views and they would bring articles and items to our attention. They were part of the process, and in those days there wasn't that rigid divide between the locals and the American component of the embassies that is now. We always paid

attention to security issues but it wasn't this, what I gathered to be this much, much greater isolation between the American component of an embassy and the locals. It was a close, cooperative working relationship. We had a number of---a couple---a few---locals who would come over who had worked in our embassy in Nanking and some of our other consulates on mainland China. They came out as refugees and we were using them in Hong Kong. So it was a good relationship, a close relationship.

Q: Were you able to almost bypass the system? There was a tremendous flow of visitors going essentially to Vietnam. I'm talking about political types, congressmen, and others; would they stop by? Could you get to them or were they pretty much being absorbed by the upper echelon and you weren't able to get your accounts out?

LEVIN: No, at that time I only had---every now and then we had patrol office duty with these CODELs (Congressional Delegations) but it was not---I don't have a sense that we played a major role. They were going to Vietnam; that was their focus and they'd come to Hong Kong to do some shopping as a break or a holiday. Later on, when I was consul general, and when the Hong Kong issue began to---the whole question in 1997---that was when we had CODEL after CODEL. I had direct contact with them and did a lot of working and briefing and talking with them; that was in the '80s.

Q: During this time, did you feel somewhat isolated from the people who were calling the shots back in Washington?

LEVIN: Certainly yes, certainly on Vietnam. We didn't have much influence with our views on Vietnam and to a lesser extent on China. I do think we might have had some influence in easing off this effort to pick rhetoric as reality when it came to China. I'm not sure how much of an influence we had but certainly it must have had some and---

Maybe it is a good time now to lean back and give you some general thoughts I had, and this came out---When I was leaving Asia, after I retired from the Foreign Service, I did about six or seven years, maybe four or five years, in setting up an Asia Society office. I was leaving Hong Kong to go back to the United States in 1996, and there was a going away dinner for me. The Asia Society people held a dinner for me and at the end of the dinner they called on me to say a few words. I got up there and without knowing that I was going to speak I summed up my 50 years in Asia. I went off about an hour and a half---

Q: God.

LEVIN: A few words. They taped this and from that a transcript was run off. Essentially what I said was that during these 50 years the United States had gotten the dynamic of what was moving Asia, the reality of the Asian scene, completely wrong. By that I meant that we had seen communism as the major force and our major problem. Our whole policy in Asia, most of it was to contain communism, to build up anti-communist alliances; everything was in terms of a tenant policy of containment of communism. The reality of what was moving Asia at this time was nationalism. If you looked at the major

problems we had in Asia: Korea, Vietnam, China-Taiwan, three divided nations, the moving force was nationalism to reunify. Now each one of these countries had its own particular ideology but that ideology was not strong enough to overcome historical nationalistic antagonisms. Once we got out of Vietnam---we were in Vietnam to contain China; keep that in mind. When we first went in we were going to contain China. In 1966 China was ripping itself apart and was its own greatest enemy and threat to its own existence. Here we were still in Vietnam talking about containing China, China, China. This so-called common ideology was not deep enough, was not meaningful enough, to overcome these nationalistic and communistic urges of China and Vietnam. When we got out of Vietnam in '75, within two years China and Vietnam were at war with each other. I mean it was a pretty large-scale conflict. We got it all wrong and our major contribution---

You look at Asia and it's certainly---Now communism is a spent force, this huge economic bump. What we did, what we did on the positive side without really doing it as a conscious policy, was we contributed to Asia's resurgence and growth and all that; we opened our markets to Asia; we provided the most lucrative markets to the goods of Asia; we encouraged a number of Asian countries to develop industries, and put up protective barriers around themselves. We did that in the name of anti-communism; we wanted the economic development as a means of inoculating the people against communism, providing this economy of material wellbeing. We thought this would---but how it really worked is the prosperity of the United States and the openness of our market was a moving force in creating this Asia, one that is vastly transformed from what it once was. All this talk about anti-communism and carrying out covert operations in Indonesia to overthrow a government, which was coming close to communism, if there had been communism in Indonesia it would have been Indonesian communism. It would have had nothing to do with China because the Indonesians don't like the Chinese. We got it all wrong and this was the theme of---

Q: Was this that apparent to you while you were in Hong Kong as a China watcher or was this something that you really saw developing as an observer over time?

LEVIN: It was apparent to me as a China watcher. Before I even got to Hong Kong, I sat at the feet in Washington of a man I respected greatly, a man by the name of Paul Kattenberg. He headed the Vietnam desk at the time, and felt that what was going on in Vietnam had precious little to do with China. That to me was clear even though we, particularly Walter Rostow and people around him, kept prattling about the revolutionary ideology of China, the danger of China, that---Now the rest of it is clear cut as I just pronounced it---no, that was when I sat back and thought about it. It was kind of being very---I had that feeling by the 1980s or so but that we--our whole approach. We missed the dynamic of what was moving Asia. It was nationalist, not ideology, not communism and that---I mean, we transformed---First it was the Soviets bent on world domination and China was a pawn of the Soviets; then it was the Chinese after the Sino-Soviets but now it's the Chinese bent on world domination. Then the Vietnamese War was just a war by proxy and the Chinese revolutionary forces. If they won in Vietnam this whole thing would spread across the globe and there'd be wars of national liberation throughout the

globe. America would be surrounded by a hostile communist revolution and we're all beholden to China. That's what we were doing and that was such nonsense.

Q: Well---

LEVIN: I did make that point when I was back in Washington. When was this? Let me see; about '70s---I think I mentioned this once when Chou En-lai was going to visit Africa. The African bureau was just seeing this apocalypse in that Chou En-lai going to Africa, and that Africa was going to be lost to Chinese communists. In a meeting with the bureau I told them they were off their rockers. Of course this produced consternation; they thought I was crazy. In the '70s some of this was _____. It is kind of sad because if you look up our policy today, again everything we put is in global terms. There was a time during the Bush Administration when he was talking about this---Islamic fundamentalism trying to conquer the world, the caliphate, world domination. Do you recall that line coming out? Even now terrorism is put in terms of this global movement. We can't seem to deal with reality in given places; we have to put it in a world context and there we are trying to shape---

Q: Yes. One looks at the Islamic side of things those that are the fundamentalists are trying to expel the West from their particular areas, rather than take over other areas.

LEVIN: Absolutely. The factionalism that permeates these movements has got to be---you can't conceive of these fundamentalists really unifying anything. They're just rent by tribal, ethnic and other different---sheer power differences. It can't be a unifying force. They are more prone to factionalism than we are, that's for sure.

Q: You were the foreign affairs watcher; were you seeing any or were you charged with seeing signs of the communist, the Chinese communists, trying to spread, particularly into Indonesia. During the time you were there you had essentially the Sukarno/Suharto fight and all. What was happening? How did you view China, Mainland China and Indonesia?

LEVIN: At that time I was in Jakarta. This was before Sukarno's overthrow. I was there from '60 to '63 and Sukarno was in power throughout those three years. We viewed with alarm the PKI, Sukarno's playing footsy with Beijing, neutralism, the conference, which was before I got there, this whole bent of Sukarno cozying up to the Chinese, cozying up to the Soviets and the growth of power of the PKI. I think at the time I sent in a dispatch about the PKI. The PKI had undergone a purge and the once---when the PKI were being purged, this was in the early '60s, and it was those members of the PKI who had an ethnic Chinese background. In other words, the overseas Chinese were living in Indonesia; some of them who were there for many generations were still basically having the Chinese ethnic connection. So this purge rid the PKI of its leadership ranks of ethnic Chinese. I remember commenting on it, that this was nationalism at work within the PKI, the triumph of the Indonesian as a part of the party. I don't know if I've spelled it out in particular that in effect, you were dealing with a homegrown party and it should be

viewed in that context. I don't know if I went that far but I do remember pointing out that they were getting rid of the Chinese component.

Q: While you were in Hong Kong, did you see signs of mainland communists trying to re-exert authority or what have you in Indonesia or elsewhere, in Africa, Thailand, anywhere? What were they up to?

LEVIN: Only in the sense of crowing about some obscure faction of a Thai communist party, or a Mozambique communist party that had broken apart. There was a sliver of a faction that identified with Beijing and they probably were at least subsidizing it and a lot of crowing about that but---

Q: This is in Thailand?

LEVIN: This was all over the world. In Latin America there was---

Q: So there really wasn't any particular movement or interest in expanding?

LEVIN: They proclaimed rhetorically how they had friends all over the world. They would highlight a visit by some obscure guy from some Peruvian this people's party or from Libya, that people's party. Washington would get alarmed by that and the CIA would try and find out what the hell was going on. We took it all so seriously and it was just rhetorical "b.s." They were just trying to comfort themselves and particularly impress their own people of what an important force China was in the revolutionary movement, or that people were beholden to China and looked on China as this great revolutionary power. It was self-comfort and little else. Too many of us back in Washington took it far too seriously.

Q: This is a major consideration and when you do that you have to build up your---

LEVIN: Your bureaucracy.

Q: --- your adversary.

LEVIN: That's right. And your bureaucracy.

Q: I was looking at a column in The Washington Post today and they're talking about China becoming the number two economic power. It also pointed out that the average income in China was about the equivalent of that of an Albanian.

LEVIN: That's _____.

Q: Yes. They're going through the normal leap forward by working on infrastructure and all the things. There's nothing particularly wrong coming out; there's no particular innovation or anything else of that nature.

LEVIN: Look

Q: You know---

LEVIN: It's been 20 years or so the Japanese were going to eat our economic _____.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: The Japanese were buying up Rockefeller Center. Our whole country would be dominated by the Japanese. The Japanese fell flat on their faces. We're beginning to join them.

Q: Looking at it as a practical thing the Chinese are even--- the Japanese were well dominated by these major concerns which sort of stifle innovation. The Chinese with the party has to be stifling the hell out of innovation.

LEVIN: The Chinese or the Japanese are conformists and conformists to a degree that I think are much more so than the Chinese. When the Chinese feel like there's a dominant power there that wants them to do something, they'll conform. When that power is loosened, and it has been loosened in China, the Chinese are individualistic to an extent far beyond that of Americans and certainly well beyond the Japanese. There is this innovative force in China but what people fail to realize is there's still the stifling bureaucracy. It's not so much ideology; there's still a bureaucracy; there's still corruption. The thing facing China in the future is an aging population, a very rapidly aging population. I recall that right now there are about six people of working age supporting one person of retirement age. In about 30 years that ratio is going to be reduced to two to one. They're going to have an enormous burden, an aging population, and that's going to create some problems for them. I don't at all buy into this image of China and this great mind on the development to the point where it relegates us to a Third World status.

Q: Oh no---

LEVIN: We can do it; we can screw it up. Our policy, that's for sure.

Q: And certainly our policy---I could go on at a great rate.

Burt, I think this is probably a good place to stop.

Q: Today is the 1st of September 2010, an interview with Burt Levin.

Burt, you left in '69, Hong Kong, and would you take it from there?

LEVIN: Okay. Went back to Washington and was given orders to go to Cochabamba, Bolivia.

Q: I might point out for those that aren't familiar, Henry Kissinger was appalled at how--he went to Latin America and how they didn't know about NATO issues. He felt we ought to mix assignments up and so there was what was called the GLOP, the G-L-O-P Program; I'm not sure what it stands for except it had global outlook---

LEVIN: Program. Global Outlook Program.

Q: ---Program. The idea was to get people more familiar with other places.

Okay, go ahead from there.

LEVIN: We wanted generalists, people who would know everything about everybody. So I got these orders to go to Cochabamba. I didn't know where Cochabamba was. It sounded like one of these dance numbers from a Carmen Miranda---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: ---movie that missed called *Cochabamba*. After doing some reading up on it, and more importantly, which always emphasized the most attractive aspects, I was anxious to go; it sounded wonderful.

Q: Yes, people say it's a real---a sitting in the middle of a---you have your own hacienda and you sit around and people bring you the Bolivian equivalent of a mint julep.

LEVIN: It was the second largest city in Bolivia; it was down from the high mountains. It was on a flat delta. The weather was described as eternal spring, great walks, and great trout fishing. It had a vibrant community of exiles from Germany and Europe, who had a rich culture, and on and on. After a little while I was beginning to look forward to it. Not being able to speak a word of Spanish was kind of a handicap, but I felt what the heck. Then about two weeks before I was scheduled to leave for Cochabamba my orders changed and I went back to Taiwan for the third time as a Chinese language officer.

Q: Okay. You were in Taiwan from when to when?

LEVIN: Sixty-nine to '73. There's a little interesting aspect to that because, as we talked earlier, I married a Chinese national. Of course I had to get permission for all of that. One of the conditions when I was granted---I was told that I would never be sent back to the post where my---to my wife's native land because of the possibility of conflict of interest. So, boom. That was swept aside and there I was going back to Taiwan. She was not from Taiwan but Taiwan was China and she was Chinese. Anyway we went to Taiwan for four years.

Q: What was the situation in Taiwan in '69?

LEVIN: Our policy was just frozen: this Taiwan was the sole, legitimate government of all of China. We worked year in, year out at the United Nations to preserve the China seat

for Taiwan. It was just a policy that was totally at variance with reality because of the China mainland, though by then maybe then 700, 800 million Chinese at that time were totally controlled by the communist government, by the PRC. We were fooling around with this fiction and certainly in my mind looking like fools in this effort to twist arms to get this fiction of Taiwan as the only government accepted by the UN year in, year out. I just thought it was evidence of the strength of the Taiwan lobby in the United States. The cowardice of people who should have known better than to fight this still lingering anti-communist sentiment in America was just a total denial of reality.

Q: We often get Washington centered. There was another side to it; you had a regime in China that at that time, do you think it had any feeling towards looking opening to us?

LEVIN: You had a regime in China that was tearing the country apart, whose policies were promoting chaos, who was so focused and preoccupied with the internal chaos that to regard it as an aggressive, major threat was misleading. I never felt that we should go in there and throw our arms around this regime but just that we should work in a way which (1) recognizes the reality that China was controlled by another regime and (2) try to release the frictions and the misunderstandings that resulted from our rather unrealistic view of the situation. We should look in terms of the future and try to work out some kind of an arrangement or a relationship with this huge country which would mitigate the possibility of stumbling into conflict. We should embrace it as one of the great governments of the world, just to deal with reality. Change was absent; we were still wedded to this policy of the 1950s.

Q: Was this idea that you had, and quite frankly I had and other people I talked to had; right from the beginning I never bought the idea that you don't recognize China, but we've learned to live with it. Was this something that was knocked about over the coffee table or something?

LEVIN: Oh sure, there were like-minded people in the embassy. There were people such as the DCM, Bill Gleysteen, who had a long background in China, came from one of these missionary families. There were sensible people. The ambassador was of the old school, very firmly wedded to the---

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LEVIN: Walter McConaughy.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: Walter McConaughy, partly of the strong anti-communist sentiment, partly this failing that's so prevalent in our Foreign Service, that as ambassador to Country X, no matter what the country, he identifies with the interests of Country X. The goal was to promote a good relationship. The way you promote that relationship is you become a strong advocate of the needs and interests and desires of the country you're stationed in. This to me is not the way to run an ambassadorial assignment, but he was of that school.

What I did when I was assigned to the political section was my job in the political section. The thing that I'm very proud of was that after about six months in the political section I sat down and I wrote a very long dispatch in those days. What I did then was to compare Taiwan of 1969 to the Taiwan that I left in 1956, citing the changes that had taken place in the intervening 13 years. Obviously these changes were a very significant amount of economic development and improvement in the standard of living of the people of Taiwan.

The point that I made was that these transformations of Taiwan---You see, the argument has been consistently advanced by those who were staunch supporters of Chiang Kai-shek and the whole idea of the present policy and the impossibility of interfering and everything---the idea had been pushed forward and it became part of the conventional wisdom that if we were in any way to mollify or adjust our policy on the China issue that it would result in very serious consequences on Taiwan. It would undermine the legitimacy of the Taiwan government; it would create morale problems among the mainlanders who were running Taiwan. It would present us with very difficult problems on Taiwan.

My paper argued that (1) the people now running Taiwan enjoyed a life that was far better, more secure, materially much better off; the intellectuals, the academicians, the businessmen, had a degree of stability on Taiwan that they never knew on the mainland, that (2) they were perfectly content and now even proud of their accomplishments on Taiwan and that (3) this idea that their whole future and fate rested on continuing this claim to mainland China and to recognize and to be recognized as the legitimate government of China, had no validity. This question of the legitimacy of the government, which claimed to be the government of all China, would be threatened if we, the United States, moved away from that concept, was just sheer nonsense. Power in Taiwan rested on control of the military and law enforcement. No one on Taiwan was going to go up to the government and try to overthrow it just because it no longer could claim to be the government of all of China. It was a government that had a monopoly of power in all forms and no one was going to challenge that.

The point that I made was that, if there were changes in Taiwan and its status in the UN, it would have less of an impact on attitudes in Taiwan, particularly about the power structure and the elite. That it would have far less of an impact than if we were in any way to restrict our market to Taiwan. The Taiwan market saw itself as an economic success and the most important thing to Taiwan was continued access to the American market and continued economic development. I said that no matter what happened in terms of Taiwan's international status, as long as they felt they had access to American markets and the American security guarantee was still in place the whole issue of Taiwan's international status, and the possible repercussions in the domestic situation, had just changed drastically and no longer was a relevant thing. That paper produced a very lovely comment from Marshall Green, who was assistant secretary. I cherished it. I think it had---certainly it said probably that a lot of people were thinking what the paper

said. It was the perspective of the changes that had taken place, coming back after 13 years. That was a paper that I have a lot of pride in.

Another thing, at the time when I was a political officer, you began to get the stirrings in the Taiwan community. These Chinese Taiwanese originally came from (_____) and other parts of China. They'd been ruled by Japan for 50 years. There was a veneer certainly among the urban people, among the educated. They knew Japanese culture and they spoke Japanese. They were educated in Japanese schools. All their customs and their native language, their traditions and everything were Chinese. These people had been shut out of political power; political power was the monopoly of the mainlander refugees who came to Taiwan. The friction and the unhappiness of the Taiwanese with the imposition of the harsh authoritarian rule and, at that time in 1947, the incompetent mainland rule over Taiwanese who, while second-class citizens under the Japanese, nevertheless enjoyed what was good government. This produced an uprising in 1947, which was put down rather bloodily by the mainlanders and their troops. So there was a lot of lingering friction and animosity on the part of the Taiwanese, and the desire for greater political representation. Economically they were doing all right and that economic growth of the community was being translated into some initial demands for greater Taiwanese political participation. This was watched like a hawk by a government that was still strongly autocratic with a strong dictatorship.

I began, as part of my duties in the embassy, to meet with some of these Taiwanese, talk to some of these Taiwanese. I earned the suspicion of the ruling government because of my association with the Taiwanese. This resulted in the creation in front of my house, basically and obtrusively, maybe 100 feet to the diagonal of my front door, an observation post of intelligence agents of the Taiwan government, of the KMT government. The post consisted of a Jeep station wagon that had no motor in it. It was just a place where the agents could sit and watch and relax. They watched my house but it soon developed into a situation where it was so obvious and it was---that when my wife and I would leave the house with the kids and our domestic servants would be taking the day off, we'd go to these police and tell them, "Look, nobody is in the house, so please keep an extra close eye on what's going on there." These agents would play with my kids. It was all in a very Chinese attitude to the whole thing, being watched, which they did---

Q: Why were they concerned with us? Because our policy was the Kuomintang policy, basically, of status quo?

LEVIN: They always, they always feared that in our deep interest in human rights and efforts to promote democracy that we were trying to encourage the growth of Taiwanese political power and some form of opposition to this one-party rule; that was their great concern.

Q: We were, weren't we? I mean---

LEVIN: Not in a very active sense. What we were basically trying to do was find out to what extent was the Taiwanese dissatisfaction with this monopoly of political rule by the mainlanders. To what extent did they organize it, how far were they going to carry it, how far would the mainlanders allow them to go forward? It's this whole question of human rights, of a more open political system. We were watching it; we weren't deeply involved in trying to promote it. Just showing the degree of sympathy for the plight of the Taiwanese who, though a huge majority of the population and though a very major economic force on the island, yet they were without any political rights.

Q: This is, as anything in Asia, a complicated game. One, we wanted to make it difficult for mainland China, whatever, however we could; two, we wanted to support the idea of eventually the Chiang Kai-shek regime-type going back to China. At the same time we undercutting the Chiang Kai-shek regime by promoting---I mean, we had to know that eventually the people on Formosa or Taiwan would want to get out from under the mainland Chinese rule, whoever it was.

LEVIN: Right, but we were not supporting the restoration of Chiang Kai-shek's mainland of China. I think that by the 1950s it became evident that there was no hope for this government to get back into China. Absent a huge American military involvement, this government was not going to go back to China. It was never part of U.S. policy to work toward the restoration of the government on Taiwan as the government of China. What we were doing was essentially keeping that government and people on Taiwan out of the clutches, as we saw it, of the communists, of the PRC. That essentially was the policy and that policy worried China, which saw us moving toward the creation of an independent Taiwan. One of the great obstacles in moving in that direction was the insistence on the part of the KMT government that there was one China and unless it agreed completely with the PRC that Taiwan was part of China. The great argument there was which government was the government of China. So we didn't move very far in the direction of Taiwan independence and now we're in no way supporters of Taiwan.

Q: How did we feel; I mean what was your view of the KMT types who were running the government? Were they getting old? Were they being replaced or what was happening?

LEVIN: Sure, there were whole packs of _____ and this piece that I wrote, the one I just described to you, spoke about the evolution that was taking place on the island of Taiwan. In the 1950s when I first got there and for over a decade or almost two decades, the mainlanders who came over from China, you could divide them roughly into two groups; one was the military and the intelligence apparatus, the heart of the Chiang Kai-shek government. These basically were military men who had very little understanding of economics. Their political approach was: you tell people what to do and you have a gun to back it up. Their whole focus, from the time they arrived on Taiwan, was building up the military and propagandizing about the evils of communism and their approach to government was in keeping with this narrow, essentially militaristic view of the situation.

On the other side of the coin, was the other opponent of the KMT government. Of the people who came from the mainland there was a sizeable, large percentage of the

refugees who came from (1) intellectual groups; the universities, people who were not that comfortable with communist doctrine and from (2) with businessmen, successful entrepreneurs. This was the element, technological, technocrats, entrepreneurs and a group of academics; this was the element that essentially we were working with on the economic side. That contributed so importantly to the economic miracle of Taiwan beginning in the late 1950s. It was like two aspects to this KMT government; first, the authoritarian, traditional militaristic; second, the urban component, the people who came from Shanghai, who'd been associated with western business, western thought. They were a more enlightened, more technocratic, more educated aspect and this is the group that was the architect, with some assistance from us, the architect of the Taiwan economic success. This evolution was beginning---economically it was all really well underway. Politically the stirrings were for a less totalitarian system. The Taiwanese were beginning to feel more of a sense that they could try to move in the direction of greater political power and the demographics were for them.

I wrote in this paper what was happening, where these mainlanders who came over in the military and these government officials, their children, their children had no---Taiwan wasn't home for them. They had no hope of any future in Taiwan. These people were running to get to the United States. I made that point earlier. A good percentage of the Chiang Kai-shek elite and power apparatus left in a search for greater opportunity in the United States. This was the privileged elite. These were the people who one way or the other had the connections and the means, their parents provided for them, to try and get to the United States, and get educated in the United States. These were people who weren't interested in becoming---taking over from their father as a colonel in the military or as a general this or in running the party branch. These people in effect were leaving a vacuum for a next generation of Taiwanese to gradually come to power because the Taiwanese outnumbered the mainlanders by at least five to one in terms of population. What you had over time was the aging of this group of mainlander refugees who came over to Taiwan. They got a gradual displacement in the military, in the government, academia, a gradual, evolutionary movement of the Taiwanese into greater positions of power.

Q: Where were your contacts? Did you find yourself more or less excluded from the military types or---

LEVIN: No. In a strange way because my wife's family had an old military background and this friend of a father and that friend of a father and this and that and that. So no, I had contacts throughout Taiwan society. In the foreign office there were these younger people in the ministry of foreign affairs. I spoke Chinese and they---I guess many of them knew that---looked on me. They didn't exactly go crazy over my whatever contacts I had with the Taiwanese. Essentially I probably was seen as somebody who was interested in China and very caught up in its culture and knew how to deal socially and politically with Chinese. So no, I had a wide range of contacts; I got around a lot.

Q: Was there any seepage out of China because of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and all through Hong Kong to Taiwan or not?

LEVIN: The Taiwanese wouldn't---they were deeply suspicious of anybody they- --No, they were very, very restrictive on people coming to Taiwan. They always hid the spies and agents.

Q: It's an interesting phenomenon because most refugee organizations in another country or something have waves. I'm familiar with---I studied Russian at one time and there was the White Russian Wave and then the fleeing from the collectivization and then the purge of the military and then World War II and all. You get these waves. Take Taiwan; it was a capsule frozen in time.

LEVIN: That's right; they sealed it off; they sealed it off. The wave came out in---to Hong Kong in 1960, after the great---the failure, the great failure, and Hong Kong's policies were pretty lenient. They needed the labor force; they were beginning to industrialize. It was pretty easy for a Chinese and certainly in the neighboring areas of Hong Kong there was a huge influx of refugees in 1960, around that time. But it didn't come from Taiwan. It was a handful, maybe, of people who were really well known but no, Taiwan cut itself off. They were always suspicious of agents.

Q: Chiang Kai-shek's son; was he "the power" while you were there this time?

LEVIN: He was increasingly in power, yes. He, interestingly, was seen as--First of all, he had been trained in Russia. He spent years and years in Russia and he had a Russian wife. He at one time had been at odds with his father in the 1930s but that had been reconciled and yes, he was seen as the heir apparent. He was seen as a man who had headed up major aspects of the secret police, the intelligence apparatus, as someone, one of these hard liners who would strive, perpetuate this authoritarian, totalitarian government. That's what he was viewed as. Interestingly, when he did come to power, here was a man who, contrary to expectations, pursued a course that was, I think, beautifully attuned to reality. He opened up the political society to the time when he was recognizing the demographic realities of Taiwan, the need to assure the loyalty and backing of the Taiwanese. Chiang Ching-kuo, the son, ruled after the father died, _____ I believe it was-- --, the Taiwan political system opened up, opened up very widely. He was the architect of Taiwan's movement toward democracy. His father probably would have tried to stand in the way of these trends but he saw these trends and he just---

Q: When did Chiang Kai-shek die?

LEVIN: In '75; I'm pretty sure in 1975.

Q: What about Madame Chiang Kai-shek during the time you were there, the '69 to '73. Was she a power or not?

LEVIN: She was always something of a power. Her power, of course, rested on the old man's control of the government. Her power was in terms of the influence and her importance in maintaining American support for Taiwan. She was the Wellesley graduate; she was the perfect English speaker. She was the one who would from time to

time travel to the United States and talk about our two great democracies, etc., etc. Her value was more in terms of keeping and assuring American support and other international support, rather than the ability to actually get into the maneuvering and factionalism of the domestic arena.

Q: Now, did---

LEVIN: Once the old man---once Chiang Kai-shek died, the son took over. He was not her son; this was a son from a different wife. There was no love lost between the two of them. He eventually---all along there was no close relationship and once the old man has died his son just kind of put her aside and within a few years she moved to the United States.

Q: Did events, like her involvement in Vietnam, because in '69---we'd gone through the Tet Offensive and we were beginning to pull out---did that have any effect---were the Chiang Kai-shek group looking over their shoulders about our commitment to their cause?

LEVIN: Yes, probably to some extent yes, yes, yes. I think that first of all they were right up there with their brethren in the United States, the anti-communist wing of the American political body in taking on the hawks' position on Vietnam. They were right in there with fighting communism. They were one of the staunch advocates and supporters of our involvement in Vietnam. Yes, they were worried and they were disturbed by our events of the late '60s, and early '70s, which showed an increasing likelihood of the United States ending its involvement in the Vietnam War.

Q: How did you feel about it?

LEVIN: About our involvement in Vietnam?

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: My take on Vietnam was influenced by my views of the civil war in China: (1) I simply saw what was going on in Vietnam as a civil war and not this great issue of a communist world versus the free world. (2) All this argument about how essential Indonesia---Vietnam was to our position. There's this argument about dominoes; I totally discounted that on the basis of my experience in Indonesia where, from 1960 to '63 as Vietnam was heating up, Indonesia paid not the slightest attention to Vietnam. They just couldn't care what was happening in Vietnam. And (3) and (4), the experience of the French, the failure of the French as foreigners to try. All this kind of welded together and reinforced by---beginning in 1963 back in Washington, getting to know and spending time with a fellow by the name of Paul Kattenberg, who was running the Vietnam desk. Paul had served in Vietnam. Paul, to me, was a very knowledgeable person and I completely accepted his views on Vietnam. We were replicating what the French had tried to do and with the result likely to be the same. I was against our involvement from the get-go.

Q: Yes, I was just talking to a friend of mine who is a historian who was saying, pointing out to our involvement in Iraq and in Afghanistan, particularly in Iraq where the Army is pulling out our military but we're increasing the State Department contingent. He says we're facing the same problem the British faced. You know there's a foreign affairs group and there's a colonial office and in many ways the State Department's developing into a colonial office, a significant colonial office in its ranks.

LEVIN: It's going to be---It's not the State Department that you and I knew. It's going to be contractors of all sorts. I mean this whole thing is ludicrous. It's ludicrous what we're doing about this idea; we're going to train the local security forces and then we can--- How many decades did we train the Vietnamese? We trained them up to their eye teeth. We poured in material; we had thousands of people training; training, training, training. Look an army reflects the culture and civilization. We're not going to be able to go in there and transform the Afghan army or the Iraqi army into an American kind of fighting force. There are so many other issues affecting attitudes and performance and we're just training them how to shoot a gun and do this. It's a training that---it's marginal. That's not the issue.

Q: Okay. Well---

LEVIN: We trained the Taiwan army for years and years and the Taiwan army is still with the Chinese army.

Q: Which brings me to a final point: how we stood, during this '69 to '73 period on Quemoy and Matsu? The whole world revolved around these two islands at one point in 1960, but how stood it---

LEVIN: The Chinese just dropped off their efforts to rattle the cage on Taiwan with Quemoy and Matsu in the hope of bringing a wider settlement of the issues there. It just lapsed into deserved obscurity. There were no ripples. Actually, here we were, still late in the 1960s and the early '70s. It was very rigorous; well a little less so, but the idea of economic intercourse with a hated enemy. In the meantime on Taiwan arrangements, tacit arrangements had been worked out between fishermen from the mainland and from the Taiwan areas. Where you would like to catch a very prized fish were in the waters around Quemoy and Matsu. Then they were allowed into Taiwan, openly; it was a link to various delicacies, food, that can come only from the mainland, and different kinds of traditional Chinese medicine. So while we, in our virginal purity, say you don't deal with an enemy, the Taiwanese---what they sought was important, i.e., food, medicine and certain kinds of fish. We're dealing with the Peoples Republic of China. You get congressmen railing against supporting the economy of this atheistic enemy and of course you get that one, dealing with it very quietly.

Q: In '73 what did you do?

LEVIN: I came back to Washington and they gave me a job with the bureau, congressional liaison with the bureau, which didn't last very long. I forget how many months. It was not exactly a very stimulating, or interesting job. Soon afterward I was made head of the Taiwan desk or of the Republic of China desk in the East Asian---in the Bureau of Asian---What did we call it then? EAP?

Q: May have been Bureau of East Asian Pacific Affairs.

LEVIN: Right. I was made---I was named as head of the Taiwan desk.

Q: Wait a minute now. When did Kissinger go to China? And Nixon go to China?

LEVIN: Seventy-two I believe it was.

Q: You were on Taiwan. We'd better talk about this. What were the repercussions? How was this received---In fact, how did you, just at the time, hear about this?

LEVIN: At that time---that was such a time I was actually home on emergency leave. My father was dying of cancer and I was sitting at home and heard it over the radio. Out of the blue; we had no inkling of that, no inkling. The ambassador at the time, Leonard Unger, I'm not sure. No, I don't think it was Unger yet; I think it was still McConaughy. I was not at post when that happened. It must have come as a total bombshell, absolute bombshell, because nobody knew about it. When I was up to come back to the States none of us had any inkling that this dramatic thing was in the offing.

Coming back there was this tremendous concern on the part of the Taiwan government. We sought to allay this concern by constantly reassuring them of our security commitment and of the intention to maintain our diplomatic recognition; that was in the early years. They were obviously shaken by this whole thing.

Q: Were you given standing orders that---how you would deal with this, saying we're always with you or things are going to change or what?

LEVIN: The focus was, as I recall it, on reassuring them about our security commitment. Kissinger by that time wanted in one way or another to wash our hands of Taiwan. His whole focus, beginning in '72 when the trip first took place, was on how do we advance a relationship with China. To him Taiwan was a tremendous obstacle and he had very little sympathy for Taiwan. He too recognized the political impossibility of 180 degree turn around, but his whole purpose was to avoid the whole issue of Taiwan. Any time the Chinese ambassador, Huang Zhen, tried to see him, and later, when I was running the desk, he made up every kind of excuse to try to avoid seeing him. It was a very unpleasant situation personally between Kissinger and Huang Zhen.

Q: Did you get the feeling both---when you eventually came back to the Taiwan desk to go over this---I've interviewed these people who, Winston Lord and the whole crew that was with Kissinger and opened up China, and, in fact, if you read this book, Nixon and

Mao, she used something like 25 or more of our oral histories. Margaret MacMillan, who wrote it, used these oral histories, but the thing that got me into interviewing these people was how they got caught up in the 'Mao is the center of the universe' idea and all. I was wondering whether you were beginning to feel almost disdain by the leadership of EAP for those who were saying we've got Taiwan here; we've got to deal with it.

LEVIN: No, no, no, not disdain. I was fully in support of this movement toward China. I thought it was long overdue. We did have a situation, which I thought in my own mind, posed no threat to the wellbeing of the people of Taiwan. It was a readjustment for the United States towards the reality of the situation and strategically in terms of our dealings with the Soviet Union. I always worried that we were going too far, that we were going to unnecessarily alienate the Soviet Union because of this romance with China.

As far as Taiwan was concerned I had no sense we were selling out Taiwan. Sure there were bruising feelings; sure we had this unnatural relationship that extended to the point where some of our generals and some of our colonels there and some of the people within the United States government almost had greater loyalty toward Taiwan than they did to our own government, to our own interests. In some cases they were actually leaking information to the Taiwan authorities because they had been so captured by the ability of the Taiwan people to flatter them, to talk in terms like, "we're in the same fight against communism," etc., etc., or that there was an unnatural aspect to our relationship with Taiwan. I saw in part that this movement toward China would break that type of thinking. More importantly it was in our national interest to do what we were doing and it would not bring catastrophe and turmoil to Taiwan, which it didn't. I think it was pretty evident, at least to me, that this whole question of Taiwan's status diplomatically would change. Its status in the world would change but the wellbeing and security of the population wouldn't be affected.

Q: Let's go to---You were on the Taiwan desk when it was still part of EAP?

LEVIN: Right, yes, definitely.

Q: Could you talk just a bit---did you get any feel for when you were with congressional liaison? I would think you would get an awful lot of posturing on the part of Congress about the China policy, or did you find realism there too?

LEVIN: I was in that job a relatively short time and I don't have much of a firm memory on that. The Republican administration had to deal with its Republican congressmen on that. If a Democrat were doing that it would have created tremendous problems. I think it was Nixon; it was a Republican administration. The greatest source of concern and felicitous attitudes toward Taiwan were in Republican circles. So I think it was handled in that context.

Q: You were doing the Taiwan desk for how long?

LEVIN: From '74 to '77. It was at that time that we began to think of the possibility of how would we handle Taiwan in the event of a shift in diplomatic retribution. That's when that kind of work began. The guy who was doing a lot of that for me, a man of infinite talent, was somebody by the name of Chas Freeman, Charles Freeman.

Q: I've done a long interview with Chas. You might be interested; he's---you can pick up his interview on the internet. Go to 'frontline diplomacy,' Google that, and then work your way in to Freeman. You can see what he has to say about that.

LEVIN: Okay, I will.

Q: I've interviewed a lot of people and I would put him, one of the very few, in the genius class.

LEVIN: Oh yes. Oh, definitely, definitely. A man of infinite talents, yes, who got screwed recently. Are you familiar with that?

Q: What was that?

LEVIN: He was headed for a major job in the administration. What was it? Something in the National Security Council (NSC), a responsible position, and then it was pulled out from under him because of the pro-Israeli lobby. They felt that he was not solicitous enough of Israeli views and that some of his attitudes and opinions were anti-Israel. They had enough power and influence to deny him the appointment. It was not one of the finer moments of this administration.

Q: No. When you're looking at Taiwan, what were the issues that you felt you had to--- We weren't going to say okay, you're on your own now, kids, and this and that.

LEVIN: No, no.

Q: With full recognition of China it was understood that in no way were we going to be able to have full recognition of Taiwan. Was that the assumption?

LEVIN: Oh yes, that was a given; that was a given. The only question was whether we could have retained an official place on Taiwan, something like a consulate or some kind of official office. It became pretty clear, not too far along, that the Chinese would not--- the PRC would not countenance that and very quickly---you had a model. We had the Japanese model. The Japanese had recognized the PRC but the Japanese had long, historical, cultural and emotional ties with Taiwan; that was their colony for 50 years. There was a strong, pro-Taiwan element in the Japanese political system and the Japanese had worked out essentially a private presence on Taiwan. That's the model that we followed. That's the model that Chas Freeman worked on and that was the precedent for a great deal of what we did in terms of lining up our relationship with Taiwan.

Q: Were you feeling an intense counterattack or something on the part of---it used to be called the China lobby? How were you feeling---that group, the anti-communist, pro-Taiwanese, Chiang Kai-shek---

LEVIN: Their efforts, of course, were mounted toward the administration, toward the White House and Kissinger and all of that. As a matter of fact, given what was going on in Watergate, it was pretty clear that the Nixon Administration was not going to move forward and actually make this change in the diplomatic situation. In other words that with this liaison office arrangement, the Republic of China, we had the unofficial---we had an official position there but that the embassy and formal ties would be maintained with Taiwan. That was going to go on for a number of years because Nixon, so weakened by Watergate, was not about to go and pull off a huge switch in the diplomatic relationship. We knew there was not going to be any dramatic change for a number of years, but we kept working on the model and taking as the template what the Japanese had done, because the Japanese had accomplished that change. We didn't see this as something that was going to happen in the near future because of our domestic political situation.

Q. During the time you were doing this, in '74 to '77, did you feel that mainland China was any threat to Taiwan?

LEVIN: No, no. Their preoccupation was with the Soviet Union. They were increasingly worried about the Soviet Union. Now that would ebb and flow but their eyes were focused on the Soviet Union. That's what brought them to work out this accommodation with us. This accommodation with us was virtually a guarantee that they were not going to do anything on Taiwan in terms of _____. No, Taiwan was secure for that whole period. Psychologically the mainlanders, who were still in Taiwan, were very upset with what we were doing. In terms of anyone thinking that this was creating an environment conducive to the Chinese using military force or attacking Taiwan, there was, no, nothing like that, absolutely no.

Q. Actuarial tables must have been playing quite a role as far as dealing with the Taiwanese government because it was still Kuo-min-tang, wasn't it?

LEVIN: It was; it was.

Q: Were you seeing a new breed or was this still the geriatric breed?

LEVIN: The geriatrics were as geriatrics go, as we both know very well. They don't rejuvenate. Now there was a very slow, gradual second generation coming into control, both in the military and in the civil part of the government of Taiwan. These people were still pretty much wedded to the U.S. diplomatic presence, the U.S. embassy and formal diplomatic ties. They saw that as a solid reassurance that we're going to be standing with them from here to eternity. They were very much concerned about any movement toward the Peoples Republic of China. They had lived with what we had done; they had lived with the liaison office. They had no alternative, actually. I think most of them knew that

what we were doing would not fan a Chinese attack on Taiwan. Nevertheless they were discomfited. It was changing a familiar situation.

Q: How did you view the Watergate business?

LEVIN: I found it very disturbing because you just were mesmerized. I had just come back; I came back in '73 from Taiwan; '73 to '74 I was at Stanford for one year. I was doing senior training.

Q: At Stanford?

LEVIN: Yes.

Q: Let's talk a second about that. How did you find the academic attitude towards the whole China business?

LEVIN: I think by then of course the attitude was that at last the United States is grasping reality and going in the right direction. I think the overwhelming---in academic circles there was the sense that it's about time the United States started dealing with the Peoples Republic of China directly.

Q: Did you find the academics, the ones you were dealing with---I take it you were working on an Asian studies?

LEVIN: Basically, yes. Pretty free ranging. I had a wonderful time. One of the most interesting courses I had was with a wonderful, zany professor who spent the year. I sat by his side on the works of a modern Chinese author. It was literature but a literature that was very poignant and very socialist in the first part of the 20th century. It was a great time. Keep in mind I was also attached to the Hoover Institute. The Hoover Institute was a bunch of pretty far right wing individuals.

Q: It has that reputation.

LEVIN: Yes, but the actual professors at Stanford in the Chinese area were all very much welcoming of our moves toward the Peoples Republic of China.

Q: We'll move back to this time that you were in '73 to '77 or so. You were dealing---you were in Washington, and this is the time of Watergate, wasn't it?

LEVIN: It was the time of Watergate but it was of course the time that---of the Taiwan government disconcerted, worried about our movement toward rapprochement. Every time Kissinger went to China Ching-sung would immediately try to get an appointment to talk to him and Kissinger would call me up and say, "I don't want to see this guy; think of any way"---It was a very difficult situation for me; I was the in-between and trying to make clear to the embassy of Taiwan and our embassy that we could press on this forever they knew full well what was going on but they'll say---

Q: Normally when a secretary of state goes to one of two countries that are in opposition to each other, usually there's some sort of meeting, to come back and say what was talked about.

LEVIN: We did it on lower levels---

Q: In the first place Kissinger had the reputation of not telling anybody what he was doing. I can see on this he would want to do even less.

LEVIN: Right. That's right.

Q: Put you in a difficult position.

LEVIN: It did, it did, it did. You've just had to deal with it.

I want to tell you an interesting situation.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: While I'm there, Chiang Kai-shek died. Chiang Kai-shek dies in April of 1975 and immediately I'm made in charge of working on the arrangements. Kissinger immediately decides that the delegation, the American delegation to honor---to attend Chiang Kai-shek's funeral will be headed by the secretary of agriculture.

Q: Good God.

LEVIN: What the hell was his name? He was---Butz. Earl Butz.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: Earl Butz. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz. Now, Earl Butz, apart from being secretary of agriculture, which is not the most prominent official position in the U.S. government, was also seen as something of a lightweight. He had made some disparaging racial remarks at one time in the course of the presidential campaign and he was just not seen as a very impressive individual. Kissinger said Butz was going to head it, and his reasoning was very clear. He wanted to (1) downgrade the relationship with Taiwan and (2) demonstrate to the Peoples Republic of China that we were not all that close to Taiwan anymore.

When I got this decision I wrote a memo and I brought it up to Phil Habib. Phil Habib was the assistant secretary with EAP and the memo is in the files. I have a copy myself. The memo says you can't appoint Butz as the head of the delegation, that we have had this relationship with Chiang Kai-shek for---whatever it was 30-40 years. That to have a man like Butz would be absolutely appalling to Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek. He's going to take over Taiwan, and to the entire population of Taiwan it

would be seen as such a sign of disrespect and loss of face that this would make it very difficult for us to deal with Chiang Ching-kuo on issues that were going to be inherently difficult to deal with anyway. We would get his sense of outrage over the way we dealt with such a long, close ally and would compound the difficulties we had in terms of the substance of what we're trying to do. That it's just---then I made the point: this is not going to be welcomed by the Peoples Republic of China, that as Chinese they would look at this and say well this is the way the Americans treat somebody that for so many years they've been associated with and close with. It would lose us respect in the eyes of the people of Beijing. I said the Chinese would thoroughly understand (I was advocating that we send Vice President Nelson Rockefeller) the Chinese would thoroughly understand why we were sending Nelson Rockefeller and would have greater respect for us than if we sent the Butz. Call him a clown, and he was a clown a little bit, Earl Butz.

I walked this memo to Habib and Habib read it and agreed with me. He grabbed me and we went right up into Kissinger's office and Kissinger read the memo and he was yelling and shouting and actually finally he reversed himself. He said all right. So we got Nelson Rockefeller. After the meeting, however, as I'm walking out, Kissinger called me back and he tells me, "I want you to keep a close eye on Nelson Rockefeller and I am making you responsible for keeping him from making any offers of any kind of assistance to the government of Taiwan." I said, "Yes, sir " and walked out of there into the hall, wondering how the hell am I supposed to rein in the vice president. In any event Rockefeller didn't make any offers. He did attend the ceremony. It brought great face for Chiang Ching-kuo and no repercussions from the Peoples Republic of China and that was it.

Q: It shows Henry Kissinger, like so many people, is impulsive but when faced with the reality would take a second harder look at it.

LEVIN: Yes.

Q: But it also is a fact that, with all due respect, you didn't just stand there and say, "Well I'll let Butz go." He was, incidentally, fired not too long afterwards.

LEVIN: That's right.

Q: This does point out that we do have a professional cadre of people, Foreign Service officers like yourself, who understand the political whims, the whims of personal feelings and all that, but every once---I have to point out the practical realities.

LEVIN: That's right.

Q: And you did it.

LEVIN: It was the Chinese aspect to it. The PRC is not going to see this as a political move, reversing our efforts for rapprochement. They'd understand. They're Chinese; they know what we're doing. It's a funeral. You send somebody. You've known the guy for so

many years you send somebody of stature. Not a peep out of the Chinese on the whole thing. Not a peep. So that was that.

Q: That's fascinating.

LEVIN: Yes. That memo's in the files, I'm sure.

Today is the 3rd of September 2010, with Burt Levin. Burt, we're going to take you back; you went to Hong Kong from the Taiwan desk in 1977 and I'd asked you, because we're repeating this, what was the---what were you up to?

LEVIN: As deputy principal officer at the Hong Kong consulate general, I oversaw our consulate general in Hong Kong, which had been the primary, and by far the most important center for China watching, for trying to get a handle on what was going on in China. That function began to shift with the establishment of our liaison office in Beijing starting in 1972 or '73. Subsequent to our diplomatic recognition of the Peoples Republic of China and the establishment of a number of consulates in different parts of China, the function continued to become more and more performed by our embassy in Beijing, and by our consulates in China. Hong Kong still maintained something of a role in the China watching business.

Prior to the 1970s we paid almost no attention to Hong Kong itself. Of course Hong Kong was becoming economically more important; we did have commercial officers there. We paid some attention to the economics of Hong Kong but no attention to the politics of Hong Kong because essentially it was a British colony with a colonial administration run by the British, not too much of a political dynamic there. Again that began to change in the late '70s as Hong Kong continued to grow in economic importance. As you had in Hong Kong some growth among the Hong Kong Chinese there was a sense that they wanted greater participation in the political process of Hong Kong as the society became better educated, more connected to the outside world through its trade and financial activities.

There were the beginnings of some political pressures by a professional class like the Democrats of China for a greater role in the political process, not for any separation from Hong Kong, not for any identification with the Peoples Republic of China. What you had there was a class of Chinese who were, for the most part, refugees from China, had fled communist China and had prospered under the British colonial system in Hong Kong. Even the working people in China, saw from close at hand the chaos and destructiveness of some of these Maoist policies and these recurring political movements that brought about such instability and continued poverty in China. There was no great identification on the part of most people in Hong Kong with the Peoples Republic of China so there were no pressures to reunite with China. There was a sense on the part of most Chinese in the professional class down to the working class that they didn't exactly feel very proud about a colonial status. Certainly their hearts didn't swell at the sight of the Union Jack. Nevertheless they acknowledged, recognized and psychologically knew that they had been better off under the British, that they had in a sense escaped the disasters and the ill

fortune of their compatriots in China because they were not of China. Hong Kong at that time was in a transition moving away from its role as the China watching center and beginning to become more concerned with what was going on Hong Kong itself.

Q: Had there been any spillover of the Cultural Revolution into---

LEVIN: There had been in 1967. In 1967 there were some groups. Certainly the Peoples Republic of China had an official presence in China and a strong unofficial presence in China. Those who were part of the PRC official apparatus, the New China News Agency, which in essence acted as the unofficial Chinese embassy in Hong Kong and in the various trade and commercial organizations, the Bank of China, the China food stuff, whatever it was, I forget the name---

In '67, in response to some grievances, there was a raising of the Hong Kong ferry fare. There was, I think, the perceived need on the part of the PRC bureaucratic organizations in China, as well as of their sympathizers, to demonstrate to the leadership in Beijing that they were as red and as revolutionary as anyone else in China. So they began some demonstrations against the British government. This was in 1967. This is during my first tour in Hong Kong.

These demonstrations involved, in a few instances, placing explosives, bombs in mail boxes, in trash cans, and in some public places. Not these horrific bombs that you're now getting in Iraq; nevertheless bombs and in one instance these---one of these bombs caused death, as I recall, the death of some young children, two, a couple of kids. With that the whole population of Hong Kong just---those who may have been on the fence, those who were quiet ---just swung in support of the British government in Hong Kong, supported the police, supported repression of this movement and that was the reflection of the Cultural Revolution in China. The outcome was it was a disaster for the PRC; it just turned the population even more against the PRC because some of these tactics had led to the death of some very young children, one child -- it may have been a child---mother and father but I forget. It produced this casualty so that was the overflow of the Cultural Revolution. By 1977, when I was there, from '77 to '78 as EPO (executive principal officer), that aspect---First of all China had moved away from the Cultural Revolution in 1978; this was when Deng Xiaoping began to change the policies of China in a very drastic fashion. By 1977 the Cultural Revolution was in the past and there was no radicalism. There was no popular support for the PRC; it was fairly quiet in Hong Kong at the time. It was a period, of course, of growing prosperity over the years.

For example, when I first went to Hong Kong in 1955 on a visit and then subsequently when I was there from '65 to '69 and then back in '77, you saw this very significant improvement of living standards in Hong Kong. In '55 when I went there, I went from Taiwan to Hong Kong; visiting Hong Kong from Taiwan would---Taiwan was a third world country. Taiwan was poor; Taiwan was very underdeveloped, but Taiwan had a hinterland of agricultural production and people were poor but just getting by. When you went to Hong Kong in '55 there were several million refugees from China, and Hong Kong had not developed its---what was subsequently to become a very impressive

manufacturing base. Also as a financial center it was nothing. So you had in Hong Kong desperation. We had American relief societies there handing out food packages. You had people sleeping in the streets. This was in '55; wherever you went as a foreigner, as a European, as a Caucasian you were surrounded by beggars. It was similar to what greeted you on a trip to India. There were streetwalkers all over the place, young girls. It was a situation that was pretty depressing and pretty heart wrenching.

By '65, when I came back there, it changed. There was still poverty. There were a lot of poor people, a lot of people working long hours in difficult situations. By '65 you had significant reduction in the population of people living in shacks, those jerry-built housing of the early '50s built by these refugees on hillsides and shantytowns. All that was rapidly disappearing in the mid '60s and certainly the streetwalkers and people sleeping the streets that was a thing of the past. By the '70s, thanks to a very impressive and large scale public housing system, these ramshackle shanty towns on the hills of Hong Kong and in the bare spaces in the mountains of Kowloon, that had just about come to an end. You could see over the years these very significant improvements of living standards in Hong Kong. Hong Kong in the '70s was basically a society that was prospering, that the people, the average worker and average families were better off. Still many people were living in very tough sort of circumstances, but far above what the past had been. The reflection of that was rather a peaceful society. You---The British rule had been marred to some extent by extensive corruption within the police ranks; they were beginning to straighten that out and it was a fairly quiet situation in Hong Kong.

Q: Were the British very obviously making the government more Chinese or had they started that?

LEVIN: Yes, there was some---Yes, training young Chinese for Civil Service positions. Again, at the top levels of the government it was still very much a British people coming out from the UK. The Chinese positions were not of the policymaking and highest levels of the government but there was a substantial middle level civil service component comprised of Chinese who were well trained and well educated. This was the group that subsequently took over the Hong Kong government when the British left in 1997. Control was still firmly in the hands of the governor and of his top- level officials.

The Chinese played some role, wealthy businessmen, the accomplished professional, something of an advisory role, some were co-opted through bestowal of titles, a Tsar here, an order of the British empire there. Basically the system was functioning smoothly, efficiently. As I said you had, in some aspect of the well educated, a little growing desire for greater political control of their own fate. This was met by the British by these very gradualist increases in the number of Chinese in the legislative council and a few more titles and a few more somewhat higher positions in the bureaucracy. It was a very gentle evolution toward more of a Chinese face in the government but it was still a government controlled by the British.

Q: Who was the consul general while you were there?

LEVIN: The consul general was, for the first weeks, a fellow by the name Chuck Cross. Chuck Cross came from a missionary family in China and was a graduate of Carleton College. This is the college where I now teach, Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. Just this year, coincidence or a little historical background there: when my wife first met Chuck Cross she mentioned that one of her teachers in the high school in Beijing was a Miss Cross, and that was Chuck's aunt. The family has these missionary connections. My wife at that time was in a missionary-run high school in Beijing and so there's a little coincidence.

Chuck was there about six weeks. He was replaced by Tom Shoesmith. Tom was a Japan expert; his expertise was Japan but nevertheless he came out as the consul general in Hong Kong. Maybe a reflection of the lesser importance of Hong Kong as a China watching station but he was there for---I was in Hong Kong for slightly more than a year. I was then transferred to Thailand as deputy chief of mission.

Q: Sticking to Hong Kong: I would have thought that our government had developed a very strong cadre of China analysts from Hong Kongese and they couldn't do the same type of work in Beijing because of political conditions. They must have been feeling a bit nervous.

LEVIN: I can't recall when we stopped this very major operation, the translation of the Chinese press and periodicals from Chinese to English on a very regular basis, and put out translations in publication form. We did that for years and years. We ended that. I think we ended that with the sense that as China was becoming more open we were in China. We had a presence in China; there was a gradual withering away of this huge expertise and operational structure that we had developed in Hong Kong for China watching. Our close relationship, research service, which I think the U.S. government financed, that pretty much ended; dollars from the States no longer came to Hong Kong to study China. They went to China. Over the years that core of local expertise just withered away. I couldn't put a specific date on it but certainly by '77-'78 it was a smaller size, much smaller size, and of less importance.

Hong Kong provided many of the officers who were in on the movement to China, our whole Chinese language group, most of them sooner or later served in Hong Kong and then sooner or later served in Beijing. So that was the---one of the---Hong Kong again in a sense as a setting for our function in China, analyzing China, but that core of expertise dwindled away.

Q: Could you---when you were there in the '77-'78 go up to Guangzhou and travel around?

LEVIN: Not very easily, no. That had changed when I came back to Hong Kong in late 1981 as the consul general by then, yes, yes we could. I did go on a couple of trips, mostly to Guangzhou and South China, taking delegations of the American Chamber of Commerce. That was really the beginning of the opening of China. It was much easier.

In 1978, from Hong Kong I visited China for the first time. I had started Chinese studies in 1952 at Columbia University; I had been influenced to study China by a professor who said while the Korean War is on now in a couple of years it should be no problem to get to China. Anyway, it took 26 years from the time I started to study China to actually get to the Chinese mainland. Of course I'd been to Taiwan; I'd been to Hong Kong; these were all Chinese society. To get into the Peoples Republic of China in 1978, I went there with my wife. We went to her hometown of Beijing with my two children; it was an interesting thing, because while China was just beginning this reform process under Deng Xiaoping, nevertheless the legacy of the Cultural Revolution was very strong. In economic terms all retail functions, restaurants, shops and everything were government. The choice of goods was pathetic. The quality of food in restaurants was pathetic. What you could buy in the street markets, the vegetable and the fruit markets, was just a hand full of rotten, rotting apples, cabbage. The cities were so gray.

People dressed, of course, uniformly in their clothing, which was not only communist but it was poverty. The people in China tended to dress alike for hundreds of years but there was a grayness and a cheerlessness. Certainly in terms of material availability it was a grim society. I recall in '78 walking on the street with my two kids and going over to a Chinese to ask for directions; I wanted to get to a certain place. Of course I spoke Chinese and I started walking toward him and the minute he saw a foreigner coming he just frantically made gestures, no, no, he wasn't going to talk, and he walked away. I couldn't talk to a Chinese in the streets of Beijing. Even in the hotel contact was minimal. The only person who really had any association with the Chinese society was my son who at 11 years old, 12 years old spoke good Chinese and was a pretty good as a billiard player and was playing billiards with the hotel staff down in the basement of the hotel.

But we couldn't. My wife had some family in a rural area, maybe three hours, three-four hours out of Beijing. We tried to get permission to go visit the family and were told it was inconvenient. They never said no. They said, "No, it was inconvenient." So we didn't get there. That was my first visit to China in '78. By '81 to '82, when I was consul general and went to China the whole thing had changed quite dramatically.

Q: Hong Kong. Going back to when you were a deputy principal officer, were your jobs more administrative, taking care of the running of the consulate general?

LEVIN: In a way yes, but in Hong Kong, where everything was so efficient, where you had a British-run bureaucracy, where you had a retail and commercial sector that had been dealing with foreigners for many---for 100 years or so, there were no serious problems. Electricity was regular; things like that you didn't---you had none of the problems associated with living in a third world post. I don't recall any serious challenges in trying to run the consulate general at that time. Housing was very expensive, increasingly so, and this was always a concern on our part. That one year period is something of a blur because it was rather routine. The whole, of course, the whole drama was in 1978. I can't recall whether I was in Hong Kong or had left Hong Kong. I think I still was in Hong Kong. The drama was when we finally established diplomatic relations

with the Peoples Republic of China. We had the liaison office but then we took, under Carter, took the formal step of establishing a diplomatic relationship.

Q: Burt, this is a bigger picture but were you observing a new breed of China hands? You'd been part of the group that had been sitting around waiting for 25---for a quarter of a century---

LEVIN: That's an interesting question you raise, Stu. No. I was, in a sense, part of the new group. Let me explain that. The Foreign Service's expertise on China was largely in the hands of men---there were no women at that time---of men who had grown up in missionary families in China, people like Bill Gleysteen, or prior to that John Stewart---

Q: Service.

LEVIN: Service. Missionary families. This was where our talent and our knowledge of China were from, largely from missionary families. There were some who in the pre-war years---I think we had set up a language school in Beijing and produced a number of people---who had been trained as Chinese language officers prior to the war. This was the old group of China hands, very heavily weighted toward the children of missionaries. This was the group that was devastated by McCarthy and by the willing acquiescence and active participation of John Foster Dulles. This was the group that "lost China." This was the group that in brilliant analyses in their dispatches from China in the late 1940s, as the communists were gaining victories where you could see them, and in the White Paper produced in 1950, in effect was telling the U.S. government, the administration, the Truman Administration that Chiang Kai-shek's government was losing the battle, that it was responding to the challenge poorly, that it had a lot of problems and that the victors were going to be the Peoples Republic of China. In essence saying the United States better start thinking of how to deal with that situation and deal with the realities of that. This group was crucified during the McCarthy years with the acquiescence and the positive participation of John Foster Dulles.

What then transpired was the beginning of a new group of Chinese language officers. These were people who initially---as we closed down our language school in Beijing in the immediate aftermath of World War II as the communists were gaining strength---a few of them were trained at Yale. Yale was teaching Chinese at the time. Yale had a pretty good Chinese language program. A few of them were trained at Yale but there was basically a hiatus, a gap between the old who were no longer of any consequence, and there was not yet a replacement for that group. That began to change in the 1950s when we began our Chinese language school in Taiwan, in Taichung. That school started I think in 1954 or 1955 and so with that school you had a new cohort of Chinese language officers and the core of the Chinese language officers. I was in Taichung from 1958 to '59 and that group went on for about 15-20 years; we're still training, I think, to outer offices in China. That was the new group and I was part of it and those who followed on were essentially part of it. We all knew each other but as the years went on there were younger graduates I didn't know who they were and things like that. Essentially we had the same background.

Q: In this group there was no sort of nostalgia for the good old quengtang and all that?

LEVIN: No, no, no, no. There was---There were a few holdovers from the missionary people who had been too young to have been of any---or weren't even in the Foreign Service and yet were old enough to have grown up in China before the war, people like Bill Gleysteen, who was one of our more accomplished Chinese language officers.

Q: ...ambassador in Korea.

LEVIN: Then was ambassador to Korea. He stands out in my mind as the last of the old school. Now he went to---I'm pretty sure he went to language school in Taiwan but of course he had a good background from his years in China. His brothers---he had two brothers---he had two brothers in the Foreign Service; there were three of them in the Foreign Service. They were the last of the missionary breed and I was one of the earlier new breeds. This new breed was basically the same. There wasn't the sense of that---we who had been doing China watching in Hong Kong were so distinct from the ones who then came up in the '70s and '80s and actually went to China. No, we were the grandfathers of the classes and we looked at ourselves as the same cohorts.

Q: Well then---

LEVIN: The language school training was interesting, fun. We did nothing but study Chinese for six hours a day and of course we combined that with a little bit of hi--jinks, sometimes overnight poker games and a few carousing evenings as well but we learned Chinese.

Q: Then in '78, were you chafing at the bit to get into Beijing or---

LEVIN: Oh sure, sure, sure. It was always---Now, there was always a great desire to go to China, always a great desire. I tried to go there when I was dealing with Taiwan. I tried to go to China but they wouldn't let me go; the State Department wouldn't let me go.

Q: Were you at all concerned when you were dealing with Taiwan as you had been that this might taint you? I had a little time in the Middle East area and of course anybody who had been to Israel was precluded from going to an Arab post.

LEVIN: Well yes, yes.

Q: And that's long gone but---

LEVIN: Right, right, no, you're absolutely right.

Here I was as a Chinese language officer and most of my career devoted to Chinese affairs. Yet, if you looked at my career I never was stationed in China; I never had a posting to China. Now the reason for this was in 1972, when we first established this

liaison office, I was stationed in Taiwan. It was department policy that anyone who had served or was serving in Taiwan would not be sent to Beijing. There was a sense of the sensitivity of sending---Just as you were mentioning about being in the Middle East and stationed in Israel. So the Department for a number of years, out of consideration for what they thought would be the sensitivity of the PRC on this subject, did not send people who had been in Taiwan. There had to be something of a cooling off period. How long that was I don't know. So here I was in Taiwan; I certainly was not going to go from Taiwan to China. Then from '74 -'77 I was the head of the Taiwan desk. There again I was not going to go after that assignment; I would not be sent to China. At the time I was hoping for a posting in China. By 1981 I had not been posted to China, but I had been to China a couple of times. By 1981 I was consul general in Hong Kong.

In 19, maybe '83-'84 our ambassador in China, Art Hummel---who was a wonderful man, I'd known him for a number of years---he asked me if I would like to be his DCM. His DCM had left, I can't recall the circumstances, and he wanted me as his DCM. I gave it some thought. Here we had a relationship with China, a very active diplomatic situation there, all kinds of issues and challenges, and in Hong Kong there was no bilateral relationship there. It was---we had no real outstanding issues but nevertheless we had a post that had well over 100 American officers. It was one of our largest establishments and I was running it. I guess the sense of---deciding between do I stay the boss or do I go to China and become number two, I decided I would stay being the boss. By then, having finished Hong Kong, the only position that would have really been available to me in China would have been as ambassador and that was just never going to happen. I never served in China and one of the reasons was that through a number of years I was in Taiwan or identified with working on Taiwan it was a time when the Department thought it would just be too sensitive to send me to China. Now I gather that none of this sensitivity remains. People go from Taiwan directly to China and vice versa.

Q: It's the same thing in the Middle East.

LEVIN: Yes but in those days it was---that just---The great China language officer never served in a post in China.

Q: Burt, then in '78, how did this assignment to Thailand come about?

LEVIN: The ambassador there, Mort Abramowitz---I'd known him for a number of years, he was trained as a Chinese language officer although over the years he drifted away from that---he was looking for a DCM. I think maybe he had just been appointed as ambassador there. Maybe that was it. He asked me and I thought being DCM in Bangkok was more of a challenge and a more substantive position than being deputy principal officer in Hong Kong at a time when not all that much was going on in Hong Kong.

Q: Yes, you can see that.

LEVIN: So I accepted the job and after less than a---well just about a year in Hong Kong I went off to Thailand. What that created was: here are my kids; they're in Hong Kong;

they've got all this---my son was then about 11-12 years old and my daughter is a year younger; they're in school; they've got all their friends and suddenly I go off---I went ahead of the family to report immediately to Bangkok and my wife, as so often was the case, she was left to do the packing and bring the kids. The kids were just so upset over the thought of leaving their friends and their school that it created something of a problem for my wife. I flew back to Hong Kong and with great effort and all of that amid considerable tears finally persuaded them to come to Thailand where they then proceeded to have a great time. Anyway, this was something that I think all of us in the Foreign Service at one time or another---to have had to deal with the impact on the children of some of our career moves. But off I went to Thailand.

Q: How long were you in Thailand?

LEVIN: Three years; three years. At a time when every now and then there was a coup but dealing with the government that was---one could say almost---beginning transition from a Thailand of a military dictatorship, and it was still, to some extent, that when we were there. The strong roots of a growing influence and power of the technocratic educated class, the beginnings of the development of Thailand both economically and politically were basically what we were dealing with. We were dealing with drug issues, narcotics, political issues, the periodic maneuvering; that was the three years in Thailand. It was interesting.

We tried also to clean up---there was this residue of a huge American presence in Thailand; the placenta of the Vietnam War. We had gotten out of Vietnam in '75 but this whole apparatus that we had created in Thailand, the air bases, the bureaucracy, the CIA, the military presence of the U.S. remained. We had this huge, swollen bureaucracy of maybe 400 or 500, 600 Americans working in the American mission. To his great credit Mort Abramowitz, with my active and strong participation, pared that down to about half the size over the three years that I was there. So once Mort left and I left a year later after being chargé for about a year, the guy who replaced us rebuilt it almost to the original size. That was one of our efforts to cut what was a bloated bureaucracy there.

Q: Let's talk about that. Why would there be---I thought we'd pulled out of the air bases--

LEVIN: Yes, we were basically out of the air bases but once an American presence is established there are all kinds of vested interests that cling to their positions. The CIA presence was very large and just anybody and everybody were there. There were too many Americans; we just didn't need that many and we were to bring it down. Bureaucracies never shrink. It's just luck if you can keep them at their present level but they never shrink.

Q: Let's talk about the bureaucracy of the military component. What were they that were staying there and how were your relations with them?

LEVIN: Relations were good. We had a military advisory group there. Up until the late '70s, there was always this concern about communist movement in northeast Thailand although by the late '70s it was pretty clear that that wasn't going anywhere. So there was---I can't recall the exact size of the military advisory group but we had a good relationship. They had cut back in size from what they once were. There was no problem there but we were constantly trying to reduce the number of people there. There just were too many people.

Q: Let's talk a bit about the government---or governments of Thailand for the three years you were there. When you arrived what was the government?

LEVIN: The government was run by the prime minister who was a man by the name of Kriangsak and Kriangsak was a military man. He ostensibly, as I recall, retired from the military but his background was military. He was succeeded by another military man by the name of Prem, the foreign minister, a very nice, cultivated man, I must say. He was a former air force general. The military component was very strong. There were political parties; there had been civilian prime ministers but the power of the military was considerable; the political power of the military was considerable. They basically ran Thailand at that time.

What happened over the years, and this was true and it's true in Indonesia and it's true in Korea, true in Taiwan; these, all these countries, had a very strong military, which had the political power. Let's face it; Taiwan in the '50s and '60s, Korea in the '50s, these were military dictatorships, essentially military dictatorships. So was Indonesia and so was Thailand. The common thread then was that there was enough awareness by the military of the need for technocrats and the importance of economic development that over the years, as the economies of these countries began to develop, the role of the technocrats became more and more important. Because these militaries were smart enough to realize that they lacked the knowledge, the expertise, the ability to run an economy, to---yes, they could repress the society, they were quite good at that; they could maintain themselves in power but for this whole modernization of nations they turned to technocrats. As the country became modernized, as educational systems improved, as contacts with the outside world increased the power of the technocrats grew and the power of the military diminished. This was a process, I think, that was evident in Thailand, Taiwan, Korea and Indonesia to the point where while the military still, certainly in Indonesia and certainly in Thailand, still retained considerable political power, nevertheless there were countervailing centers of power. In Taiwan the military now is a professional military with nowhere near the political power it once had. I think that's happening in Korea, although I'm not that knowledgeable about Korea. This was a period of transformation of politics of Thailand during the time I was there. There was still a very strong military; that still is the case right now, but the development of alternate centers of power, that's the Thai case.

Q: Well did---

LEVIN: I remember, one little anecdote, let me tell you this---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: When I was chargé there was some kind of a Buddhist ceremony and so I was there and the king was there and the chief abbot of Thailand was there and obviously somebody took a picture. Well later, a year later, a few months later I'm with my family up country and we go into one of these fly-specked noodle shops for lunch, we're sitting there and eating and my daughter looks up and says hey, there's a picture of you on the wall. So there, lo and behold, the king and the Buddha---the abbot and me, we're the picture on a calendar; I was a calendar boy.

Q: Oh my God.

LEVIN: So my daughter points this out and the proprietor of the shop saw that; oh my God, we had a crowd gather around us in a very short time. Then of course when we got back to Bangkok my wife bought about 50 of those calendars; I still have some of them around the house here. You want a calendar, the year 1982? Let me know if you need one; you can wallpaper your house.

But anyway---

Q: Tell me; what about the role of the king while you were there?

LEVIN: The king was a presence. He was not an active participant in the day-to-day but he was the umpire. He was, whenever there was an issue of tension or anything he would intervene and he was, I guess, what you would call the pressure valve, the safety valve lurking in the background, revered. You know when the Thais were in the presence of the king they were on their knees. When people approached the king they would be virtually crawling and it didn't exactly stir the cockles of my democratic heart but as a good Foreign Service officer that's their custom, not mine.

Q: Well---

LEVIN: Yes. He was the power, the ultimate power but was not actively engaged. When there were coups, when there were differences, or situations that threatened to have some major consequences he would quietly step in and of course---his word was final on these issues. There was no constitutional role for him but there was this semi-religious and strong legacy of the ultimate power of the king, the divine aura of the king. He was highly respected and rather popular. He was seen as a very active force in promoting irrigation of the country in the poor parts of Thailand and roads and various social projects. He was sort of the magnanimous king concerned for his worthy subjects but of course not to the point where he would seriously impair the role of the military or the power of the business class. Still he was seen as somebody concerned with the welfare of the people. He was very popular.

The problem now, of course, fast forward to the present time, was political difficulty; he's sick, and he is not intervening.

Q: His brother is not a very popular person.

LEVIN: Not his brother, his son. It's his son; it's his son, the crown prince, who even when I was there in the '80s, late '70s and early '80s, was seen by the overwhelming majority of the Thai people as a womanizer, a cruel person, a person who mistreated his staff, a man hungry for money. He was very decidedly a reviled and unpopular figure. This is the guy at a time when Thai politics are in turmoil---this is the guy---who stands to inherit the throne. It adds to the foreboding quality of the future of this present political issue in Thailand, where the underclass is demanding more of a role and a better position in society. This is very worrisome.

Q: How stood relations between Thailand and China?

LEVIN: It was very interesting. You know, you scratch a Thai and you find a lot of Chinese blood. The elite of Thailand, and even now in the military, the military are more pure Thai. Even now increasingly so, the elite of Thailand and certainly the business elite, the academic elite have a very strong component of Chinese blood. These are the people, the king, and the king's family that has origins in China. So there is this strong Chinese aspect to the leadership of Thailand, to the elite of Thailand; the former premier, Thaksin, is almost pure Chinese. The guy now, I don't know him but I would strongly, strongly suspect---it is almost 99 percent sure that he's probably part Chinese at a minimum.

But what happened, of course, is that you had this Chinese migration beginning hundreds of years ago and, as is so often was the case, the men came without family and intermarried with the Thais. Now what puts the situation in Thailand in a different context than that of Indonesia, for example, is that the Thais being Buddhist and the Chinese essentially Buddhist, there were no major religious or cultural barriers to intermarriage and assimilation. So the Chinese who came to Thailand and who intermarried and who still are aware of a Chinese component to their genealogical makeup nevertheless are very Thai. They've assimilated all the Thai customs, the bowing, the this, the that; it's very Thai but there still lurks in the soul a Chinese aspect, a Chinese percentage that, when the PRC was seen as the enemy, and Thailand was of course in the same bed with us, their military dictatorship there was strongly anti-communist. Consequently there was no relationship between Thailand and the PRC. Thailand maintained a relationship with Taiwan but to be openly flaunting your Chinese identity and background was always to risk the danger of being identified with the PRC even though the strong man, the military dictatorship or his strongest trusted lieutenants had some Chinese aspect to them themselves. Nevertheless the society as a whole kept this Chinese characteristic under wraps.

When we began our diplomatic relationship with China, when the anti-communist aspect of our relationship with Thailand wore thin because circumstances had changed so much

and when Thailand developed its relations with China and began to have growing economic ties, all of a sudden this hidden aspect of the Chinese-ness of the Thai elite became an open book. Its most visible aspect was the celebration of Chinese New Year in Bangkok. When I was there for three, four years there was, maybe in the last year or so, a sense of celebration of the Chinese New Year. Now, I've been back a few times and boy, it is just openly celebrated. There is a far less reticent effort to submerge the Chinese identity. There's greater confidence---and a greater awareness that they have all got some their Chinese blood. It's much more open now. It's an interesting situation there. Some sociologist ought to go there and do a good study.

Q: Outside of this kinship, do you see somehow a Thai-China bloc developing?

LEVIN: No, no. The Thais are--- The Thais look at China now---I don't think they see them as a threat. I've not been dealing with Thailand for a number of years. My sense of it is that Thailand sees China as an economic partner, as somebody whose economic importance for the region is evident. They see that Thailand in one way or another has to take that into account in its relations with China, that it's a market for some of the Thai goods. It's hopefully the source for some Chinese investment and it's a question of an economic relationship. I don't think anyone in Thailand feels that they have a natural affinity that somehow Thailand should be a strong supporter of Chinese foreign policy or Chinese objectives, whatever they are. On the other hand I don't think there's a strong fear of China. There's no sense that China's military might is growing and we better be careful. I don't think the Thais see the Chinese as a physical threat and so they look on China, I think, largely in terms of the economic context. That's how they look at it.

Q: Were there natural affinities economically between Thailand and China or was Thailand going its own way of developing this?

LEVIN: Oh yes, there was very little trade and dealings between the two of them through to the '80s. I think what essentially has happened, with the last 10-20 years as China has become economically more and more of a force---I think there's been a deepening of economic ties. When I was there, there was not much of an economic relationship. I do recall however, I think it was 1978, maybe a little later, Deng Xiaoping came to visit Bangkok, Thailand, an official visit. There was a reception to which I was invited. Whether I was the chargé or DCM I don't recall but anyway I was at the reception. I was also in the receiving line; he was receiving us. When it came my turn I spoke to him in Chinese and he looked at me and he said where did you learn your Chinese? And I said in Taiwan. I remembered the sensitivity had gone out. He looked at me and he smiled and he sort of wagged his finger at me but he smiled; he saw the---I wouldn't say the humor in it but the interesting situation. Here I am, representing the United States; we have these huge differences with China on Taiwan; he asked me where I study, I said Taiwan. That was history; he knew that was the history. I must say he came through as just an interesting man, the way he handled that one.

Q: Was there any tie between Thailand and India?

LEVIN: Not really, no. No, no. There was almost nothing there. There were some cultural, historical ties in some aspects and I think there was even a Hindu astrologer or something attached to the court. Many of the Thai names, some of the cities, things like that frequently have a Sanskrit Indian background, but it is something for professors of ancient history to study. There was no real vitality to the---there was an Indian population of some not great size and some commercial retail; I think they were largely selling cloth or something like that. But no, there were no real ties. What you had from the Middle East---you'd go down in the streets of Bangkok and you'd see a fair share of Arabs with their Middle East dress, with their flowing white robes, and they had all been there for the good time. This was the sex tour of Thailand and they were very prominently part of that group coming out.

Q: You were a prominent figure in the center of sexual depravity.

LEVIN: That's right.

Q: How did that play out for you? Not personally. Obviously you have a---there had to be problems with this.

LEVIN: Not so much with---Not at that time. You didn't have, or maybe we just weren't aware of this predatory type of thing, the---what the heck, the word escapes me---the child pornography, sexual activity with minors. That wasn't part of the equation. Whatever Americans were coming out there for the sexual aspect of China life, it wasn't an issue. They just came and did what they wanted. We didn't know enough, I think. There wasn't that---To what extent that was taking place I'm sure there was no less than today but today of course---

Q: Probably more.

LEVIN: This outrage; we just weren't aware of it, I would say.

Q: You know, the Internet has changed commerce so that---

LEVIN: Right, right.

Q: ---orders can be placed.

LEVIN: Right.

Q: You know, whatever happens has probably intensified the pornography.

LEVIN: Sure, sure.

Q: We're talking about the really, as you mentioned, predatory activity with children and girls.

LEVIN: Yes, we just didn't---it wasn't on our horizon. We didn't know it. I'm sure it happened; we just didn't know it. And nobody was complaining about it, of course.

Q: Did you have problems with the American staff?

LEVIN: Not really, no. I can't recall any serious issues, no. There were a couple of Americans that got caught up, arrested on narcotics charges and things like that, but no. I can't recall---No, certainly not the staff and certainly no real misbehavior or issues between---as a result of behavior of Americans privately or officially that created problems in the relationship with Thailand. No, nothing like that.

Q: How about Burma now? Were we keeping a Burma watch or what?

LEVIN: No. No, we were paying no attention to Burma from Thailand in '78 to '81. Nope; absolutely nothing, no. Only in the sense that DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) was looking at the narcotics trade and things like that. Thailand at that time was transforming from a grower of the poppy. There were pretty extensive poppy fields in Thailand at one time but the government was dealing with that quite effectively. What you were now having was Thailand being transformed into the manufacturer; the raw material would come out from Burma and along the borders where there'd be various processing plants. Thailand was moving from producing the raw material to becoming the manufacturing and transit point, and the financier of the drug traffic. The crops were being grown essentially in Burma and so there was a lot of this DEA activity involved with that whole border region, particularly in the areas where the remnants of the KMT army were living. That was always an issue.

The Thais, you see, it's interesting; the Thais---the king was a major factor over the years through development of roads, through efforts to introduce alternative crops and through the king's sustained and largely successful effort to uplift the social and educational status of the minority peoples, the hill tribes of Thailand. The king's efforts had a significant impact on reducing the growing of opium, poppies, by the hill tribes people. They had an alternative source of income and they were connected to the society as a whole through a vastly improved transportation system, roads, and a road network essentially. It was a very enlightened approach. Dealing with the financing and little illegal acts that were a different issue. Burma experienced, when I was in Burma, it was like the enemy. When you get a military, a Burmese military who---

Q: You're saying Burma.

LEVIN: Not Burma, where the stuff was grown, who has scorn for the minorities, treating them and looking at them as somewhat less than sub-human because they're not Burmese. And---which provides no other economic opportunity. There's no development there; there are no roads; there's no education; there's no medical services; all that makes it almost impossible to make any progress. So when I was in Burma it became very obvious to me you can use as many chemicals as you want and dump them on somebody's fields but---the real issue is the mistreatment of minorities and the fact that

these people have very few forms of economic activity, whereas in Thailand, which was once the case, it was reversed through some very astute and effective programs by the government, led by the king in this particular instance.

Q: Let's turn to the East. What about the refugee and Laos?

LEVIN: Oh, that was the big issue. That was the issue in Thailand at the beginning, I think '78, '79. The whole question of Thailand was-

Yes. You're bringing up an interesting issue.. In 1978 I believe it was, the Vietnamese invaded---it might have been '77---invaded Cambodia. Cambodia was the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese invaded because of (1) the persistent troublemaking that the Khmer Rouge were making along the border with Vietnam/Cambodia, (2) the incursions of Khmer Rouge, (3) some very major massive massacres of Vietnamese living in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge, and (4) this old ethnic hatred of the Khmer for the Vietnamese, a long history of that. In any event, the Khmer Rouge, through their very aggressive and brutal treatment both in border areas and with the overseas Vietnamese living in Phnom Penh, prompted the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. This produced a huge wave of refugees fleeing the Vietnamese and also taking advantage of the situation to leave Cambodia, which had been wracked by misery as a result of the Khmer Rouge. Within a very short period of time we had a huge influx of Khmer refugees into eastern Thailand. I remember going there as this process was starting and seeing large numbers of starving Khmers, families living under bushes, the children just in desperate straits and coming across them. I was in the embassy jeep and just basically with a couple of associates, a couple of colleagues from the embassy just sort of running a shuttle service from the nearest Thai town, buying biscuits and just a pathetic little effort to try to keep some people alive as many of them were severely suffering from malaria.

In any event, in the midst of this huge flood of refugees, the UN to its great credit with the very effective leadership of the guy who became deputy secretary general of the United Nations, a fellow by the name of Malcolm Brown. He was running the whole thing, building refugee camps right around these people as they were there. It was a huge, enormous effort and it was very much abetted and helped by members of our embassy, the staff. It was a tremendous and very effective handling of the refugee problem. So that was dramatic. It took our attention for several months. The Thais weren't all that keen on having the Khmers there but we prevailed on humanitarian grounds. We did a tremendous job, I think, in keeping many of these people alive, keeping most of them alive. The irony is that a number of these people were the Khmer Rouge here; they were fleeing and so many Asian armies with their families. We were assisting people, I guess, fighting with the Khmer Rouge. These were essentially peasants. It was something of a very major and very successful effort by the U.S. government with a very large component of UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) working on that thing. That took a lot of time, a lot of energy and was a noble and successful U.S. government effort.

Q: When you were there what was going on?

LEVIN: That's when the refugee exodus began.

Q: Really began then?

LEVIN: Yes. This is whole issue of the U.S. policy, which I think they wrongly, for a time---So much of what we did at that time was motivated by this lingering resentment and lingering wounds of having lost in the Vietnam situation. We were trying to move ahead with actual diplomatic recognition of Vietnam, but that was blocked. There was concern about how the Chinese would react to it. I remember writing, with the ambassador's concurrence as I recall, that we should just deal with Vietnam independently. They're ready for some form of engagement with the U.S. government and that, in itself, is something we should do. We should not be overly solicitous to the views of China because at that time China and Vietnam already had a friction very deep. The Washington judgment was that the strategic importance of China outweighed any need to improve the relationship with Vietnam.

Let me give you suddenly a thought; I remember a fairly interesting incident. Do you recall this yellow rain thing?

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: You do?

Q: Supposedly poison.

LEVIN: Yes. This was happening when I was chargé and we began getting all these---I think maybe just before I was chargé. It was building up. I was looking at this thing and a number of people on my staff had been closely associated with our Vietnam effort. They were coming in from visits in the area and talking about the yellow rain, talking to the Hmong who were telling them stories about yellow rain, yellow rain, the Soviet planes, who knew what.

I decided to go visit the area and it was quite apparent from my visit, number one, you could get the Hmong to say anything you wanted them to say. These were basically a people who were out to please and you could stir the direction any way you want. The conversation of something could go any way you wanted to and they would basically agree with you. Any of the people that were out looking into this situation, our people, Americans, I had some suspicions that they were so consumed by this anti-Vietnamese, anti-communist attitude that that it was coloring their reporting on this thing.

I came away from this with very serious reservations about this whole yellow rain. Think of it: they're dropping this powder-like substance from airplanes. You drop a powder-like substance from airplanes you don't have a hell of an idea where it's going to land. I mean it just---And then you were dealing with a, let's say a pre-rational people, certainly not a Western-type thinking. You were dealing with people who were just filled with their own

traditions and superstitions and this could happen and that could happen. In other words I didn't see, from a Western point of view, very much credibility in the stories that I was getting. Oh, they heard the airplane but they didn't see it and then the powder came floating down. It just struck me as farfetched.

Then I went on a little investigation with someone who was sent down from Washington who told me that the Thais had carried out our _____ and everything. I went to all Thai sources and they swore up and down that they never did this. The whole thing just began to have a stench, a very stinky odor about it. Haig was Secretary of State then; the highest levels of our government were going around parroting these things, and Secretary of State Haig was going to make a speech on yellow rain. I mean, this was accusing the Soviets of flying the aircraft and dropping the yellow rain. Haig had a very pronounced anti-Soviet attitude because his concern always was we've got to do anything and everything to placate China because the Soviets are the real adversary and China's the most important nation in the world to us. He had these fixed ideas. To nail the Soviets on the charge of this barbaric poisoning of children of two tribal people and these were the reports he was getting; he was very content to do that. I sat down and I wrote a very long cable saying don't make the speech, that the evidence is faulty and I don't think it really happened. I sent it in, and this was stupid of me; it was such a sensitive subject and the fact---saying that we'd been lying in the past about this and don't carry it forward any more---that I sent it in not through State Department channels but through CIA channels. It was typed--I learned a lesson there---it was super sensitive channels and a few days later Haig goes on and makes the speech. The issue finally over a period of a few years just fades into obscurity and subsequently there are studies about pollen and bee dust and all that. I think it's pretty widely recognized that there was no dropping from aircraft of poisonous yellow powder.

Q: It didn't make any sense.

LEVIN: Yes. I think it's pretty evident now.

Maybe six months, a year later, maybe even longer, Haig comes through Hong Kong and I'm consul general there. We're in a meeting; I said, "You know that speech you made on yellow powder; didn't you ever see my cable? It was addressed to you." And he said, "Burt, I never saw that cable." He then said at that time, "I wish I had; I never would have gone ahead with that speech."

You know, looking back on it, I just have to think that with this resentment over the Vietnam defeat---some of the people in our government, (State, various intelligence agencies which were so identified with our effort to defeat the North Vietnamese) had basically indulged in a black propaganda effort to get at the Vietnamese. This included the suppression---that's the only way I can explain it---the suppression of this very highly sensitive cable. I have no record of it. I don't know where the hell it is; I wish I had it because I laid out in great detail my very deep misgivings over these charges of this yellow rain campaign. I think over time I've been proven right, but it was an interesting and a very educational experience for me.

Q: There are true believers who will---within the bureaucracy---

LEVIN: Absolutely.

Q: The whole Iraq invasion business shows---

LEVIN: Yes. I wish I had sent that through State Department channels, less classified and had copies of it. I was convinced that this was---

Q: Another thing, Burt, you must have had a significant number of people, Americans and others, who were involved in almost the trade of promoting the idea that somehow or another the North Vietnamese had camps full of American prisoners that they weren't---

LEVIN: Oh yes, oh yes.

Q: This was ridiculous but---

LEVIN: Yes. We had a section within the embassy, which was exclusively devoted to the missing in action and the recovery of remains. That section was run by a fellow who had been a special ranger in the U.S. military and played a very heroic and substantial effort in the Vietnam War. A man of great courage and, I must say, a man of great balance. He was going about his job in a very professional way and had no truck with this idea that the Vietnamese were holding large numbers of American prisoners. It just made no sense.

But yes, that was something that was essentially thought out in Washington as a political issue within the United States. We'd get the occasional congressional visitor; this rings a bell. One of the congressmen from California, what's his name, a real right-winger; he's still in the Congress. Dornan? Not Dornan. He came with another colleague. These people were just maybe the extremist fringe of this issue. He was sitting with me in the embassy in Bangkok and telling me there are Americans held in Vietnam my age, and I was saying where's your evidence of that? He was in effect telling me it's too secret to tell me and he was convinced, etc., etc., etc. That was the type of thinking that you've got on this. I know; I have hard, accurate evidence but it's too sensitive. There was a lot of that going around but that was basically a Washington issue. Do you still see it? You go places; they're still flying MIA (Missing in Action) flags.

Q: Oh I know that.

LEVIN: I don't know what, but it was quite evident to us, including the head of this section, that we were dealing with the issue of Americans and tracking down remains. There was no substance to the issue at all.

Q: Back to Hong Kong again?

LEVIN: Yes, as consul general, as CG, yes. We'll do that.

Q: All right, fine. They didn't give you honorary Hong Kong citizenship?

LEVIN: Not quite; not quite. My daughter was born in Hong Kong but she had no claim to either British or Chinese citizenship because we had consular immunity.

LEVIN: Basically I finished Thailand, didn't I? I think so. I think my three years in Thailand, I think we more or less covered that.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: So in late 1981 I'm heading off to Hong Kong.

Q: Okay.

LEVIN: As consul general.

Q: All right. Today is the 10th of September, 2010, with Burt Levin, and we're off to Hong Kong. You were in Hong Kong what, from '81 to when?

LEVIN: Late '81, although I was not---I had a few months before I was formally installed in the post so late '81 until '86; a very long posting.

Q: Oh boy.

LEVIN: Yes. Almost five years. Probably broke the--- certainly the modern record for longevity at the post.

Q: And you were consul general?

LEVIN: Yes, right.

Q: All right. Let's talk about it. What, in '81, was the situation in Hong Kong?

LEVIN: In late '81 Hong Kong was, of course, one of the great models of the economic miracle of Asia. It was a prospering city; it was beginning to establish a wide range of economic ties with the mainland of China. It still had a substantial amount of industry and exports to the world, including the United States; they had a large garment industry, textile industry, light manufacturing, labor intensive, all of which in the ensuing 10-15 years would migrate to China. This was just the beginning of the process. Hong Kong was a thriving city. It was a far cry from the refugee crowded, economically depressed Hong Kong of the 1950s. The shantytowns had disappeared; the city was well run. The city-state, the colony was well run, and it was politically very stable. Pressure groups of professionals, lawyers, doctors were pushing for more power for the local Chinese. In a period of illusionary gradual fashion what rapidly became the main issue and the overwhelming issue throughout the entire time that I was there was the question of Hong

Kong's future, the status of Hong Kong in the years leading up to and following 1997. Let me explain and give a little background on that.

Hong Kong, what we generically call Hong Kong, was acquired by the British in three tranches. The first was in 1840-1841 following the opium war. As an outcome of the opium war the island of Hong Kong, the island itself, was ceded in perpetuity to the British. Then in the 1860s there was a second war between China and the British. As an outcome of that war the peninsula of Kowloon, this is on the China mainland directly across from the island of Hong Kong, the peninsula of Kowloon was ceded in perpetuity to the British. Then in 1898 the British military largely pushed the issue in the sense that they needed something of a buffer zone, something of a larger area for military exercises. The British government leased from what by then was a tottering Manchu government, Ching Dynasty Court, and underwent ---arranged for a lease, a lease of what is called the "new territories." That lease was to last for 99 years, i.e., to be up in 1997, which of course when it concluded in 1898 it seemed like an eternity. Now here comes 1981 and the issue beginning to bother the business community of Hong Kong is what will be the situation in 1997 when the lease expires.

Is that fairly clear?

Q: Yes it is. Was the issue at the time the new territories or the whole of Kowloon and the island?

LEVIN: No, it just was the British pushing for a larger---basically pushing for a larger colony. Rather than seizing it or just taking it away from an enfeebled Chinese government the British at that time and the UK probably had reached the zenith of colonial acquisition and already some voices were being raised against expansion of the empire. More importantly the British didn't want to assume sovereignty just through one pretext or another to acquire the territory as they did the island of Hong Kong and the peninsula of Kowloon. They didn't want to give ---see the example of the pretext for other countries, which at the time were preying on China to carve China into---and seize their own colonies within China. Spheres of influence, concessions, etc. were fine, but the British wanted to maintain essentially the territorial integrity of China; they wanted an enfeebled Chinese government to continue to hold sway over most of China because under those circumstances the British had a major, the major, overwhelming economic and even political power in the most important areas of China. That was the Yangtze Valley. So the British didn't want to---by annexing the new territories permanently---they didn't want to start off or race among other countries to seize parts of China. The British wanted to maintain China's territorial integrity because they benefited from that circumstance.

Q: When you were there was the question strictly focused on the new territories when the lease was up or was it assumed that if the new territories go, the whole colony goes?

LEVIN: You ask the most pertinent, incisive and, knowing you, brilliant question of all. The new territories---by then it had all been integrated into this whole of Hong Kong. The new territories existed---consisted of probably five-sixths of the entire area of what we call Hong Kong. Moreover, most of the industry of Hong Kong was located in the new territories. At one time, even in the early '50s, it had something of a rural cast. By the early 1980s major cities had been developed in the new territories, huge areas of industry. Hong Kong's airport was in the new territories. The British very early on realized that they could not separate out the new territories from the fate of the other parts of Hong Kong, that it was an integrated whole. It would be impossible, for example, to say to the Chinese, okay, 1997 is up; take the new territories and we will, according to the existing treaties we will keep what is ours, i.e., what had been ceded in perpetuity. The British very early on, faced with the reality of the situation, treated Hong Kong as an integrated whole, and negotiated over the entire future of Hong Kong. They could not have singled out the new territories and just focused on the new territories and dealt with it in terms of a "1997 okay, it's back to you and things." So the answer to your question is it was all tied together as in reality it was tied together in dealing with the Chinese over the issue; it was all tied together.

Q: As consul general, you mentioned before that the post almost ran itself. Managing the consulate wasn't of major interest; it was all looking to China. When you got there in '81 was there more of an emphasis on Hong Kong itself from an American official's point of view?

LEVIN: We had a residual interest in China. I was commenting on China policy. I would be commenting on China's relationship with the Soviet Union on what was going on in geopolitical terms in the region. We had that residual interest. Our embassy in Beijing, by then we had an embassy, and Hong Kong's consulate, the consul general in China, they had the lead. We still had the residual function but with the issue of Hong Kong's future coming to the fore there was a tremendous interest in Washington, the government and throughout American industry because (1) Hong Kong was so important in terms of its direct trade with the United States; (2) the United States was a source of imports of so many consumer goods and (3) equally as what was beginning to emerge as the---as a hub for U.S. involvement with China at that time.

Many companies, which were seeking entry into the China market, which were seeking investment in China, conducted their activities in Hong Kong. Hong Kong had by then become the means by which to orchestrate American economic and trade interests with China, the way to deal with them; go through Hong Kong, go through Hong Kong. Hong Kong had become important because of (1) its own inherent economic importance, (2) its role as the middleman between China and the United States and finally and overwhelmingly (3) the fierce U.S. interest in the fate of Hong Kong. What was going to happen to this world financial center, a major component of U.S. dealings, economic dealings with China, and then the fate of six million people who were enjoying a prosperous living standard and now who were faced with the possibility of being taken over by what we saw as an authoritarian communist government. This government was barely out from the legacy of this horrendous cultural revolution. So there was

tremendous interest in Hong Kong almost from the time I got there over the issue of the future of Hong Kong.

Q: When you went there in '81 what was your--- you'd been in the area for a long time; what did you think---how---, doing a projection---what did you think was going to happen?

LEVIN: Okay. Let me first say I got there around November of '81, and even though I had not been formally installed in the post I called on the governor of Hong Kong, a fellow by the name of MacLehose, Murray MacLehose, Sir Murray MacLehose. Now MacLehose was an old British Foreign Service type, a person who had Chinese language capabilities and who during the war was working on China issues. In this first, very first meeting with him---I didn't have any instructions or anything---I raised the question with MacLehose. I said that---in essence I said that---I didn't understand or I implied where I made the point that I thought the British were wrong in trying to press upon China negotiations over the 1997 issue. At the time it was pretty clear that the question of negotiating this issue of new territories and the expiration of the lease in 1997 was being pushed by the British. The Chinese were showing very little appetite to come to terms with the issue, to sit down and try and work it out. One had the impression that the Chinese weren't quite sure in their own minds how to deal with it and moreover didn't want to take it up at that particular time.

I made the point to MacLehose. I said that the Chinese position on Hong Kong over the years had been very clear. That consisted of (1)---and this had been reiterated many times over the years by the Chinese---all the treaties governing the status of Hong Kong, the treaty of 1841, the treaty of 1862, the ones that had ceded Hong Kong and Kowloon in perpetuity to China and then the subsequent lease of the new territories, all of those treaties were illegal. They had been forced at the barrel of a gun upon a government that did not represent the Chinese people, a Manchu government. This was a separate ethnic group, the Ching Dynasty, the Manchus, and therefore the Chinese government declared these treaties illegal.

(2) The second point is that Hong Kong, all of Hong Kong we're talking about, is Chinese territory. Then it follows that the Chinese will recover their sovereignty over Hong Kong when the time is right. This had been the consistent Chinese position for 25-30 years, voiced at irregular intervals. I said to MacLehose, you take this Chinese position and what they're saying is that 1997 is a meaningless date. They---It's illegal. Everything's illegal. I said why don't the British take that into account? What was hanging the British up and why they were pushing for this thing is that all mortgages in the new territory---If you built a factory in the new territory, if you built an apartment complex in the new territory, you---your rights to that property were limited to the day before the expiration of the ninety-nine year lease. By 1981 or 1982, early '82, you had only fifteen years to enjoy the rights of property; most mortgages in Hong Kong were only for fifteen years. There was this very practical problem of: are people going to invest in the territories, is there going to be any kind of real estate office _____, etc., with the knowledge that whatever lease you have is going to expire one day before 1997---I think

June 30, 1997. Banks weren't going to be willing to issue mortgages for longer than that period.

There was this practical thing. I was telling---I was suggesting to Murray that what they do is simply, in a very minor key, say that from here on in all leases in the new territory would be with an indefinite expiration date. Just make this low key announcement I said and probably the Chinese will come back with a rhetorical blast. They will say, "We don't care what the British do, what they say, what the imperialists say, etc. Our stand on this has been resolute: all those treaties are legal and the Chinese people will recover these lost territories when the time is right." Then you're home clear. There's a certain amount of uncertainty there but you've been living with this uncertainty for years. Murray said---MacLehose said they couldn't do that because the whole British position in Hong Kong was premised on these treaties. To try and do anything like that---and he went into a great technical answer---it would violate orders and council, etc.

In other words the British position was very---probably a position we would have taken and that was a Western legal thing. We have these legal rights and that's why we're here; we're exercising and we'll proceed according to this legal right. In a way you had something that had been evident in 150 years of contact between China and the West: the West insisting on its legal rights and the Chinese dealing with it because there was no legal system in China in terms of their own politics of the issue. My sense that the British might have avoided this showdown on Hong Kong in some way fudged this whole issue and that, as far as the British were concerned, that was an impossibility. It was a good, interesting exchange and I still wonder in the back of my mind what would have happened if the British had pursued it along those lines. In any event the issue was joined.

Q: Did you find that your post was much more aligned to the economic side of things now than the political?

LEVIN: Increasingly, increasingly, with the exception of this growing interest in the fate of Hong Kong. There was far more attention to the economics of---our economic relationship, yes, because of the importance of Hong Kong to China. Our economic dealings with China were an inherent importance, intrinsic importance of Hong Kong. Yes, economics---but then came the issue of Hong Kong's future, which just dominated the whole picture. One could in a sense call that a political issue. What was basically the remainder of my---remainder of the entire period of my tenure in Hong Kong was taken up with the whole question of Hong Kong's future: how would China deal with Hong Kong, what would the terms of any agreement between China and Britain, what would they be, and if the settlement was arrived at how would China deal with Hong Kong when it was restored to Chinese sovereignty. This then was the overwhelming issue.

Q: In a way you seem to be trapped. There you are on an island where the decision is going to be made a thousand miles away in Beijing or somewhere. Was there anyone to talk to on the Chinese side to figure out what the hell's going to happen?

LEVIN: We---This was an issue between the British and the Chinese. We were keenly interested in the outcome but the British---certainly the Chinese made clear they didn't want our deep involvement and the British also kept us---made it clear that it was their issue; it was their negotiation.

Q: Absolutely. We didn't want it, did we?

LEVIN: We probably---some persons would have. What was very clear from the outset--and I had a very close relationship with the governor and certainly then with the governor who succeeded Murray, a fellow by the name of Youde---I'm trying to think of his first name---Teddy Youde and his advisors---they had political advisors from the British Foreign Office. These people I knew from my earlier stay in Hong Kong and this was the---a major part of the British negotiating team with the Hong Kong governor who had previously served as, if I'm not mistaken, served as UK ambassador to China. He was a China expert, a delightful, wonderful, extraordinarily talented man. His advisors, most of whom were personal friends, were very accomplished people. Through this personal relationship but more importantly through the British recognition of the importance of Hong Kong to the United States and the importance of the United States to Hong Kong. We had made Hong Kong what it was economically, in a way, so that they kept us very closely informed to what was going on in negotiations between the---

Q: We're talking about when you arrived there sixteen years, seventeen years ago; what was there to negotiate? Was the date up in the air the whole time you were there?

LEVIN: It was pretty firm that come July 1, 1997, there would be a---that unless something was agreed on between China and the UK Hong Kong's status would change. The British realized that this was not only the new territories but that they couldn't hold on to the rest of the place. What the decision was, and again, given the business community's growing uncertainty, now sixteen years seems like a long time. It certainly did to me, but still there was this sense of---I was saying earlier on the question of mortgages, owning property or leasing property, etc., that there was a growing sense within Hong Kong's business community that this uncertainty about 1997 had to be resolved. This drove the British negotiation; this drove the British to urge the Chinese to sit down and negotiate. The Chinese were just reluctant.

Q: Why were they reluctant?

LEVIN: I don't think they had their mind made up on how they going to handle this particular issue. They had so many other major issues to deal with I just think the sense was that this is a tough, thorny issue for China. One could just say well it's ours and we're going to pack but they realized the economic significance of Hong Kong. It just was tough and they weren't anxious to deal with it at that time. That was my sense of it. They were looking at it; there's a lot of time to deal with this issue. The British and the Hong Kong business community was saying no, we've got to deal with it now. So these negotiations lasted about two or three years and finally a settlement was achieved in 1983. Throughout this entire period there was this great, great question of how would

Hong Kong's fate be settled. There was tremendous uncertainty in Hong Kong as to the outcome and this uncertainty drove---produced a certain amount of fear in Hong Kong and the sense that---among many, particularly among the wealthy and among the business community---that Hong Kong was facing a very---that Hong Kong, that the Hong Kong that they knew and that we knew was in dire danger of being extinguished when the Chinese took over Hong Kong. In other words there was tremendous uncertainty about the future of Hong Kong as these negotiations got underway. That uncertainty was heightened by the difficulty of the negotiations.

Q: You must have been under tremendous pressure by Americans with interests in Hong Kong, businesspeople and all, saying okay Mr. Consul General, where is it going, what should I do?

LEVIN: That's right, that's right. First of all there was tremendous, wonderful close cooperation between the Chamber of Commerce and the Consul General. The American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong certainly by then was one of the largest American Chambers of Commerce overseas; it was---and the leadership, these are all old buddies of mine, so it was a very close and cooperative relationship. What my position was---and I made this very clear and I---the issue was joined. I then went back to Washington on home leave. I can't quite remember the sequence, but I was away from post for a month or so, maybe a couple of months and then I came back to formally take up my duties as consul general. I looked over the consular reporting and the consular reporting was---in essence---was saying uh oh, Hong Kong is in great danger. When the Chinese take over or if the Chinese take over there's no hope for Hong Kong. That basically was the tenor of our reporting, a very dark picture of Hong Kong's future. I sat down, and this must have been in early '82, and I sent in an analysis, which set forth a fairly optimistic view of the situation on Hong Kong.

Now this optimism was based on a number of things: I pointed out that Hong Kong was extremely vulnerable to the Chinese. Hong Kong's water supply and Hong Kong's food supply, all this was totally dependent on China. China, by means of a telephone call, by means of cutting off the water, by means of sanctioning food exports to Hong Kong, simply by saying, "It's ours; the time has come; we want it back." China could have totally destabilized Hong Kong at any time of its choosing, but China never did that. It had this capability. Also keep in mind that Hong Kong was the product of the most degrading incident in modern Chinese history, the opium war. In Chinese eyes the downfall of this civilization, this culture, this shining thing known as China, this celestial empire, the downfall dates from the opium war. This is a very simplified reading of history but this is what so many Chinese believe, including probably the government. China's hundred-odd years of humiliation in China began with the opium war. It was the British and it was that single most reviled incident in the eyes of the Chinese that set China on this spiral downward. Here was Hong Kong. So they had tremendous historical antagonism toward the British with the opium war and Hong Kong; they had that reason.

In 1950 when the British were in Korea fighting alongside the U.S., the British had a sizeable contingent in Korea, fighting the Chinese. Here was Hong Kong, that all this

period, the Cultural Revolution when China went crazy with this very easy capability of plunging Hong Kong into turmoil, the Chinese left Hong Kong alone. It's amazing that they did so. The colony---the Chinese were foremost in this anti-colonial movement in the '50s and '60s, the head of this anti-colonial movement, that anti-imperialism movement and historical grievances against Britain, this visible symbol of shame, the continued occupation of Chinese territory by an imperialist country and radical cult they left it alone when they could have easily plunged it into turmoil. One can only conclude that throughout this period of time Hong Kong was of a very significant economic importance to China. In the 1950s during the Korean War and time when we imposed draconian sanctions on China as a result of Korea and as a result of the ensuing Panama City toward this communist, younger brother of the Soviet Union, Hong Kong was the place where many of our controls were evaded through the smuggling networks. It was Hong Kong that was basically China's only outlet to the rest of the economically developed world, the western world. It was Hong Kong. It was also Hong Kong though its purchases of Chinese food and subsequently Chinese water that was the major earner of foreign exchange for the Peoples Republic of China.

Q: Were you getting, either at the time or maybe later, any insight into the Chinese politburo? Mao Zedong or others? how they viewed Hong Kong during this long period of time?

LEVIN: No, no. Only through inference, only through the historical thing. This analysis, as I was saying---I first went to learn historical things about how China had been so patient and so tolerant on Hong Kong and why I thought this was the reason that China did not devour Hong Kong: I laid out this thing that in its most radical phase and given all its historical grievances and all the logical assumptions that China would devour Hong Kong, they left it alone. Then I made the point that whatever their economic interest in the past had been, these had been greatly enhanced by Chinese policy now.

Beginning in 1978, opening up to the outside world, encouraging foreign investment, encouraging trade and a total reversal of this policy of self-reliance that Mao had imposed on China was a drive toward economic development that was incredibly tied up with encouraging foreign investment in China and encouraging Chinese exports to the outside world. Hong Kong was providing the capital; Hong Kong entrepreneurs were now investing in China. Hong Kong was providing the banking facilities. Hong Kong Chinese in conjunction with some Taiwanese Chinese were providing the managerial expertise that the whole opening of China and this whole tremendous emphasis that Deng Xiaoping was putting on economic development, Hong Kong was central to this policy. A functioning, thriving Hong Kong was essential to this new Chinese policy of economic development. Other facts are historical tolerance, economic interest, and magnified economic interest.

Then I made the other point that in dealing with Hong Kong China had to keep in mind Taiwan. What China wanted was a peaceful reunification of Taiwan with China and what China was proposing for Hong Kong was something that it earlier had proposed for Taiwan. It was something that originally was designed for Taiwan: One country, two

systems. They're telling the Hong Kong Chinese you can keep everything you want, keep your system, we guarantee a continuation of the capitalist system for 50 years after 1997 to 2047, whatever, and nothing would change. The only thing would be that Hong Kong people would run Hong Kong, i.e., British leadership out and Hong Kong reversion to Chinese sovereignty. China would deal with Hong Kong's foreign policy issues, everything but---everything in terms of domestic rule, the existing Hong Kong system, control over immigration, etc., etc., everything would stay the same but it would be Hong Kong Chinese money in Hong Kong. The British would be out.

The Chinese were very conscious of the fact that how they handled Hong Kong would have implications for Taiwan at some future point. They had no expectation that 'oh, they settle Hong Kong then boom, Taiwan would fall.' They didn't realize that had they screwed up the Hong Kong thing, had they taken over Hong Kong and then it just collapsed in chaos their effort to encourage, to lure, to entice, whatever you want to call it, Taiwan over time into a reunification scenario would be hopeless. Taiwan would have taken one look at Hong Kong, said what's going on with Hong Kong, the hell with it; we don't want any part of that. So there were implications for the whole issue of Taiwan.

I threw that all together in an analysis and then I finally said, "There is China trying to show the world that this is a new China." In terms of its own self image how it would look in the eyes of its own people if they were to take this thriving world center of finance, a major economic hub which, as a result of reversion to China, is turned into a garbage heap. I said this would have quite a psychological impact on China itself and on the way the Chinese people would view their own leadership. It just wouldn't be very good for China's image to create chaos in Hong Kong. All these things I sent in as my analysis of what the situation was. This is basically what I believed to be the dynamic of the Hong Kong situation.

Q: How was this received in Washington over time?

LEVIN: Ah, you ask a very interesting question. It was challenged. People would come out and say you're crazy and look what China's done to China, etc., etc. I remember some guy coming out from CIA, giving a conventional, what I would call very Western-centric, view of this: oh the police are going to be corrupt; there is going to be corruption from China coming in and then China won't be able to keep its hands off, etc., etc. A lot of this. Of course one couldn't totally rule that out.

Then my leadership in State Department, assistant secretary for EAP, was a man by the name of Paul Wolfowitz. Paul Wolfowitz was---let's say his views on China were very strong. A very strident anti-communist, you know, the communists---to him China was still basically---he was opposed to any sense that this is a China that you can somehow work with and deal with. His views were views that were fairly common among what I would call the neo-conservatives as we subsequently called them. We had been too kind to China; we were too soft on Chinese communists. We should be stalwart in our support of Taiwan and a whole litany of this fervent anti-communist sentiment that the neo-conservatives embraced. He never said so directly to me but I'm sure he thought I was a

raving idiot. I will say this: years later, many years later after I was out of the government and before George W. Bush took over, I think it was probably early---I can't remember exactly but several years after the PRC took over---Hong Kong reverted to PRC sovereignty. Wolfowitz came over to me at a function at, I think it was in Nanjing, the University of Nanjing, he walked over to me and said, "Burt, you were right on Hong Kong. " So I will give him credit for that.

The place where my views were accepted and endorsed was by the American business community in Hong Kong. Obviously they had an important stake in trying to persuade their home offices to maintain involvement in Hong Kong and to buck up the American business community by painting a picture that was not as bleak as one would think from just a surface view. We worked very closely, the business community and the consulate general.

My whole function at the time was to report back to Washington what was going on in negotiations and there were some rocky moments in the negotiations. There were--- particularly there were some strident differences in 1982 when Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher met. It was not a particularly---I think it was '82, maybe '83---happy meeting and it became pretty well known that the negotiations between the British and the Chinese were not going well. One time---I think this was in the fall of '82, I'm pretty sure it was---you had panic reigning in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong dollar, which had traded at 5.7 to the U.S. dollar, 5.7, suddenly in the street was now going at 11 to one. Merchants in stores were refusing to accept Hong Kong currency in some instances. Hoarding of rice and other basic commodities was starting and you got a sense of growing panic. To me all along I was fairly confident that the British and the Chinese would settle the issue but the great danger was of implosion, that Hong Kong would rip itself apart because of the uncertainty as to how and when some form of agreement would be reached. This was happening. It was at that time that the Hong Kong government decided to peg the Hong Kong dollar to the U.S. dollar at 7.8 to one. I think that scenario of growing panic was a huge catalyst in bringing the Chinese and British together again and negotiating with more of a sense of urgency and a greater willingness to make necessary compromises to reach an agreement. An agreement finally was reached in September, in I think '83.

Q: Were the negotiations being carried on in Hong Kong?

LEVIN: No. Negotiations were in Beijing. I'm sure there were some side negotiations.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: Negotiations were incredibly complex---a huge number of subjects to be covered and things like that. The British---We were kept totally informed and a constant stream of reporting we did on that. We were the point by which we---not Beijing, not the embassy in Beijing but through the British government in Hong Kong that---we were the focal point of contact between the British and U.S. Government on how the negotiations were doing and what was going on. I was told by the British political advisor that---asked to

keep this in great secrecy because----he told me that we were being informed to an extent that none of the Commonwealth, not even Canada nor Australia, were being as closely informed as we were.

Q: Did you sense from the British you were talking to in Hong Kong that---did they say okay, we're going to go through some rough patches but this is going to work out? Or did they know where it was going?

LEVIN: No, I think what you had is there were splits in the British government; you had Thatcher as prime minister and running London. The head office had more of a hard line approach to dealing with China whereas the governor of Hong Kong and his staff, who were a very major part of the negotiating team, had a more accommodating position on Hong Kong: in other words the sense that there could be a success for Hong Kong. The British hope, of course, was essentially to acknowledge, in a way, Chinese sovereignty, to turn over Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty but somehow work out a continuation of an administrative role by a British led government. You know Hong Kong with a very small executive-led governor was a typical colonial governor. He could overrule anything and everything. He had an executive counselor, and a legislative counselor, which were largely advisory. What the British hoped to do, I think, was to preserve the essence of power while giving the symbolism of sovereignty, restoring it to China. The Chinese would have nothing to do. They made clear very surely that no, no as far as they were concerned Hong Kong had to be run by Hong Kong Chinese.

Q: You're talking about the business community, the American business community but also in Hong Kong, I've never served there but I would assume that you probably had some of the most astute businessmen, Chinese businessmen in the world located there.

LEVIN: Absolutely.

Q: And what were they---you must have been in close contact with them.

LEVIN: Absolutely. You're absolutely right. It was interesting; it was fascinating because many of these Chinese businessmen were astute but they really didn't have any sense of Chinese politics. I mean these are people who were cut off from China for many, many years and who were engrossed in their own business activities in Hong Kong and worldwide. Yes, they knew something and, as Chinese, obviously, they had their contacts in China but they couldn't really feel that they had a handle on this situation. They would come to me. In my mind a memorable situation where---You've heard of the name Li Ka-shing?

Q: Not really, no.

LEVIN: Li Ka-shing is probably one of the richest people in the---

Q: Oh yes, is he tankers?

LEVIN: He's got investments all over, very wealthy; he's very successful. If you talk about Hong Kong business, I mean that's the name that comes; Li Ka-shing. I don't know how they Romanize it in the States but anyway, he invited me out on his boat one day and he had with him---and I thought I knew Hong Kong businessmen quite well---the major leading Hong Kong businessmen. Very often they had some veneer of westernization, some ability to speak some English. Interestingly Li Ka-shing's English was non-existent; he's a real Chinese Chinese but hugely successful; probably the richest man in Hong Kong, which is saying something. He had on this boat three or four guys whom I had never met before. They were from his own region in China, Chaozh, but their business was essentially in Hong Kong. He wanted me, he asked me for a briefing, to give a briefing on the Hong Kong-China situation. I gave a briefing, which consisted of what I had earlier told you, but I had to do it in Chinese.

The point simply being that there was a tremendous amount of attention paid by the Hong Kong business community to what America thought about the future of Hong Kong. That was a role that we played in a major way in Hong Kong. I knew that the consulate's view, and the consul general's, which was then seen as the American view, was a major factor in how the Hong Kong business community, and the Hong Kong people as a whole, would deal with this uncertainty. With Hong Kong beset with huge uncertainty and at times in danger of imploding because of this uncertainty being very real, the function that I saw for the consulate general and that the American Chamber of Commerce saw for itself, and therefore we were working closely in cooperation, was to create an impression of American confidence in the future of Hong Kong. Any sign of a loss of American confidence because America was vital to Hong Kong's economic well-being, any sign that American business was withdrawing from Hong Kong, that the American government was pessimistic and all that, that would have been, in my view, the straw that broke the camel's back.

I saw it as my role, and I went out on a very full program of public speaking and writing on this question of Hong Kong and providing analysis of the kind that I had provided to Washington. There's nothing confidential about it, of why I thought Hong Kong would weather this uncertainty and have a satisfactory outcome to this question of negotiation. What their final terms and negotiations would be, I didn't know, but I just had the sense that the Chinese would---that it was a major national interest to China to see that Hong Kong weathered this successfully and that would be the key to the future.

Q: It might be rational and all, but China in particular under Mao, the Cultural Revolution and thousands, the Great Leap Forward and all that, had been irrational as all hell.

LEVIN: Right.

Q: Did you feel that this is because the new generation was taking over, that there was rationality there or---?

LEVIN: Oh sure, sure, that the whole Mao policy had been discredited, yes; that they were embarking on a new direction, absolutely. Going back to what I said earlier, that throughout this whole irrationality they tiptoed on the Hong Kong issue, on an issue that one would have thought would have really been of such great emotional importance, British opium war, colonial possession of our own territory, sacredness of Chinese soil, etc., etc. They left it alone. So even when they were irrational they seemed to have a little spot which allowed a different treatment of Hong Kong.

The thing was yes, China had taken a very significant turn and it was evident. We'd go into China then; we began to go visit South China in 1981, 1982 and boom you'd go there and it would be a dinner. They'd put on a dinner for you and your host would try and get you drunk, the way they used to do in Taiwan in the '70s. There'd be these girls in these slinky Chinese dresses with the split up to their armpit almost and boy, in two, three years, since the demise of---it was five, six years since the demise of Mao and three, four years since Deng Xiaoping came to power, there'd been tremendous changes. One absolutely had the sense that this was a different China and that was a major factor in the whole thing. If they didn't go crazy on Hong Kong when they were crazy on everything else, now they're not crazy anymore. I say that's a pretty good sign for the future of Hong Kong.

Q: What was happening on the consular side of things?

LEVIN: Every, every influential Chinese, every major businessman, everybody who tried to get to know me, tried to invite me, tried---they wanted an American visa in their passports just in case, just in case. So I was a very, very sought after figure in Hong Kong. I'll tell you an anecdote about this.

In---oh, I can't remember, maybe '83, '84---we had a visit in Hong Kong by Governor William Clinton of Arkansas. Whenever there was a governor visiting, and we had CODELs by the bushel, particularly with this uncertainty about the future of Hong Kong, we had CODELs. We had executives from American businesses and corporations; everybody drawn to the scene highlighted and questioned Hong Kong's future in briefing after briefing and discussion after discussion. Whenever a prominent American, or a CODEL, you know how it is, governor or anybody, I had a cocktail reception for them at the residence.

Q: Sure.

LEVIN: So out went the invitations for the reception for Governor Clinton of Arkansas. Well I get a very paltry response to that. The people---the businessmen of Hong Kong were very practical in that sense they didn't see much prospect of business between Hong Kong and Arkansas. So I made a few phone calls, sort of cashing in my check; in effect saying hey, I want you there. I got a very satisfactory response, simply because---not by force of personality, not that I was such an endearing fellow. They responded simply for the pragmatic realization and in some cases the desire for American visas they wanted to stay on my good side. They cultivated me; let's put it this way.

Q: Speaking as somebody who ran the consular section in Seoul, for example, and other places, how did you deal with your business---other contacts who said, "Say, Mr. Consul General, I really want to get a visa for somebody" and all that; how did you deal with that?

LEVIN: Mostly by trying to get them a visa. Unless it was obvious, the decision basically was in the hands of the guy running the consular section. If I thought it was of particular importance I would call down, and then the guy running the consular section at that time was responsible. There are times when this creates friction between the front office and the consular section, but we didn't have that. I didn't overdo it and most of these people would have gotten visas anyway. What they wanted was this unlimited entry kind of thing, and we were fairly responsive because we're talking about people who were very prominent. If they came to the U.S. they'd probably bring hundreds of millions of dollars with them. We had huge lines around the consular section, waiting for a U.S. visa, trying to get U.S. visas and the consular section dealt with it. We had no PR problems in terms of American visas. There was a rush on the part of many in Hong Kong to leave and many did go to Canada or Australia.

Wealthy people bought themselves out; there was Salvadorian or God knows Nicaraguan passports and things like that. So everybody was making these contingency arrangements and many people actually followed through on them, traveling abroad, setting up their families abroad while they still stayed in Hong Kong. Keep in mind that many of these businessmen were refugees from China so they wanted to be in a position where if things went bad that they could, they and their families could, get out. A lot of these arrangements were made and interestingly in the subsequent years when it became quite clear that the Chinese would not screw up Hong Kong, particularly in the years after 1997, many who had gone abroad out of concern for where China---where Hong Kong would be post 1997, have now returned to Hong Kong.

Q: Was there any concern on your part---in the way you were acting by saying things are going to be all right and keeping people in place; it wasn't as dangerous but it had some of the elements of an ambassador saying this country is dangerous because it would screw up the-

LEVIN: Right, right, right. A very interesting point. Here's what I did. I had Vietnam in mind; I was aware of Vietnam. I knew how our ambassadors were telling---

Q: Graham Parsons and all.

LEVIN: Yes, and how great the situation was, etc. I was telling---in a sense I was looking like a case of clientitis. It will be all right. It's going to be all right but I really felt it was going to be all right. I called in my staff, however, and I said look, these are my views. If you have contrary views, you just write them; they'll go through. I'm not going to stop anybody's views but I will tell you this: I don't want anyone talking outside. I even sent out a memo, a classified memo to all Americans. I said I don't want---if you feel

differently than I do, your channel of communication to Washington is wide open. I made the point I don't want conformity reporting. I know what happened in Vietnam. I don't want---I have complete freedom of expression. I do not want you to express these views to Hong Kong Chinese. I don't want some code-clerk or some secretary speaking to a Chinese girlfriend or a Chinese boyfriend and saying, "Oh boy, things are terrible." That would be seen as an expression of an American view. If somebody in the American consulate was saying things are terrible, and the state of public opinion was very delicate, I said that those views you keep to channels within the United States government. That was my position. I did not want to follow in the footsteps of so many of our principal officers in the Foreign Service who were blithely optimistic in creating a picture of something that would not mesh with reality. I was reporting all the problems, all the worries, all the things but coming to the point that I thought it would work out all well for the reasons that I cited earlier. Moreover I gave public speeches on that thing. I was doing it with the blessing and the thanks of the Hong Kong government because they too were tremendously concerned about the state of public opinion.

Q: What about the true believers? We're talking about the neo-coms whom we've ready discussed. Communists are evil, and I'm talking about back in Washington. What was happening? What about the pressure on you and---

LEVIN: There's Congress; they were passing this resolution and that resolution and this resolution and I mean all resolutions, which express concern about this and that. They didn't have any real effect because we were in the middle of negotiations. What they showed, both to the British and the Chinese, was a substantial volume of opinion in the United States that said, "Oh, these are communists; they can't be trusted no matter what." There was a strong current of that: Hong Kong's doomed period. Uncertainty was such a strong feeling as witnessed by the many people with their contingency arrangements. There was uncertainty and there was the sense that it would be all right. It was not a very dominant feeling in Hong Kong.

When the agreement finally was signed in September of '83, even skeptics, people who did not have too much hope, looked at it and said it's a pretty good agreement. I think following the signing of the agreement in '83 there was a measure of restoration of optimism about the future of Hong Kong.

Q: When the agreement was signed in '83, how did you see it? In the first place, did you think this was going to hold? Was this pretty much the way it was going to be or?

LEVIN: Yes, yes I did, yes. I saw no reason for China to mess up Hong Kong. I thought there would always be----the Chinese were in a position through various subtle means to exert influence on the Hong Kong Chinese who would be running Hong Kong,. I thought that there'd be an evolutionary accretion of Chinese influence and direction over Hong Kong because, after all, they were the dominant force and it was Chinese territory. I thought the basics of the agreement would hold, that everything would be done in a subtle way. There was a whole question of was the press going to continue to be free, are the reporters going to shade their stories, editorial writers shade their editorials because

China is looming there? The South China Morning Post, the leading British-English language newspaper, which had been in the hands of British interests and now was bought out by a wealthy Malaysian Chinese who was close to Beijing, would that retain its independence? Thoughts of that sort; all these issues were up there floating after the agreement. In the end yes, the press is as free as ever; there are protests and memorials on every day. A few thought the Tiananmen incident as processions of vandals through the streets of Hong Kong. The Chinese have been pretty good about keeping their hands off. I'm sure this---there's a subterranean, subtle influence in there obviously; that's to be expected. In terms of the basics of Hong Kong society, if you go to Hong Kong now and you hadn't been there in 20, 30 years and you were an old veteran of Hong Kong, you wouldn't notice any changes in Hong Kong.

Q: The Hong Kong people were, like New Yorkers or something. They're a people, a people removed so that almost an infection of democracy isn't very likely to spread much out from Hong Kong.

LEVIN: I think what you're dealing with is---There was no democracy under the British. Don't kid yourself. There was freedom, a freedom limited to some extent during the years of British rule. You're not going to get a Chinese newspaper to say the Queen is a lesbian or anything like that. It's not going to happen. Censorship was something; no Chinese newspaper would denounce the Hong Kong governor, things like that.

There was freedom; there were basic freedoms but there was always this worry that these freedoms would erode under the Chinese. Well, they really haven't, but you're right; this issue of democracy, of voting and things like that, it's something of a continuing issue in Hong Kong. Under the British, as I was saying earlier; it was the educated Hong Kong elite, the Chinese, who wanted to play the Chinese role in British Hong Kong. Now you have the Chinese role in British Hong Kong.

You get pressure for greater popular participation in the political process, i.e., move to a greater democracy. The pressures are there but they're not overwhelming because you're dealing with Hong Kong Chinese most of whom---there's a British legacy. If there were no popular participation under the British and more importantly in the Chinese culture, there would not be this sense of hey, you know, this government should be beholden to me, should be responsive to me, I have every right to choose the government that's over my head. There's none of that sense. There are still people who will say oh you're just being culturally imperialistic, people think differently, etc. For those who just think that democracy is innate and is genetic in every human being in the world, I would say in Hong Kong your average citizen right now, his focus is on his economic situation---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: ---The economic situation as well; he's not standing up there saying I want the right to choose my government. Not in Hong Kong. I haven't seen it. I still don't see it. There are more people now who are better educated, and have a higher standing in

professions and society who think that way and therefore the pressure is there but it's not overwhelming.

Q: With the '83 agreement and all, did things change for you? Was there a shadow Chinese representative in the city---?

LEVIN: Oh yes, there always was. The New China News Agency, which was---in Hong Kong this was the Chinese embassy in Hong Kong. You couldn't have an embassy because Hong Kong was part of China in their view. But yes, I began dealing with the head of the New China Agency back in '77 when I was there as the deputy for a year or so. That guy was something of a cipher but then in early '80s, '81, '82, they sent out somebody who'd been a member of their central committee. He couldn't speak any English but boy he quickly got into the elite Chinese business and social circles and enjoyed the good high life in Hong Kong. I saw him regularly at dinners and functions, things like that, occasionally meetings. As a matter of fact we came to rely importantly on my wife who, whenever the Chinese ran a function, would sit her next to him because she could interpret for him way better than his own interpreter. We had a good relationship, sure. He wasn't going to give me any inside information on how the Chinese were handling negotiations but we had a relationship.

Q: You had about three years after the agreement had been signed; not much was going to happen, was it?

LEVIN: No. It settled down. It really settled down and there was a certain amount of a sense that the agreement was pretty good. The terms were essentially guaranteed by the Chinese; there would be some Brits left in some positions in the government but the governor would be a Chinese. The governor would be chosen through a very restricted election means, which meant that the Chinese would have tremendous influence as to who the governor was. But there was a sense that it was a pretty good agreement. There were some lingering doubts and particularly in the right wing of American powerful that thought you can't trust a Chinese; they'll never follow through, etc., etc. After the agreement was signed there was, I would say, a fairly significant sigh of relief in Hong Kong.

Q: Is there anything else we should---anything else we should discuss---?

LEVIN: No. Just as a footnote, what really threw this whole thing into a tremendously renewed anxiety, and feeling of foreboding on the part of Hong Kong, the people of Hong Kong, was the Tiananmen thing in June of '89.

Q: Oh yes.

LEVIN: With that there was an uh-oh; these are the guys who want to take us over. There was just a renewed sense of foreboding. By that time, of course, I was out of China. Let's talk about Tiananmen and we'll talk about Burma next time.

Q: All right. So in '86 what happened to you?

LEVIN: Eight-six, I went back to Washington and I was assigned to Harvard as a visiting scholar. I could read and write and recite the alphabet by heart and so therefore I was qualified to be a visiting scholar. I was waiting for the assignment as ambassador to Burma that had been pretty much laid out and I had to wait. So they sent me to Harvard for a year.

Q: Today is October 1, 2010. Do you remember where we left off?

LEVIN: I left off in Hong Kong.

Q: You were there from when to when?

LEVIN: From late '80 until 1986; five and a half years, basically, as CG, consul general. That probably is the longest tenure in modern history in Hong Kong. The reason why they left me there was because this issue of 1997 was being played out and I guess they didn't want to change at that particular time.

Q: Did you run across anything about one of your predecessors, John Singleton Mosby?

LEVIN: Absolutely; absolutely. I was sitting in the office one day and somebody called on me and this was a guy who was a pretty well-known collector of historical documents and an archivist, a collector. He presented to me a picture of John Stuart Mosby signed, I think, by Mosby. I hung it up on my wall, left it at the consulate general when I left the post, and reminded people that it's my property but that was 1986. Everyone's forgotten that and the picture hangs in the office of the consul general in Hong Kong today. I saw it about six months ago.

Do you know how he got the job?

Q: Yes, under Grant even

LEVIN: That's right. He was one of the few Confederate generals---

Q: Actually he was a colonel.

LEVIN: All right. Who, once the war was over, agitated for a policy of reconciliation and as a reward for his stand, his political stand, Grant gave him the post in Hong Kong.

Q: The reason why I know so much about this, I wrote and published a book back in 1990 called The American Consul: A History of the Consular Service.

LEVIN: Yes.

Q: Which I'm getting ready to republish, and I did practically a chapter on Mosby.

LEVIN: That's wonderful.

Q: Because Mosby uncovered a whole---an extremely corrupt system that was being run in the China post by William Seward's nephew.

LEVIN: That I hadn't heard.

Q: We had consuls general having interests in brothels all that up and down the coast.

LEVIN: Entrepreneurial, huh?

Q: Yes. The interesting thing was that charges of corruption were leveled against Mosby by those who were doing the corrupting. The State Department people obviously hated the guy's guts and so they were going to fix him. They took the consul general from, I think it was Negoria or Kobe-Osaka or someplace, who was another---a Union general whose name I forget, it's a German name, but he had been in charge of the pursuit of Mosby up here in Virginia during the war. So obviously he would fix Mosby's wagon. Well of course the two warriors got together and started swapping stories and Mosby was completely vindicated.

LEVIN: I didn't know that.

Q: It's a wonderful story.

LEVIN: I did read a biography of Mosby. It was

Q: The Gray Ghost.

LEVIN: Excuse me.

Q: It was called The Gray Ghost.

LEVIN: I remember reading it, yes; quite a story that here was the Great Gorilla ending up as consul general in Hong Kong. Crazy, crazy. Want to make a movie out of it, hey?

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: You be Mosby, all right?

Q: Yes. Burt, when you were in Hong Kong, this again was from when to when?

LEVIN: Late '80 through '86, through July of '86. I visited the post November of '80 and basically took over then. I went on a short home leave, came back and was formally installed in about, maybe February of '81, and lasted until July of '86. The highlight of the whole thing was my position was conveyed both to the Department and conveyed

publicly. My position was that the Chinese were going to handle the Hong Kong situation satisfactorily, that they would not screw it up, and that they recognized that it was in their interest economically and politically to assure a smooth transition, to assure that once they got control of it in 1997 that things would go on in satisfactory fashion. That attitude was meant: (1) to buck up confidence among the Chinese in Hong Kong, and among American and foreign business community about the future because there was great concern about it. (2) more importantly to counter some very polite assertions by people in the State Department and in the government at large. These people subsequently became known as neo-conservatives, and asserted that Hong Kong was doomed, that once these communists touched the place and took it over it was just doomed. So I argued, argued strenuously, advocated publicly and in the end Hong Kong was transferred in 1997 with hardly a blip.

Q: What gave you the confidence to stick your neck out on this?

LEVIN: My hypothesis was thus: Hong Kong was a product of the most humiliating episode in modern Chinese history, the opium war. The Chinese, in the communist and non-communist Chinese period, look on the opium war as the transformation---and this is a simplification but they believe it---as a transformation of this great culture and civilization and empire into the disaster, the _____ of Asia that it was for 100, 150 years. They believe it was the British who were responsible for the decline, downfall and transformation of China from the glorious empire to the sick nation in a period of 150 years of national humiliation, all set forth by the British. There are such emotional feelings on that and yet when the communists took over China in 1950 they left Hong Kong. When the Chinese were fighting the British in Korea, the British were alongside us, but they left Hong Kong alone. They had an easy ability to reduce Hong Kong. After all Hong Kong is contiguous, basically contiguous with China, and all the Chinese had to do is squeeze Hong Kong economically. If the Chinese made clear that they were going to take over Hong Kong you would have had a flight of capital, of personalities but the Chinese left Hong Kong alone. They left it alone because at that time and for years subsequent Hong Kong was the only major source of foreign exchange for the Chinese communists or the PRC; Hong Kong was virtually their only outlet to the outside world. Hong Kong was the means during the Korean War, to smuggle things into China through---evading all kinds of sanctions and trade controls that we put on China. Hong Kong was the point of entry to China to smuggle in things it needed.

So even after the Korean War things went on; they left Hong Kong alone. Then came the Cultural Revolution in 1965, when one could say China collectively went crazy. A period looked back on by elderly Chinese who experienced the era was absolutely moving and it's a shame. During the height of this craziness they left Hong Kong alone. There were some manifestations of the cultural revolution in China but they were quickly pulled back by Zhou Enlai and what remained of the central government. At its most extreme, most irrational period, from '65 through '67, '68, this symbol of China's humiliation was still left alone in British hands. So China consistently put its interests ahead of its emotions on the issue of Hong Kong.

Finally, the other aspect that I put into this analysis was that 1997 was still 15, 16, 17 years away. It was the British who were pushing the Chinese to take up the issue. It wasn't as if the Chinese were saying, "Well, you know, the time's come to get rid of--- let's solve this." It was the British; it was the British interests, which wanted certainty after 1997. These real estate property holdings were foremost in the British mind. They shaped the British position; the British were running after the Chinese to deal with the future of Hong Kong. For the Chinese at that time, this was a difficult issue. The Chinese position had been stated in the UN for 20, 30 years: Hong Kong is ours and we'll take it back when the time is right. They weren't thinking 1997. As far as they were concerned it wasn't in the 1997 treaty---none of the treaties were

Q: Well---

LEVIN: All of these things, plus the impact it would have on Taiwan, were factors. If they messed up Hong Kong their hopes of persuading Taiwan to come around in a peaceful reunification would be totally dashed. Then there was this sense of China's own pride, a sense of how humiliating it would be if the British turn Hong Kong into this tremendous financial center and economic powerhouse and China comes in and turns it into dust and garbage.

Finally there was all this capital and China now was focusing on economic development; they were getting their priorities straight. They needed capital and they needed technology. They were getting that from Hong Kong; they were getting it largely from Hong Kong and they were getting it in some respects from Taiwan. They didn't want to screw all of that up; that was too important for them. So all these things came together in my analysis. For the neo-conservatives who were then in the Reagan Administration, the Chinese were communists. Communists would come in and they would impose draconian rules. They had this ideology and they're going to etc., etc. So there was---

Q: I realize you were one remove away in that you were sitting in Hong Kong, but what were you getting and when you went back how was the battle being fought? In the first place I'm not sure there was much we could do about it but---

LEVIN: That's exactly it. The British didn't want us deeply involved and the Chinese didn't want us involved at all. The British said, "You know we're grown up boys; we can handle it." As far as the Chinese were concerned it wasn't our business.

Basically it was an effort by me to keep the United States government, the public, and the media, which I would read constantly, informed. It's just as well. It's a big difference from just saying it's finished or it's going to be a ruin, because public opinion in Hong Kong was hanging in the balance. The last thing we needed was for the U.S. government to come out and start making pessimistic or ideological remarks, you know, China's communist, they're not going to allow freedoms, etc., etc.

In the end there was some congressional comments, a few statements but mostly the U.S. government's position was what we hoped that---we expect some freedoms will be

preserved. The British would have been embarrassed as well had we taken a strong ideologically driven stand on this, so we didn't. What I had was skepticism, skepticism in the head of my bureau, skepticism for other sections of the government but nothing that really got in the way of what I thought the policy should be and was. My job essentially was to express confidence that this thing would be resolved satisfactorily.

Q: I'm surprised there wasn't sort of a congressional hearing in which you'd be called to testify.

LEVIN: I wasn't; there wasn't a congressional hearing on it. There were congressional statements and things like that. Then of course we had largely CODELs coming one after the other.

Q: All to get suited up at Mr. Jeeze.

LEVIN: What a better excuse to get suited up than the concern over the future of Hong Kong. Yes.

Q: Yes. Congress would have gone naked if you would have---

LEVIN: That's true. So that was Hong Kong. It was an interesting time.

Q: Hong Kong was a large, active post but were you in a way presiding on its diminishment because China-watching was going to be done in China.

LEVIN: I know. What replaced China-watching was the fate of Hong Kong and that was getting a lot of attention. We were from this point increasingly superfluous on China-watching, which would have made the post largely involved with consular matters and some economic things and that sort. We were revived and given a very prominent political stage with this whole question of the future of Hong Kong. So the post was fairly prominent and high profile because of this problem with the issue of the future of Hong Kong.

Q: Was there a significant university in Hong Kong that would later then meld into the greater Chinese educational system?

LEVIN: No, not really. There were two major universities; then they developed a third one. Hong Kong University was established by the British, for the British, with basically a British curriculum and heavily with British classes and basically an English speaking curriculum. That used to be the university for the elite of Hong Kong. Then there was Chinese University, which was set up by refugees, post-1950, and was largely a Chinese language curriculum. That was the university and college where the middle and lower class of Hong Kong would go, where the bright, ambitious sons and less so the daughter, but where the daughter of the taxi cab drivers would go.

Hong Kong U began to lose its status, however, as the practice of sending the elite abroad grew and grew. So in the 1930s to maybe the early '50s, some wealthy Chinese offspring would go to Hong Kong U; by the 1970s he was going to MIT or trying to get into Harvard or going to Berkeley. Thus Hong Kong U began to lose some of its luster and indeed by the '80s was overtaken by Chinese U. This sort of upper mobility describing---

Q: Its origins were almost equivalent to one of our community colleges.

LEVIN: One of our city colleges in New York, right, right. These colleges---we had some contact with them but they didn't loom large either in our work or social aspect. I knew all the vice chancellors, vice chancellor being essentially the president of the college. There would be dinners and receptions but to say that I was deeply involved with them would be telling---or that anybody in the consulate was deeply involved---

Q: What---

LEVIN: They had lost some of their panache because in the '50s and in the '60s if China scholars in the U.S. became---studied China, they had to do it from Hong Kong. We had these universities. By the '80s many of these scholars were able to go into China so Hong Kong lost some of its value in terms of American studies into China.

Q: Going back to the China-watching side, obviously over the years there had been developed a magnificent Foreign Service national cadre of people who read the papers and really knew what was happening in China from their fingertips. What was going to happen to them and how did you deal with that?

LEVIN: One of the best, one of the best was when I was at the post in the '60s, that group. As China-watching became less of a major function, it just faded away. The expertise people had got old; they retired and weren't replaced by younger people. We relied to some extent on consultants but either out of ignorance or arrogance, certainly by the '60s, we basically were doing it on our own. From time to time we would call somebody, one of our locals and stuff like that, in to consult with them, but we counted less and less on them. By the '80s that whole era had ended. Those who had been former refugees from China who came out or were affiliated with or worked for the consul general had been retired by then and had not been replaced by a younger group of China watchers. Most of the China reporting then had gravitated to China itself.

Q: During this time you were consul general, how stood things between Hong Kong and across the water with Vietnam?

LEVIN: Not much activity. In the '60s when we were deeply involved in Vietnam the correspondents lived in Hong Kong and would spend extended periods in Vietnam but their families would be in Hong Kong. When they came back we got to know them, a number of people in our political section at that time the section of the China watchers. We socialized and we chatted and we talked. From that period I have very dear friends, people like Robert Shaplen, who wrote for The New Yorker.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: These are good buddies. We had a regular poker game. Bob Shaplen has family we knew very well. Stanley Karnow, who wrote for Time magazine, then left Time and wrote for The Washington Post and Newsweek and produced a book and a TV series on Vietnam in the '60s or '70s, which is probably best that's ever been done; Stan Karnow. Oh, there were others; Bernie Kalb, who at that time was with The New York Times. Prior to him _____, who was on---We knew them all. We were their sources of information; they would come and talk to us about China. They were covering China and Vietnam and we would talk to them about their views on Vietnam. It's not that we were covering Vietnam but as interested Americans we wanted to know what they thought was going on. So it was a close, a very close, tight relationship with major correspondents in Hong Kong, very good, tight relationship, good relationship, both in the '60s and in the '80s when I was CG.

Q: I assume while you were there Hong Kong still a place where our fleet would come in to visit.

LEVIN: Oh yes. They'd come in all the time. Visiting admirals would come up to the office. We would discuss some topic of interest to Hong Kong economic and industrial leaders, arrange flights out to our aircraft carriers and stuff like that. Submarines came in and I would tour the submarine. There was one occasion we were---Boating is a very popular sport for the wealthy in Hong Kong, and so we often, my wife and I, would often be invited, to go---friends of my wife---on boats to go picnicking and swimming and things like that. One day I was out on a boat with a number of friends, all American friends who'd had a few drinks and cigars and stuff like that, and the aircraft carrier, I forget which one, the John Kennedy, I think, was anchored nearby. We went by it, and I went by and I waved to one of the guys and I shouted up and said tell your captain that the American consul general is here. And we were invited onboard. We got off this little pleasure cruise and went onboard. It was such a strange thing and particularly for the guys with me; they talked about it for years afterward, you go sailing with the consul general and you end up on an aircraft carrier.

It was an extraordinarily busy post. Lunches, breakfasts, CODELs, dinners, cocktail parties, two or three cocktail parties followed by dinner. After a very short while I had a couple of---well I didn't have kids then; they'd visit every now and then; they were going to school here and boarding school and colleges. Socializing was to the point where you just didn't have any time for yourself. So I made clear that on Saturdays and Sundays I would just not accept any invitations. If you wanted me during the week OK. I had to do it otherwise you'd just burn yourself out.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: We had a number of visits from Secretary Shultz; he loved Hong Kong so he would go there. I think he must have been there three or four times while I was there. We

had a chief of mission meeting for EAP countries in Hong Kong; I hosted it. A very interesting meeting. We had ambassadors from the region and I remember so clearly we had the ambassador from Australia, and New Zealand. I don't know, '84, '85, somewhere around then. We had a discussion about how things were changing and all of that, but these two ambassadors spoke separately of their great concern about the communist threat to New Zealand and Australia. They just--what they said was ridiculous and you could just sense how foolish they appeared before this assembled crowd including, I think, George Shultz. These were appointees; one of them had something to do with Coca-Cola and maybe another one was a car dealer. These were political appointees by the Reagan Administration and they were fighting labor union activities in Australia, putting it in terms of the communist threat in the region. It was awful. One could say maybe it was the party mentality in those days. I remember that very clearly.

Anyway Hong Kong. One other thing that I should mention, note, and that was the mood in Hong Kong. The public mood was so worried, so concerned, particularly in 1983 when the negotiations were not going well. We had a near panic; the Hong Kong dollar had fallen to 11 to one from traditional \$5.80 to one U.S. dollar. The situation was very worrisome and my great fear throughout that whole period was not that the substance of the negotiations would ultimately be resolved but that, before that could happen, Hong Kong would implode. There was so much worry, so much concern. So I put out a memo to all Americans and I told them---might have told you before but anyway---I told them that they are not to discuss Hong Kong issues with anyone. My concern was that some clerk, some code clerk or some GSO (General Service Officer) talking to a Chinese friend would say, "It's pretty hopeless and all" and it would immediately get around that the American government is taking a very dim view of the future of Hong Kong. On the other hand part of my mind was on Vietnam because I didn't want censorship. In Vietnam you had to get onboard, you had to know whose side are you on, after all. I didn't want that attitude. That was not my purpose. I didn't want people to have the slightest hesitation in challenging my views or going back to Washington with my views challenged. I made clear I would want to see it and my view too is they were absolutely correct and so in the memo I said you can go back to Washington, you can deal within the U.S. government and any opinions you have within the U.S. government. That's fine, but I don't want you giving your views to people outside the U.S. government. That memo was my sense that the situation was so delicate that a word from someone in the consulate would be seen as American opinion and could have tipped the scales on the situation. So I put out that memo.

Q: Where did you go?

LEVIN: I went to Harvard. Apparently they had Burma waiting for me but the timing was not quite right. I was hoping for something more major than Burma but anyway.

Q: So---

LEVIN: They sent me to Harvard for---

Q: You were at Harvard for how long?

LEVIN: An academic year, '86 to '87.

Q: What were you doing?

LEVIN: I was a visiting scholar. I was reading. I was having a lot of time on my own. I was enjoying life. That's what I was doing. No formal classes as such; I had known most of the Harvard Chinese people from early ages so I would get together with them and we'd socialize and chat.

Q: Did you find a China mafia at Harvard? Were they pretty much in agreement with you about Hong Kong and whither China?

LEVIN: No.

Q: It's like herding a bunch of kittens or something.

LEVIN: You brought up something. This is while I was still consul general and when the issue of Hong Kong was a major one. Harvard had a symposium on Hong Kong and they invited me to attend. So I flew from Hong Kong to attend this Harvard symposium and I'd known almost everyone at the symposium because I had spent '64-'65 doing a year of Chinese studies at Harvard. I got to know all of the professors there. There was this symposium and I gave my views: everything will be fine and all that. Ben Schwartz, Benjamin Schwartz---I don't know if the name means anything to you---Benjamin Schwartz was one of the leading scholars on the rise of communism in China. Ben Schwartz was a legendary figure. He was, I would say, a Talmudic scholar; you know boring: reading, reading, studying. He used to study his Chinese by reading the China Review in Chinese. He was one serious, conscientious scholar and he took issue with my view. His position simply was---and he was a person who mocked Leninism, Hagel, Kampf, all the very profound, philosophical underpinnings of communism and on and on---Anyway, his position simply was that it was impossible for a Marxist-Leninist system to allow Hong Kong to go on as it was, that it's a Marxist-Leninist state, a quality tied up in the ideology. What's his name, John Fairbanks, who was at the symposium, came to my defense. John Fairbanks in essence said---and John Fairbanks had lived in China, Benjamin Schwartz had lived with the scripture, with the text on the history and the ideology and he lived with philosophy; John Fairbanks had lived more in the Chinese society and had that feel, and his---he argued on my behalf---saying that the Chinese would handle this as Chinese. They would be pragmatic; they would see the importance of the issue and he felt my view was the right one. It was a wonderful spirited debate and it brought home to me that you can immerse yourself in the library and read about China but you've also got to get a feel for what the Chinese are as a people. You can say that they're Marxist and Leninist and the doctrine just won't allow it, but when you have a Chinese society which is so eclectic in its choice of doctrine, although it seemed as though they had settled on one doctrine; you have Chinese who, when it comes to

religion, for example, they'll try anything and everything without committing themselves or without seeing orthodoxy. It's an eclectic---

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: ---thing. That was an interesting time. So yes. Over the years this Hong Kong issue was debated even after I left Hong Kong I had very serious divisions, some in Hong Kong. In Harvard people were with me, people like Ed Vogel. They certainly subscribed to the idea that practical issues would triumph and that the Chinese would deal with Hong Kong in a satisfactory way. While others took the position that in view of their radical past, in view of their authoritarian nature, that once they gained sovereignty over Hong Kong they'd trash it. That's what they went on. While I was in Harvard and after I went because when I'd come home on leave from Burma or even when I retired from the Foreign Service I maintained some of these contacts with some of these Harvard people. They persisted up until 1997 when basically the reality on the ground ended the whole debate.

Q: How did the Burma surface? You say you'd hoped for---what?

LEVIN: I don't know; you always hope for something. I'd hoped for an ambassadorial position and I got it; I got Burma. I don't know how deliberations took place but I got out there in 1987, in May of 1987.

Q: Before you went to Burma, how did we view Burma at the time? What were you getting from the Burma experts at State Department and elsewhere?

LEVIN: There weren't very many Burma experts. Burma was a backwater and the only concern we had was with drug production there. It was a place where they were growing poppies. Nobody thought very much about it other than in the context of the war on drugs. That was it. That was the focus.

Q: How well was Aung San Suu Kyi-

LEVIN: No, she wasn't in the picture.

Q: She wasn't in the picture at that time?

LEVIN: No, not at all. Nothing. When I got there in '87 Ne Win was in power; he'd been in power since 1962. It was the idiosyncratic rule. There was the army running Burma. It was a society where most economic activity had been nationalized, Burmese socialism. It was a society that was gradually in a downward spiral. The rest of Asia, the various economic miracles and stirrings and things like that, left Burma sleeping in the past and ever so gently sliding into more and more poverty, a result of which was terrible mismanagement by the military. Burma was ruled by a person and followers whose only motive or objective was to stay in power. There they were controlling the state, controlling it rather tightly. No ideology to really speak about. A Burmese socialism,

which the military put into effect in 1962, was the sense at the time in the late '60s, early '70s. Socialism was seen as the way to bring about economic development and had a certain panache so the Burmese military instituted this program Burmese socialism. What it allowed them to do was to expropriate the industry and the retail sectors, which were largely in the hands, almost exclusively had been in the hands of Indians and Chinese for centuries. So the Burmese had chafed under the economic power and control of the Chinese and Indians. The Burmese army when it came to power ended that by socializing everything, but there was no real deep belief in socialism nor any sense of really trying to make the thing work. Once they ousted the Chinese and the Indians and ran the economy; the military didn't know how to run an economy---

Q: Who were the military? Where did they come from?

LEVIN: Essentially they were the rural. The military component of the colonial army was largely minorities: the Karen, the Katin. Very few Burmese as such served in the military. These Burmese were trained by the Japanese, and they were, how shall I say, not the Western influenced elite under the colonial system. These were the sons of the countryside, maybe the more accomplished sons of the countryside. These were the indigenous Burmese who had not been influenced by or close to the western influence of the British leavening process. Let's put it that way. They came to power and what was evident when I got there was this was a dictatorship, even though it trumpeted Burmese socialism, etc. This was a dictatorship, which really had no program for Burma. The Chinese communists tried to change the people of China, tried to inculcate certain views and certain forms of the means of behavior and tried to rally the people behind this ideology, which promised, as they put it, a powerful, modernized China.

In Burma there was no discernible effort to change society. The focus of the state, of the authoritarian state, was to suppress opposition. You could basically do anything you wanted except very puritanical things. By that I mean you they didn't get involved in your life the way the communist authorities did but what they were very sharply on alert for was any sign of opposition or dissatisfaction. There was fear throughout the society of appearing as opposed to the government or criticizing the government. It reached the point where in conversation a Burmese would not even refute the name of Ne Win, say the name of Ne Win for fear of somehow being accused of *lese majeste*. It was just fear of somehow being seen as critical of the government, but there was no program or efforts to change society in effect. It was just a sheer police state on guard against any effort to challenge it. The control, when I got there in '87, was that there was absolutely no sign that anything was going to get done and challenge this period. It was already with 25 years of this kind---

The army was supreme; Ne Win was supreme; nobody seemed to be in any way challenging what was going on. It was a Rangoon that stood still in time; everything was deteriorating. The University of Rangoon, before the war probably the best university throughout Asia, was now third-rate and crumbling. Rangoon before the war was **the** place; people would come from Bangkok, from Kuala Lumpur; this was the R&R center. This was the bright light of pre-war Southeast Asia. When I got there it was down at the

heel and it was just grimy, crumbling and, in a way, very charming because nothing had changed over the intervening---

Q: You got there in '87 and when did you leave?

LEVIN: I left there in late '90----about three and a half years.

Q: All right. How did you deal with the government.

LEVIN: It was the strangest government in the world to deal with. You dealt through the foreign ministry, basically, which was utterly powerless. You seldom dealt with the government. The only issues we had, the only program was this drug eradication so every now and then you would meet with the interior minister, who was a general. They almost all were generals. At one time he actually came to my house for dinner, which was something of a coup because normally they didn't associate very much with the foreign diplomatic corps. Whenever any issue came up you dealt with the foreign ministry. The foreign ministry was the one place where---it was run by some general ---you did have, sprinkled though the foreign ministry, members of what I would call the old diplomatic service probably going back to the '50s. You knew that (1) they had seen better times, and (2) they were not very enthusiastic supporters of the regime but these were people you dealt with. It was a situation where you walked in and you thought, "Well, this is it and not much is going to change" and so I got ready for a lot of tennis. We had a tennis court in the residence and a swimming pool, nice little dinners on the terrace overlooking the lake. It was a pretty good life, wonderful kinds of foods available there, not so much in the restaurants. It was grimy. I would eat at any roadside place in China; any place in Burma--I didn't do that too often. That was it.

I was there about May of '87, and this was a place, it's so strange, it just defied everything and anything that ever I experienced in the Foreign Service. We went to a reception; the government had a reception. I forget the occasion. We walked into the outer room and there in the outer room, seated on chairs along the wall, were a phalanx of the wives of these various generals. We walked in; this was our first reception, and Lily, my wife, had been married to me by that time over a quarter of a century and was fully exposed to the Foreign Service culture. As a newcomer and as the wife of the American ambassador she made the rounds; she introduced herself to a woman, shook hands, and they sat there almost dumbly as she was doing this. Then we made our way to the other room where everybody was. The other wives of the ambassadors had said, "Oh, Lily, we never do that; it's not done here." In other words it was this weird thing of the Burmese women sitting there by themselves with no expectations, no desire in any way to come in contact with the wives or the husbands of the ambassadors and other diplomats invited to a Burmese government reception. There was just almost no contact and basically very little contact between the Burmese officials and the foreign diplomats. You'd go to a National Day thing; on one side there were tables for the foreign diplomats and the other side there were tables for the Burmese generals. They didn't enjoy talking, chatting, or socializing with foreigners. There was a current of xenophobia there. It was strange, to say the least. Now you spend so many years in Asia, Indonesia, Thailand, and everybody

was back slapped and things like that. Everybody is talking; they're joking with you at the Indonesian side; nothing like that. Strange.

Q: Were there Burmese businesspeople or---

LEVIN: No business community. One or two businessmen, but we did see it had no real relationship to our work, to the substance. The Burmese relationship was basically--- it was there; there was no cultivation. There were no major issues. Drugs were the point of contact between the Burmese government and the United States. We would come in contact with the old elite, the aging people aging who had been professors and others who had a couple of decades of an active political scene when it was basically a democracy. We came into contact with former justices of the court, people who at one time had some business role or were educated or had government posts in the pre-Ne Win era, or people who had been educated under the British, who spoke very good English, and who had lived in Burma for a while. Many lived in what were at that time grand houses, but all of which were now deteriorating and falling apart at the seams. These were people who once had means, who once had position and who now literally had nothing to do. Their children had nothing to do, just idleness. These were the people we played tennis with and every now and then got together with for dinner.

Q: Today is October 29, 2010. Where did we leave off? Do you remember? Let's go back; let's talk about you as consul general in Hong Kong.

LEVIN: Yes.

Q: And then what?

LEVIN: And then I went to Burma.

Q: I know we haven't gone to Burma yet. So how did the Burmese connection come about?

LEVIN: Well I finished Hong Kong.

Q: What year did you finish?

LEVIN: '87

Q: Okay.

LEVIN: No, '86. I got to Hong Kong unofficially in November of '81 and formally I took it over in maybe February of '82 and then left in '86, after almost five years. Then I was told that I would be appointed as ambassador to Burma but the post wasn't open yet so I was sent to Harvard as a visiting scholar.

Q: How long were you at Harvard?

LEVIN: About a year. Well, one academic year.

Q: How did you find sort of the atmosphere, the faculty, the students and all that?

LEVIN: Fine, fine, fine, but it wasn't---I had been there from '64 to '65, was mid-career and was involved in Chinese history and Chinese language. That was pretty intense. I was going to classes and keeping up with things and got to know the faculty quite well. The second time was not that intense but I had a number of friends who were teaching at Harvard and so it was a very pleasant experience. The faculty---everything was---fine, fine. There was an exchange, a constant exchange of views between various faculty members whom I knew and me on issues on China and international affairs. It was very nice.

Q: Between the time when you were there before with China as the great unknown and now once the opening had taken place; had that caused sort of a seminal change in---

LEVIN: By '80---by the time I got there China was old hat. People were used to the fact we had relations with China and there was always the sense that change was going on. Of course concern about human rights issues existed but not intense debate or issues. Hong Kong was the big issue. Hong Kong was the major issue. There I had different views from one prominent person but he was an old friend. We'd sit down and talk about it with another old friend of mine who was very prominent in the news._____. He was on my side of the debate but it was fine; there was no sense of antagonism or hostility. It was a warm atmosphere where we'd just sit down over a meal or a cup of coffee and exchange views.

Q: Because the Hong Kong issue was very much in everybody's mind, did you find yourself being called upon in Washington or elsewhere to talk about it?

LEVIN: Actually you see, by the time I left Hong Kong, the British and the Chinese had come to an agreement, which was accepted in Hong Kong with a sense of confidence in the future. The agreement, the negotiations, after a very rocky path, ended on a note of some degree of good will on both sides. The substance of the agreement was enough to encourage even doubters to consider that maybe this thing will work out. What really turned that tide around was the Tiananmen Incident, which happened in 1989. That reopened huge concerns in Hong Kong and within the American community, media, congress and within the executive. The incident opened huge concerns about if China can do this to its own students then Hong Kong is in peril. At the time I was at Harvard there was a sense that the thing had been settled and provided a possibility or probability that things would work out. So there wasn't this intense debate over Hong Kong; there wasn't this intense interest anymore. The issue at the time seemed dissolved.

Q: Were there students from mainland China at Harvard?

LEVIN: Yes, there were a number. I didn't have that particularly close a relationship. I met a few but if you asked me the names now I---

Q: Yeah.

LEVIN: Yes, there were. There were students and there were researchers and faculty members; there was a very active, lively academic interchange, particularly on the advanced level, between Harvard and China and between a number of universities in the United States and China. The Chinese were coming in significant numbers as students and as researchers. They were not so much teaching but coming over for conferences and visiting. There was very lively interchange.

Q: How did the appointment to Burma come about?

LEVIN: I really don't know. I recall that there was satisfaction with the job that I did in Hong Kong. What I did in Hong Kong gave me a certain amount of---it was an accomplishment. I don't want to toot my own horn, but the consensus was that Burt did a very good job in Hong Kong and so the reward was going to be an ambassadorship. Following the counsel of a friend who was fairly high up in the Department, I had to go out and toot my horn a little bit. So I went to see, at that time it was Charlie Hill. He was the very close executive secretary to Shultz, way up there in the front office and an old friend of mine. I made the pitch that I hoped that my Hong Kong posting would be followed by an ambassadorial appointment. His attitude toward an old friend was, I would say, we are aware of what you did in Hong Kong and we will see to it that---no promise---but basically it wasn't as forthcoming as I might have hoped from an old friend. In any event it was "we'll do something for you"---but no specificity.

Q: How did you feel about Burma?

LEVIN: Well fine. I mean, there was a sense that at least I got to be an ambassador but the realization is that this is one of the sleepier posts in the Foreign Service. It was a sizeable country but for many, many years Burma had fallen behind the post. Nobody knew what it was doing, where it was going and that's the way the Burmese wanted it. There was an active concern with Burma in terms of narcotics issues. That was the focus of the government's interest in Burma: narcotics. There was considerable production of opium in the hill areas, the mountain areas of Burma and we were involved in funding. I forget the name of anti-narcotics. We provided some helicopters and equipment for chemicals, things of that sort. That was our involvement. There was basically no trade with Burma; there was no political discourse with Burma. Burma had sealed itself off. The only reason they were cooperating with the United States on narcotics was that the narcotics trade was conducted by ethnic minorities, not by the Chinese, but by the hill tribes who ran the Kachin, a whole alphabet of ethnic minorities. We provided finances to them, which enabled them to buy weapons and mount basically a very low level insurgency against the Burmese government. This way they could maintain their autonomy and resistance to the central government. Otherwise you're not going to get this government to cooperate with another government; they were so self-isolationist.

Q: How stood the political situation in Burma when you went out there?

LEVIN: When I went out there Ne Win had been ruling for 25 years and there seemed to be nothing in his way other than mortality; eventually mortality would change that. There was no evidence that this was in any way going to change or in any way was going to be resisted by the people. It was just---it was a very strange and weird situation. I remember so clearly one of the first diplomatic functions we had with the Burmese government hosting something, I can't remember the occasion, probably National Day or---no, it was something else. In any event we---this was our first diplomatic event with the Burmese government. We walked in and in the outer hall all along the wall were seated the wives of the high-ranking Burmese officials. So as a matter of courtesy and not really knowing what the heck was going on, we went around and introduced ourselves and shook some very, very limp hands. We walked into another room and there was gathered the diplomatic corps. The wives just fluttered around my wife and said, "Oh, they've just never done that." There's no intermingling between the wives of the Burmese and diplomatic corps. They were sitting down as if they were, what, just ornaments, paper mâché ornaments along the side of the---That was strange. When you go to National Day all the Burmese were seated on one side and all the foreign diplomatic corps was on the other side; very, very little interchange between the Burmese government and the diplomatic corps.

I had some dealings with the minister of the interior because of our involvement with the narcotics program. Of course there was the foreign ministry, which really had very little to do because Burma didn't have much of a foreign policy. That ministry was powerless in the Burmese bureaucratic government fixtures---totally powerless. So you went there and wrote the occasional report on how we were doing on narcotics, with the observation that inflation was growing. I did a lot of tennis, swimming, and met a delightful group largely in the diplomatic corps. Got to know the Chinese ambassador quite well.

At that time the Soviet ambassador was a very interesting figure. He had been head of, at one time, the Soviet Olympic Committee. He was a very prominent figure in the Soviet Union but apparently he had crossed somebody in some way so he was sent out to Burma. He was a very, very interesting, cheerful fellow and it was---I mean it was just a sense of knowing each other and seeing each other, not frequently but more than occasionally, a life where Saturday and Sunday were totally to yourself, and where there were very few CODELs coming. The occasional one had people who were dealing with narcotics, like Charlie Rangel. That was life and that changed, that changed. It changed.

I got there in maybe May of '87 and it changed as of October---no, no, let me think---in September of '87, without any advance notice. Seemingly out of the blue, the government decreed that the existing money in circulation would be replaced. This was supposedly an attempt to stamp out the black market. There was a flourishing black market; one can't even call it a black market. The whole economy was supposedly---was socialistic and the government had nationalized almost everything. These ministries, these heads of nationalized companies, were all military. They had no, no knowledge of economics at all

and paid almost no attention to their responsibilities. It was terrible in terms of the peasantry because they had to sell their grain on the street, but there was a flourishing retail black market. It was open really and the government cracked down on it, but without any, any advance warning. Suddenly the currency was just worthless—and this hit very hard, but very few people had switched. Bank deposits were exempted; they would be changed to the kyat. Nobody, however, kept his money in banks because if you put money in the bank and then you want to withdraw it, it took months. It was just an unbelievable kind of situation—so people commonly stored whatever little money they had---they saved it literally under the pillow and under the mattress.

Q: Yes.

LEVIN: It hit the lower classes very hard. It came at a time when students were taking finals at universities. The education system was dreadful, absolutely dreadful. The University of Rangoon, at one time arguably the best university in all of Asia, was just devoid of any—there was no intellectual life in Burma. There were 25 years of rule by a dictatorship that really had no program for Burma. It was just xenophobic, isolationist, and imposed control over the population. They weren't trying, as the Chinese communists were or the Soviets—and most communists do—to change the thought and lifestyle of the population. There was no attempt to create a Soviet man or a true Maoist or anything. Ideology was dead.

They had an ideology when they started. It was totally incomprehensible. It was supposed to be socialism. I think I told you this in the last session but this was socialism in '62, which was intended to drive out the Chinese. There was no ideology whatsoever. The government security organ, the military, did, and the security apparatus was presumably intended for intelligence agencies, secret police, and informers. The whole intent was to root out any opposition to the regime. The whole purpose of the regime was simply to stay in power. You had a society that was basically left alone, but with a sense of fear that if they were in any way to be critical of the regime, not so much by deeds but by words. Things were spiraling downward. Culture had been spiraling downward for years as literature came to a crashing end, as popular entertainment waned, and as any serious cultural things just weren't there. Obviously certain segments of society were dissatisfied but they were fearful. So there was a security net over the people of Burma. This was the atmosphere. I said there was no reason to believe this would change with any weakness in the government, a government that ruled by a monopoly of old power.

Q: Did you feel that there was any ideology behind it other than staying in power?

LEVIN: None, none, they had this greed when they came in power. It was incomprehensible. It was rogue Burmese socialism. It was just a mish-mash of incredible--you didn't know what that looked like. When I asked the Burmese, they said in Burmese—as they could read an English version—“this was a government that got rid of all the foreigners, who basically controlled the Burmese economy, and who under the British were the ones who became the landlords, who became the conduits, the exporters, who were basically the controllers of what was still a temporary economy. The Burmese

group had a nationalistic, xenophobic concept: get rid of opposition by nationalizing everything. This was a group that totally distrusted---had scorn for the old political elite, the people who from the time of Burmese independence---'46 ----the whole way through to '62. They had thought up this party democracy and squabbling and factions and things that under this parliament, that came up at the time, made Burma so ineffectively governed and provided the environment for the army to take over. These people were scorned; they were tainted by Western views and were not thoroughly Burmese – they were discredited. The business class that was left after nationalization – the Burmese businessmen were looked down on as simply interested in money for themselves, property for themselves, with no concern for the national welfare. This was an army group who believed that only the military had the requisite degree of patriotism, selflessness and the courage to run Burma. They were the people who had control of the situations, only they had the projections.

Q: Where did the military class come from?

LEVIN: Mostly from rural areas I would say. A number of them—Ne Win for example—were trained during the---let me see, I believe that under the Japanese he got some training. Ne Win however, spoke English, and he played golf. He wasn't someone right out of rural areas. He had some amount of western insignia to play with.

Q: I understand when you mention golf that golf is almost a prerequisite when you want to talk with the ruling people.

LEVIN: They played golf. Yep. The Burmese way of playing golf is to hand the ball to the caddies who would pick up the ball and move it 30 yards from the shot and stuff like that. It was a very pragmatic, but unusual way to play golf. So basically this was the whole ethos of the military. They had almost no interest, certainly no knowledge of mobility to control a developing country. Rangoon at one time in the 30s during the military---the colonial era---was the R&R place for people from Bangkok, or Kuala Lumpur. Rangoon was sort of a jewel in South-East Asia; it just---just became a typical third world city. There was very little change. There was very little traffic in the street. It was in one respect a very interesting place to be because it was a museum. It was a museum in that it preserved what Asia was in the 1930's. It was great if you were interested in the past but for the people living there it was just a steady decline of depreciation, and wealth, and standard of living. It was poor and it was getting poorer.

Q: Was there a drug lord class, guys with gold chains around their neck?

LEVIN: No, no, no. The drug lords were up in the mountains still in their own little areas. At times, we didn't have much---any evidence, to prove that the Burmese military was involved in the drug trafficking. These were ethnic insurgents. It was a low level insurgency that had gone on for years and years and years, which at least in my thinking—it's only speculation—the Burmese military almost welcomed them. It was a means of just straining whatever resources the country had and using it for the army, which at that time was almost 200,000. Very large. It was a wonderful rationale for the

military to say, “We’re sacrificing our blood, our treasure; we’re keeping Burma unified. Look how brave we are and how necessary we are to preserve the unity of the Burmese state.” These insurgencies, to my thinking—and again the territory was foreboding; it wouldn’t have been the easiest thing in the world to see them, but I didn’t see much of an effort in trying. The military left the traffickers alone.

So this was the picture in Burma when I got there and I didn’t see any indication that this would change. Then in September of ’87, about three or four months after I got there, they instituted this---literally wiping out any savings anybody had. It came at a time when students were taking exams. Not a time free of stress and the students were left without money. Some of them from out of town, no way really to live, no way to get back home when their exams were over. They were students. Protest was something that one would have never imagined. For one day in Rangoon students demonstrated; they set a group of cars on fire. Nothing like that had happened in Burma for 50 years. One began to wonder at all this and where it was going. By the second day it was quiet and it just stayed quiet. I remember writing a cable a few weeks later, something to the effect that---the passivity after all this, the quietness seemed an example of how the Burmese tolerated this situation. They were just totally suppressed, and the standard of living was going down and that’s it; they accepted it with a certain degree of Buddhist hedonism: accepting a bad state of affairs is not/not hedonism, perhaps stoicism or passivity. That’s a kind of gamble at it or so ____.

So it just seemed to pass and that was it. You know it was so fitting how high on the hog---an example of this hate---I may have told you this too: the main quality of this government was the newspapers that it put out. It put out a little state controlled paper, and there was an English edition and a Burmese edition. The stories day in, day out were “this general went to this project, and went to Rangoon,” “oh this and this guy were at the airport for a few moments,” tat tat tat tat tat,” and when he arrived these people were there for the greeting of” bup bup bup bup, “Then he went to another project, and, in this case, he went and gave instructions on how to carry it out and then he returned.” The quality of that newspaper and its stupidity reflected years as the government’s propaganda organ. The government presumably used its propaganda organ to cultivate support and build support for the regime. This was the most inane thing. It was funny to read—it was so pathetic—and yet they did it day in, day out. To me it was evidence that this was a government run by people without much in the way of brains. The people daily in China and in Rangoon read the paper although it had this heavy tone of propaganda and stuff like that. People say it almost read like the *New York Times* in comparison to the stuff we were getting from the Burmese.

Q: How did you keep busy?

LEVIN: I wasn’t that busy! You have the embassies there. You have things like that. One of my predecessors would come in every Saturday. If you really sit there and read what’s coming in there in terms of cables from other posts and stuff out of the party you would spend eight hours out of the day doing that. I didn’t do that. There were occasional reporting things to do but the day that we were busy would be something _____.

Q: Was Aung San Suu Kyi a factor at your time?

LEVIN: No, no, no. She didn't get there until a year later and she was there just coincidentally—I think we did cover this before—she was there coincidentally because her mother was sick. She was living in the UK with her husband who's a Brit and came to visit her mother. She was there when the disturbances broke out.

Q: But this was before or after your time?

LEVIN: No. You had the disturbances when

Q: This was the students'?

LEVIN: Yeah. In September of '87 you had this brief student demonstration because of the sense of desperation. They were left without any money but then it just got quiet---it quieted out, quieted out. The next thing was in March of 1988 and what happened there was a dispute at a teahouse. The Burmese sit around and most of it is outdoors on little stools_____ with tea. They listen to music and have snacks. At this tea house the students of the University of Rangoon and youngsters from the neighborhoods—what's the expression—downtown. They got into an argument over music that was playing, over the tapes of music, over the selection and it turned into fighting between students and villagers. They were the downtown people, young town people, and the police came and killed a student. There was a sense of outrage at the police because they had intervened on behalf of the town and were harsh with their treatment of students. The protests were by students at the University of Rangoon. At Rangoon Institute of Technology they protested and they were joined by sympathizers at the University of Rangoon. There had been a tradition or a history of student uprisings, a few of them in the '60s and '70s, which had been put down. The students came out and these demonstrations were basically students; they didn't get much sympathy. They didn't get much involvement. No one joined their ranks—it was seen as a student issue, but these demonstrations, in turn, were put down in a very quick fashion by the police.

The point underscored the brutality of the police. One time about 70 odd students were jammed into what we used to call a black fryer, one of these police cars with bars you know box-like things, and 72 died of suffocation. This brutal treatment of students finally evoked an outpouring of townspeople, of the citizenry, who had, up to then, remained passive. Things were slowly disintegrating. Finally just this sense of brutal behavior—and I'm sure the memories of that demonetization, if you want to call it that—tempted this pent up dissatisfaction over the way of life. This grumbling about the quality of life that had calmed down just exploded into a growing demonstrations within the population against the regime. More and more people began to join and we had expressed our support of the population and called on the government to refrain. We noted the American government reaction to a government's use of repression on its people. We talked about human rights and etc, etc. We were seen by these crowds coming out to demonstrate as supportive and the demonstrations began to be focused. They were

parading through the city by the route right by the embassy. The embassy---in front of the embassy it almost became a Hyde Park-like location, beaches and things like that. All of this was intended as a sign of appreciation for the American government speaking out against the regime's repression of its people.

These things grew and grew and grew to the point where within a couple or few months you had the Air Force, and the Burmese Navy joining in, bands joining in, a significant percentage of the civil service joining in. It was one huge popular uprising and it became increasingly disruptive. In an atmosphere like that there were elements---there was the lumpen proletariat who fell into some degree of looting. The government just was totally incapable of recognizing the political—I mean, they knew this thing was in nationwide proportions but their attitude was there was no sense of the need to sit down and compromise. No need to come out with something that would provide some kind of a political environment so that you could get these demonstrations calmed down. Nothing, nothing. This was a regime that was incapable of compromise so they just watched, and watched. Anarchy began to take hold and there were instances in July and August of a few members of the army now joining the demonstrations. The Air Force and the Navy were just little decorations of the regime—they didn't get that much support; they never did anything. The Army was the core of this regime; that was the tool, which the leadership relied on in their institution. There were these little signs that the Navy was crumbling---effectively. Then there was another demonstration, when crowds stormed a military installation and ripped away guns from a number of the soldiers and killed them. So you had the mounting intensity and the government not doing anything to try to solve this thing. It was not yet to the point where they were going to use this massive force.

Finally, what happened is that repression began—it was in August of '88—truckloads of troops drove past the hospital and there were signs by the nurses and the doctors---signs saying that, "Please stop the killing." There were the communist [or Khamis] "Stop the killing, we've run out of blood." The troops in the trucks came by there and opened up machine gun fire on them. The nurses had a special place in Burmese society; these were educated people, the doctors and nurses. This just provoked massive fury. This thing was incredibly volatile. I think neighborhoods of people fell trees as barriers. Again government just---anyway it was a trifle---they were using machine guns now with greater frequency, but they remained just as incapable of caring about the situation. At that time, it's by now late in August, and _____ came into power in India. I'm sure you've heard of the name.

Q: Oh yeah, I've interviewed him.

LEVIN: He came out of Burma and he went to meet the President of Burma; I had met Gandhi a few times. He was basically was Yale educated. The president justified his refusal to in any way accommodate talking about anything by saying, "we have a constitution" and other ways, etc., etc. He put out the example of Abraham Lincoln who suspended *habeas corpus* during the Civil War, which was according to constitutional acts. When the situation reached the point where you take on presidential action you go and do it. You try. This was totally unusual but he turns to me and says, "Burt, what

would you do if you were in my position?” I said I would resign. Next I would appoint a cabinet of experts, (people who knew something about something. I would appoint six patriotic Burmese who have a degree of fame in various areas of expertise. I would appoint essentially a technocratic cabinet (which would come in on the problems of reform). I would offer to step down and I would avoid the subjective sentiments of the country. I would hate to be the man on top that would be given powers with Ne Win too.

It was a fascinating time. Take what happened a few weeks later, when the army really cracked down with a massive show of force and put down the demonstrations. They were brutal, physical; people were---how many were killed? nobody will ever know. To resolve the crisis, we had security cameras and we could see on our screens and through the window of the embassy actually. The soldiers were just violent.

Q: Did you feel there might have been a tipping point?

LEVIN: The tipping point was when a number of army people came into the demonstrations, when they were attacking the mob at that point in installations. I think at that time the military leadership feared for their lives; they would have been ripped apart by the mob. They probably were justified in feeling that way because they were inept and they were unwilling to in anyway take any measures whatsoever to try and diffuse this situation. They had brought things to a point where Rangoon was literally in a state of anarchy and where enraged mobs could very easily have torn them from power. Now this was the time, as these things were increasingly unforgiving, when Aung San Suu Kyi came to the fore. As the daughter of a Burmese George Washington—to a certain amount---

Q: Yeah.

LEVIN: She came and she went out to all these demonstrations because they wanted her to address the crowds. She had a very charismatic style to her appearance and her language and she just became the Joan of Arc, the rallying point. Here was the Burmese salvation. That’s the beginning of her prominence, the instrumental role she played at that time.

Q: Were you getting any feedback from any Burmese who were coming by the embassy and saying, “This is happening” at all?

LEVIN: Yeah. I went out. Yeah. I went out to hear from people coming up to the gate and the news they give is the bric-a-brac of the. I went out just to demonstrate our support of this strong democratic movement that was taking place in Burma., which had overwhelming popular support. It was an uprising against the government. We were in contact with Aung San Suu Kyi. I saw her a number of times, met with her a number of times-- we saw each other occasionally but I wasn’t doing this too frequently lest I give ammunition to the regime charges that Aung San Suu Kyi was just a puppet of the United States. I didn’t want there to be such public evidence of our relationship. I had one of my secretaries in the political section, who had known Aung San Suu Kyi in the past—I think

they went to boarding school---because there was a relationship---that they knew each other---he was the point of contact with Aung San Suu Kyi. We were in close contact.

There was one example when groups of monks and students were in front of the embassy—and this was after the army had open up into All on one side was a column of troops coming toward them and on the other side a column of troops coming toward them. The Marines downstairs were giving standing instructions and yelling practically, “We do not offer asylum.” We do not offer asylum. I went down to open those doors and let them in. There must have been about 60-70 monks---we just took them into the embassy—we let them in, in groups. One or two of them were in a car, and we just drove to the outskirts of town and let them out. Again on the days that the army cracked down, when the bullets were flying, we took a couple of bullets in the embassy building—nobody was hurt; no windows were shattered. We watched as troops were shooting at students from the buildings next to us; on top of them shooting down on them---there was a squad in front of the---And the students were hiding behind trees. When they broke and ran the army ran after and shot them as if they were hunting rabbits. The students presented no threat---they were running; it was awful. The army was like, “Okay we’ve routed them all out now,” and shot them. As this is all going on we were huddled behind a wall away from the windows.

Nobody got hurt in the embassy. As this firing is going on the phone rings in my office. So I—movie style not quite on my stomach—crawl into the office and lift the phone. And it’s my daughter who’s calling from the States; she’s calling from Carlton College; she’s a senior. She wants to know how I am and what’s going on there. I say, “listen” and I held up the phone. She can hear the gunshots going off. We were never really in crazy danger, on just that one occasion; we had a convoy out at night and a curfew had been declared. We had gotten assurance that there would be no problem at the embassy but the troops, somewhere along the lines---

Q: That is one thing I’ve learned over the years: don’t trust anybody who’s out at night with a gun. Because I was an enlisted man, and I knew the lowest of the low got stuck with that duty. So you couldn’t appeal to their intelligence.

LEVIN: No, no. It was pretty scary for us—these guys with guns. Fortunately our defense attaché, a wonderful man spoke some Burmese, managed finally to diffuse the situation and get us. It was menacing for us and it was the only time that I felt fearful.

Q: Was the world press able to get in there?

LEVIN: No. Nobody. There was no television. There was some wire reporting, but definitely no press. None.

Q: How about the other embassies? What were they doing?

LEVIN: Cowering of course. I’m not quite sure what the Soviet embassy was doing. The Soviet Ambassador I knew was _____. I was hoping but I don’t think officially they

said anything. The whole of NATO, the Western Embassies would get together from time to time. The British in particular, we were all in it together on this thing, discussing things, trying to find out what was going on. The Germans were. So there was close coordination.

Q: Was there any thought of pulling our embassy out at any time?

LEVIN: No. What happened was as things began to deteriorate we evacuated. We evacuated the dependents and we took out a number of dependents from other embassies. We were largely waiting on the evacuation of embassy personnel on their own.

Q: How did you get them out?

LEVIN: By airplane. We arranged for a U.S. military aircraft to come in.

Q: Did they go to Thailand?

LEVIN: To Bangkok. Oh, I got into a pissing match with the ambassador there. He was complaining. The Department wanted to bring people back to the States. I was pulling for Bangkok because it was close. From time to time once the actual real tension was over, the resumption of aircraft was inevitable. I thought it would be good to have our dependents _____ with our embassy people. Every now and then they could just hop on a flight, about an hour, and reach family members. Then they could spend some time with their dependents. People in Bangkok were moaning, "This puts such a strain on our administration," and I just thought that was absolutely, incredibly inappropriate. To treat fellow members of the Foreign Service that way. So I made a complaint to Washington about Bangkok. I don't know if my memories—it's getting a little fuzzy I guess—but most of them ended up in Bangkok.

Q: The thing is that once you send dependents to Washington, they practically never come back.

LEVIN: I couldn't imagine how Washington and Bangkok would not be totally supportive of this. I still don't understand. That's not the way to treat colleagues. If I were running the show in Bangkok, I'd open arms; I'd go out of my way to try to help.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LEVIN: This is off the record; it was Sam Donohue, who had been the ambassador to Burma prior to that. He was very cold and unappealing. I had written---did you ever get my piece on my 40 years in Asia?

Q: I think I did. Yes.

LEVIN: Yeah. I don't know how that will fit into things.

Q: Do you by chance have it in electronic form?

LEVIN: No. I wouldn't know how to do that. You mean scan it and put it in an envelope?

Q: I can scan it.

LEVIN: No, I don't have an electronic form. That was just off the cuff. I was at a dinner that was in my honor and then at the end they said, "How about saying a few words," and I got up and spoke for about an hour and a half. But in any event the upshot of this whole thing was that the government promised to have free elections. Ne Win took control and cracked down on the regime. Through terror he put an end to the demonstrations. Then he said there would be elections in the following May of 1989. After the display of bloody terror—and I have a sense that what happened in September, 1988 was probably on a scale larger than Tiananmen, which happened in China in June 1989. I have to speculate—it probably involved more deaths and yet the U.S. public, the world in general, we got almost nothing of it. That's because there was no press on the scene and particularly no television. If by then in '89 it wasn't on television, it never happened. That was the state of the American public's awareness of events: if it was on television they knew about it. If it wasn't, they didn't. There was just no awareness of the enormity of what was taking place because of that, because they kicked the press out. As a consequence of all this, when the military took power—now Ne Win is brilliant _____. In my speech are all—I wish I had my reporting in front of me to refresh my memory a little bit. For a number of months here we just cut off all contact with the Burmese government.

I recommended, and it was accepted, that we just cut off our assistance, and not get caught siding with the police and the army. I had earlier come to the conclusion that this anti-narcotic method really wasn't doing very much. I went on one of those spraying missions. The enormity of these missions involved just sitting on an airplane and spraying, not looking for a needle in a haystack but for the defense, it was just dropping a needle into a haystack. So I was not all that enthusiastic about the program, but the DA (Defense Attaché) was; they always are. I didn't really put up any real resistance other than pointing out at how ineffective it was. Once the authorities had bloodied their hands, however, I said there's no need for us to be supplying the armed forces and the police with tools that they could use purposely to try to attack us in the night of our---I told Washington what had happened. We did; we ended all of our associations. We ended our assistance. I put out the word to our DAA that there was to be no contact with the Burmese. We cut off contact with the Burmese government. I put out the word that there was to be no contact; I found out that one DAA guy had gotten in touch with a police contact and I got rid of him.

Q: I would have thought the DAA was so gung-ho they would have fought you tooth and nail?

LEVIN: They did; they weren't happy with it. One of them defied it. You know it's not easy to get rid of a guy in this day and age. In the old days you'd say, "I want him out."

And boom, he'd be out. They fought it for a while but I finally got them in line for defying my authority.

There was another item I need to talk to you about. There was another situation in that section that cropped up; people are divided in government. I had in the political section, I inherited a fellow whom I had known for years and years and years. One time I had looked up to him and thought he was one of the most brilliant people I had ever met at that point. So I came down and here he was in the political section. In a very short while I realized that something had happened to this guy. I don't know what; I knew something was wrong. He was in trouble because he wasn't doing his job. Whenever he wrote something, it was just bad. He was just bad. What am I---it was just awful. I had to get rid of this guy. He was just---I wanted to get rid of him. As I said, in the old days they'd be satisfied if you absolutely called somebody, but you can't do that now. Nowadays there are all kinds of protections and procedures and things of that sort. There should be some protection for the officers from arbitrary acts. In this case—I mean he was terrible—so I called him up and told him that he was going on leave. I said I'm going to submit a review on your performance, but you're not going to be able to return at all. I'm going to make a request for your transfer. And this is an old friend; it was really painful but I did it and we did not talk after that. That's shedding some light on the foreign institution and professional practices that on the one hand maybe they're necessary to protect officers but on the other hand they diminish the capacity of the ambassador in the event that he has not much in the way of a loyal, loving staff.

Getting back to Burma: we maintained no contact with the government for several months, none for months. In the meantime preparations were going on. I cabled the department and said, "Well, it's time maybe that I did get a support team." There was one Burmese general, Tim---Tim---, who headed their intelligence service. He was seen as a man who was all powerful. I had met him on a couple of occasions; he was fluent---he probably was the best educated of the group; he took a year or two of Burmese. I recommended he try and sit down and talk to see whether we could bring to bear some kind of flow of intelligence on the situation in Burma. The department said, "Sure, go ahead and try." I sat down with him and I talked to him. Essentially I said, "Look the economy is probably the root of the cause of all our problems. There is serious deterioration in the living standard and quality of life in Burma and medical attention is needed. You military, you know nothing of economics. I would know nothing about ordering the charge of a division. I'm an economic person. So why don't you stop all this name-calling—there were signs up all over town about fighting against it. It was almost like China and stuff from when there was like a death curse in Korea. The words would be meaningless loathing, which contributed to outside intervention, communist aid, drugs.

What the country needs is a reversal of this economic torture. Why don't you get some propaganda line of 'time for unity,' a move from the past, and we're all in together for the state and the nation. Call in economic experts, someone who knows how to run the economy. Put them in charge there to make policies. Really have the spirit of talk about democracy—I mean all of that would have been incredible. I made, if I'm not so modest,

what I thought was an eloquent and very forceful presentation on moving away from their military operations and their own kind of thing. In return I got a replay of this nonsensical stuff: that with the return of the press conferences and I think none of that rebellion made it to the press. It was never---you couldn't watch it, there was absolutely no point—so that didn't go very far.

Then they did conduct elections; actually in March 1990 they did have elections. They were essentially free and fair elections. At that time the parties were running campaigns. We were in touch with all the parties and _____. I think earlier I'd already told you this but as these demonstrations were boiling up from the old _____ and gas fumes, I met with some who had toppled some of the military leaders by a military coup. They came to request the United States create a technocratic para-military support. Now I'm just showing how unreal the political leaders of the past were and putting it in the context of why the military can be powerful.

Unfortunately the military, which has an ineptitude for some of these---I mean it's for law and order but that's about it. In any event, because there was campaigning they allowed it to go on and allowed for essentially fair and free elections. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of the king. I remember writing an exam paper in Washington based on the fact that these elections again, were a sign that this army was totally out of touch with the political sentiment of the country. They made assumptions—while the urban areas which were _____ or third-party—that, as in the past, the rural areas which are largely---and the military formed public parties. Their assumption was just that they would overwhelm the rural people who would just be supportive of these military parties. And they weren't. It was a resounding defeat. We all looked forward to a new era in Burma politics. Within a few weeks this regulation came out. It was one defeat in a way in that there was no initiating new executives, no appointing new ones and this had to be certified, and that had to be done. Then a week later other obscure regulations came out. Because in the minds of the military everything had to be done legally; what was meant by 'legally' was to think of a way, think of a regulation which would in effect not allow _____ so it had to be regulation. Oh goodness gracious _____ and maintained the army in power where it remains today. The only sign of _____ they showed is the deregulation to keep themselves abroad. Now they did open up the economy a bit; this was basically after I left. There was some degree of foreign entrepreneurs came in and the Koreans, the Singaporeans, not so much Chinese yet—they hadn't reached that stage of development—and the Thais—they raped part of Burma for quick profits. A few industries came in, labor-intensive, to take advantage of a lot of cheap labor. When we subsequently imposed sanctions, the prohibition of anything made in Burma, one of the major markets closed and it was probably _____ a significant amount to them.

The economic policies were so capricious from day to day entrepreneurs didn't know what to expect; it was just too uncertain an environment from what I heard. Now the army was becoming pretty corrupt. In those days I wouldn't call it corrupt; it was just inherently unfair. It didn't need to be corrupt because Burmese officers lived on a level far above that of Burmese citizens. They had access to their military jeeps; they had special schools for their kids. They had special medical facilities. There was a whole

culture and apparatus of special privileges for them and that's how Ne Win was able to win the loyalty of his officers. They were, by Burmese standards, living high on the hog. Not by American standards certainly. Not quite the colonel who's boohooing, who would have two kids going to boarding school and be _____. Not that the Burmese were intending to do it almost, no, purposely _____. And it was wildly sprouting life fed by corruption and corruption that you had to have been _____. It was a military provided regiment that gave the officers a standard of living well above the regular class citizens.

Q: You left there when?

LEVIN: October of 1990.

Q: Where did things stand when you left: the election had taken place, the election had essentially been nullified?

LEVIN: There was still some political activity. I think, Aung San Suu Kyi, they cracked down on her activities. Obviously she was going hopping around, trying to get the results of the election. In the beginning there was still some leeway for political activity but they cracked down and I'm pretty sure she was under house arrest. It was evident that the election results would not be carried out. The army was totally in control and maintained control by the gun.

Q: Did you have much contact with the various parties during the election period?

LEVIN: Oh yes.

Q: Were they really feeling that things were going to work out?

LEVIN: Hopeful. It was quite evident that Aung San Suu Kyi had tremendous possibilities to support. She was the one who was campaigning on national unity, like "My father was founder of the Burmese Army." I don't know about the army but part of her program was freeing Burma, healing Burma. You know, a very intelligent, sensible program, and she won, but that was it. I mean great election and nothing came of it. There was a lot of resentment obviously, but nobody was going to go out and speak again, not after the bloody elections of September 1988. That was a very real deterrence and it worked. It was years before the monks came out again.

Q: Were you getting visitors from Washington, from congress or elsewhere? Could they come?

LEVIN: I would say that we did not have a large stream of visitors. I just don't remember---I don't think they were barred. No, we did not. Maybe its *quid pro quo*, after Hong Kong, nothing would seem so large as Hong Kong. There didn't seem to be that much interest.

Q: Were you all at the embassy, outside of that incident where you got trapped at night, were you harassed by the Burmese?

LEVIN: No, no, no. As these demonstrations intensified, and as we got concerned with the state of Americans and other foreigners, primarily the Americans, the 7th fleet sent some ships off the coast of Burma, a good distance---

Q: About?

LEVIN: 30-40 miles up the coast. With helicopter capabilities to evacuate in case things really turned dangerous. Those ships were seen by Burmese fisherman and the word came back that the U.S. 7th fleet was in the area. Oh and the government didn't know what to do. They were concerned about our fleet and so I was called in my department—I'm going to use some subjective words—the slimy and despicable guy who was the mouthpiece to these guys who were running the government. He said how they were concerned about the 7th fleet and with the situation in Burma so frothy with demonstrations and violence the Burmese government would appreciate the U.S. government putting out an announcement that the 7th fleet is not, in any way, intended as a sense of a threat. ...something along those lines... So I just put out a statement. What was interesting of course was that Burma was so off the radar, and there weren't really many Burmese experts in the Department of State, that basically I ran policy on Burma from out of the embassy. From time to time I acted in my own capacity to do---but then the rumor did get out that U.S. Marines were poised to invade Burma by _____. It was interesting. I think a lot of people were hoping that this rumor was true, but no. It was an example of the situation which is that rumors were just were flying around, just all kinds of rumors. You got a lot of currency that the U.S. was going to invade Burma. I would have thought at that time we would have caused _____ but now I can't bring it to my mind. I will tell you this: in retrospect, we would have gotten a much warmer welcome there then we got in Iraq without a doubt, without a doubt. So that was that. I do have—if I can find it I'll send it to you—an article I wrote on recollections of the Burmese uprising. Would you be interested?

Q: Yes, I would.

LEVIN: You'll have to give me time—having moved from Massachusetts to Minnesota and back and forth, back and forth.

Q: What did you do when you left?

LEVIN: I got one of these renewals, I forget what they call them.

Q: Extension.

LEVIN: Right. I was going back but before that I got an offer—the Asia Society wanted to set up an office in Hong Kong. I had been approached by a very good friend, who was a Hong Kong businessman. He undertook to set up that Asia Society in Hong Kong. I all

along---when we first came in the age of retirement was 60 then---I had this offer which was pretty attractive. What I really wanted to do was be the ambassador to China, but I didn't think that was quite possible. I thought well Hong Kong. We had tours in Hong Kong. We'd been there three times. We knew a lot of people, and this 1987 situation was holding---this was 1990, the end of 1990. I thought about it and accepted it. So I retired.

Q: How long were you working for the Asia Society?

LEVIN: From 1990 to 1996. I left in '96. I stayed in Hong Kong; then finally I said, "Hey," to my wife, "I'm getting tired, I want to go home."

Q: I must say that public life gets a little bit long after a while.

LEVIN: I'd had it and I just wanted to go back. She complained a bit knowing full well that we would lose some of the comforts of life in Hong Kong, such as the domestic servants and things like that. We did bring back a Burmese servant with us. She stayed with us for a couple years, but she was missing her family. I went back to Burma, first time, maybe two, three years ago in with a group from Carlton College in Minnesota. I didn't want to apply for a visa. I didn't want to give them the satisfaction of turning me down. But this was a group big enough and their intelligence good enough to spot me. So I went back and I met up with the maid and she started crying, she said, "Oh, I made a terrible mistake to come back." In any event, we moved. Prior to moving back, I had already been in touch with Carlton College, the president of the college. My kids went to Carlton College because I talked to Mike Armacost, who was a good buddy and a graduate from Carlton. I told him my son was reaching college age and has no idea where he wanted to go. Mike told him Carlton, and he went out to Carlton; he visited Carlton and decided to go to Carlton. While he was in school, while my daughter was here---she followed him---I got to know the president and he said, "Hey, when you retire, come here and teach." I took him up on it, not full time. I'm here part of year; I'm going to start cutting back and spending more time in Massachusetts. I'm here three or four months of the year; I'm cutting back to maybe two.

Q: Looking at the Asia Society, what were you up to?

LEVIN: We tried to bring interesting people for speeches on every conceivable topic: culture, heritage, politics, and economics. There were prominent businessmen. This was Hong Kong, so we'd get them. We would ask them to come and speak and we did pretty well. We have the arts side of it, forums and things like that. We had exhibitions of paintings; we brought in a group of Mongolian throat singers.

Q: Throat singers?

LEVIN: Mongolian Throat singers, have you ever heard of them? Somehow they produce two sounds at the same time.

Q: Yes, I think some call them croak singers.

LEVIN: Yes, croak singers. That's it. It was fantastic---those kinds of activities. It was fine, but after a while enough was enough. It was good. Then I went back. When 1997 came and they had the ceremony, I was invited back by the then-Chief Executive Officer. He had been the governor and was now Chief Executive Officer appointed by China---but it was Hong Kong, whom we'd known for many years. We were invited as guests of the Hong Kong government to the hand-over ceremonies. At the time these things, with the British flag coming down at night, and the Chinese coming up, the British have a lot of precedence for ceremonies for turning over colonies and territories. It was quite a situation.

Q: I would just like your comments though on this: right now we seem to be going through a period where the Chinese are acting up. They've been playing a rather, almost, benign role. All of a sudden the teeth are out there. Is this Chinese?

LEVIN: China? I was just reading the *New York Times* these last few days. My perspective on these South China territorial disputes: that has been going on for 20 odd years or more. Basically from time to time there's an incident down in that area. All along these governments have been in contact with each other; they've been trying to work it out, but there are these conflicting claims. As I say from time to time there are incidents and China is the major power there. Just think of it in terms of being increasingly capable of protecting its claims. They're not in effect saying, "This is our period and end." I don't see this as any real heightening of Chinese efforts to unilaterally impose a settlement in these areas along South China. I just don't see it. Now on this other island the Japanese and the Chinese are coming into conflict again. In 1970 you had people from Taiwan landing on this island, claiming this island for the Republic of China. You had people from Hong Kong going there and saying, "This is part of China" and the Japanese chasing them off, back and forth, back and forth.

Then what happened is there was a collision, which is the new element, between a fishing boat and a Japanese Coast Guard. Who was responsible? Who acted more aggressively? I don't know---there's no way---but the fact of the matter is there was a collision. In these incidents and this kind of thing, I don't see China bearing its teeth, moving more aggressively. What worries me---South China to me is nothing---that's going to fester on a low level a little as it has for years and years. Hopefully they'll work out some kind of agreement. The only issue there of course is what resources might be given and surface on these corrupt companies. The Japanese think that there is a very strong current of Chinese Nationals in respect to Japan. The young Chinese, against a background of China having 150 years of national humiliation and conquest, their mentality is one of being victimized particularly in reference to the Japanese. The Japanese in the 1920s moved in, moved in, moved into what essentially was _____ and took the advantage of China's weakness to grab Manchuria, just as earlier they grabbed Taiwan. They had an expanding sphere of influence in North China culminating in a full-scale war in 1937. The Chinese have a particular animosity towards the Japanese, "We've taken a lot of crap from you, now we're done, no more." That goes back to even when they were weak.

This dispute over this tiny island is in an environment where there's a lot of dry brush around. The Chinese government can't look weak on the question of anything involving Japan. It has to take into account—and it's shared—this sentiment that, "We're not going to take crap from the Japanese." Now whose claims are valid? There is no way you, I, the United States government can take a stand on the validity of either side. What the United States should do is avoid taking sides, avoid seeing this as a Chinese _____ against Japanese and just realize there is some strong nationalist sentiment. Americans should work with both Japan and China very quietly and say, "Look you guys can work this thing out. Don't move to the stage where you create serious tensions between your two countries, because it's a threat to the peace of the whole area." And to the United States. There is a sentiment that oh Japan's being threatened; we should move closer to Japan. We need to contain China to balance off its aggressiveness. That would be a disaster. That would just assure this sentiment, on the part of the Chinese, that the United States' policy is going to hinder China from attaining power. Let's face it; any power that gains economic strength is going to increase its military capabilities, particularly against the background of China's history being so weak and being so vulnerable to outside attack. It's a given; it's part of the international climate now. India is doing it now; India is moving ahead quite smartly in developing military capabilities. Yet there's no sense of oh the potential threat of India's intention.

Why should we---I know why we do it because people tell you China's still communist and they threaten Taiwan, the free democracy of Taiwan. That issue by the way is being handled very nicely by Taiwan and China, both groups---the economies of Taiwan and China are inseparable. It's one economy now and there's an appreciation in Taiwan of that. If we don't get too deeply involved in this thing, if we don't go off on a tangent with containing China and communist China-- who don't want democracy in China, these two groups over time, and it has already been 50 years, more than 50, will work something out. It is moving in the direction of some form of agreement between the two. One of the things that China does, in building up its arms capability, is deter Taiwan from declaring its independence, which was a very real possibility 5-10 years ago. It's moving away from that now. What I'm saying essentially is that China is a growing power. China is a nationalistic power, not in a sense of expanding in terms of Japanese nationalism where they went into Manchuria, went into this, went into that or German nationalism with—that's not it. It's a sense that China is now becoming a modern country with economic clout and they are growing their military force and we're not going to take lecturing when you lecture to us constantly on this human rights thing. The Chinese want respect and they want opportunities. There is a strong feeling within the Chinese public that the United States is hostile towards China and it's trying to stop China's growth. They will cite everything from the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade (which no Chinese believes was accidental although I know it was accidental), to that clash in Hainan Island. There were 300 U.S. Navy flights a year 13-14 miles off the coast of China. Can you imagine what the U.S. public's reaction would be to Chinese planes flying—yeah they have the right to fly in international waters—15 miles off the coast of California? That goes back to 1996 when we sent the 7th fleet in there because we had an old Chinese submarine stirring up problems in Taiwan; that was Taiwan moving toward independence. The Taiwanese President was trying a move towards independence. The

reason for the Chinese actions never really came before the American public; suddenly they're all reacting to Taiwan.

My point simply is that I think China right now remains preoccupied with economic development. You hear all the talk about how powerful China is and modernizing. You go ten miles out of Beijing and you're in the third world. There is still a huge amount of poverty in China and a huge number of problems. One of the most obvious problems is a population that is aging very quickly. They're going to have a situation where a small number of workers support a huge overhang of an aging population. China is not going to come in and eat our economic lunch. We thought the Japanese were going to do that in the 1980s. I don't see that happening in the case of China, but there is that fear.

Q: We always try to create an enemy. Every country does but sometimes this thinking gets dangerous. I think you're quite right that it's dangerous thing to play with this. It might create something---

LEVIN: Particularly when we're in an economic recession. You recall in the 1980s when congressmen were smashing Japanese cars in front of the Capitol or when the Japanese were buying the Rockefeller center? We were in an economic recession and the fear of the Japanese taking over the world economy was palpable. Well, it didn't happen, but now we're in recession. Then we blamed it on the Japanese; now the blame is on the Chinese. No one ever looks into it on the American side. There is now this sentiment in the United States that we—particularly in the right wing—that we have to contain China. We have to develop a ring of alliances and work with other countries. That to me is very dangerous thinking, because China is showing no signs other than these disputes over disputed territories—and that what it is these disputed little islands. Thailand doesn't fear China; Indonesia has got no fear of China. They're all getting along very well with China. Europe's not making a huge stink out of China. India is developing its military capacity in a very hard and impressive fashion—not yet near the level of China because it's a smaller economy. Nobody makes noise about India's militarization and particularly when it is affecting what Pakistan is doing. The Indian occupation of Kashmir is creating problems with Pakistan and now Pakistan is dealing with the Afghan thing and it's all related—but you don't hear that. China's communist, China's authoritarian, China's suppressing democracy. There are no means for a democracy movement in China now. There are some few brave souls who, express varying degrees of annoyance with the government---that it's basically bureaucratic---a government that is divided like any other government between people who are more open, magnanimous society, and the security forces (who walk around with their knuckles dragging on the floor just as some of the security forces in the United States do and try to push a more constraining regime). It's conflict.

China is dynamic; it's changing—but I will tell you this from my many visits to China and talks with Chinese: (1) this is probably the best Chinese government in 150 years; (2) without doubt the Chinese people have clothes, heating, and enjoy material well-being that is unprecedented in the last, at least, 150 years, and more government strength; (3) there is general support for the Chinese government; the public is favorably inclined in

the. There is no political pot boiling; there's no sense of popular opposition to this government. From time to time you get local disputes over land rights and people being screwed by an official. There's corruption and all of that, but there's no evidence of a popular sense of grievance against the government. It is a very positively regarded government by the masses of China—that's a very difficult thing to measure.

All that—there was a Gallup Poll which showed about 80% of the people in China are pleased with the way things are going. At the same time about 23% of Americans were content to the way the United States was going under George W. Bush. Among Chinese intellectuals there is a fear of their own people in the sense that they don't think the level of education and that the ability to China to be informed enough and discerning enough to bring a democratic form of government into existence—they just don't see it. They think it would erupt into all kinds of factionalism and corruption. In other words I think most Chinese intellectuals think China is not ready for democracy. To whatever degree that it's authoritarian and _____ sometimes in a very arbitrary fashion.

The fact remains that the Chinese people now are freer than they have been, again, for probably about, certainly in, 150 years. There is a very wide area of freedom in China. You can do almost anything. Even in literature, in books and popular culture probably the only thing you cannot do is to publicly disparage the government or actively try to create a political party—they don't want any political parties. So these are restraints on political life but the quality of the Chinese life is improving. Sensitivity towards the desires of the population has increased; they're much better educated. It's a much more open society and there is not a restive demand for greater freedom. From time to time there are strikes or demonstrations and people do stupid things: The arrest of a Nobel Prize winner, restrain the _____. It's stupid and unproductive---but I'm very pleased when an international group or a Norwegian group cites somebody who's acting for democracy or who is suppressed. That has some impact in China.

If we go on and say you violated this, you violated that, as we have done so often, so loudly, so ineffectively, over so many years that it is now seen by the Chinese—at large, government and others—as part of the long standing U.S. efforts to minimize, to lecture them, to try and paternalistically shape their future, to tower over them and to constrain them. It strengthens the hands of these old fashioned repressive. It has nothing to do with communists—divisions of these types who want to make sure that nothing threatens the government. It strengthens their hand and weakens those who are working for a more moderate---to make China more open politically. Only “more open” because otherwise they're tainted with just being the running dogs of the Americans. So we have to approach this in a clever way. If you start thinking of China as threatening and start behaving like China is threatening you will have an enemy.

That's what I feel. What is needed is for the United States to take the lead and Japan, China and maybe Russia now on a very regular basis—tri-quartile, quadri-quartile, penta-quartile—meetings of leaders and high officials who work out their issues in a very quiet way and build a certain amount of personal acquaintance and mutual trust. That's what we should be working for, not forming alliances because that can do no---with the darn

right-wing just sitting there and looking at China and thinking of all the damage they're going to do to us.

Q: This is very good. Thank you.

End of interview