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NEIL A. LEVINE

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INTERVIEW

Q: This is Carol Peasley, and it is February 21, 2022, and this is interview number one with Neil Levine.

Neil, we are delighted to have this chance to talk with you. Perhaps we could begin with you talking about when you were born, and a little bit about your childhood and family before we move onto education.

LEVINE: Thanks Carol, and thanks to the association. It's a real honor to have this opportunity to give an oral history. What a great idea and I commend the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) and the USAID Alumni Association (UAA) for their efforts.

Early Childhood, Family, Education, and Background

I was born in1961in Teaneck, New Jersey, so I was a Kennedy kid. Both my parents were native New Yorkers, my mother from the Bronx, my father from Brooklyn. They were passionate liberal Democrats, naming me Neil Adlai for Governor Adlai E. Stevenson, a Democratic stalwart and two-time presidential nominee. They were both involved in social justice issues, and that kind of figures into my story.

In 1965, my dad moved the family to Washington, D.C. to take a job with a newly formed organization called the Community Relations Service (CRS). The agency was the brainchild of then-Senator Lyndon Johnson and when he became president, he included it as Title X of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. CRS had a mandate to address and resolve local community conflict associated with integration envisioned in this landmark civil rights legislation.

My mom attended the New York School of Social Work (now at Columbia University). After we moved to Rockville, Maryland, she returned to school at Howard University where she received a Master of Social Work in 1970.

Q: Right. So that would have been the mid-sixties that you moved to the Washington area.

LEVINE: Yes.

Q: Were you schlepped off to various demonstrations at the time, I guess?

LEVINE: Sure. Because of my parents, a passion for social justice and public service were issues that became discussions at our kitchen table.

There's one story from before I was born, when I had a close encounter with Senator Jack Kennedy on the campaign trail in 1960. As my mom described it to me, the Kennedy campaign had an event at the armory in Teaneck, New Jersey. My mom apparently rushed the candidate's vehicle to greet him, and her belly was pushed up against his limousine as she gazed face-to-face with JFK through the windshield. Years later, I asked her, "how close were you?" Sitting next to me at the kitchen table, she said, "Closer than we are now."

I have a contemporaneous memory of the 1968 inaugural parade for President Richard Nixon. My parents were diehard liberals, but they were new to Washington. I think they carried a strong sense of patriotism about the role of government that made them want to attend the parade, even if they didn't care for the candidate who won. What I remember was the cold of D.C. in January and running in and out of a café that served hot chocolate.

Q: (Laughs) Okay that's good. So, you said you initially were in Silver Spring and then went on to Rockville. Were you in public schools in—?

LEVINE: I was in public schools, watching the DC suburbs bloom, when Rockville was the outer edge of the suburbs. My dad would commute to downtown DC every day.

One of the things I remember was whether he should go to work during the riots following the assassination of Dr. King. Given his work, I don't think he ever considered not going as this was his work. CRS had done work with Dr. King in Selma, performing behind the scenes diplomacy between local law enforcement and civil rights movement leaders, including Dr. King, to peaceably march after there had been violence at Pettus Bridge. And this was before my father joined CRS or right before, but there was no question that he would be going into work to do what they could to ease the tensions following the assassination.

Q: Yes; that was obviously important work and a lot that we're hearing about now as people look back on the history of the civil rights movement. So, did you graduate from high school in Rockville? I don't know what the high schools were up there.

LEVINE: I graduated from Richard Montgomery High School in 1979. I grew up with an older brother, David, and my sister, Susan. We were really a "federal family" given my dad's job and my sister, who became a clerk at the National Institutes of Health and worked there for nearly 40 years. My brother got his Ph.D. and became a university professor and scholar. But discussions about government shutdowns, RIFs (Reduction in Force) and continuing resolutions (CRs) were all very familiar to me by the time I went

to the Hill and then to USAID (United States Agency for International Development). I'd been hearing about those politics and maneuvers from when I was a kid.

Q: Good. So, did you have any special interests in high school that related to the kind of work that you ultimately did, such as international affairs or language or—?

LEVINE: I would say none, at least not recognized at the time. I did take an early liking to Spanish. Beyond that, I don't think I was directed particularly in an international direction. Certainly, I was interested in politics—and sports.

Q: I am trying to remember when significant immigration from Central America began; I think some did start by 1979 or 1980. Did you see any of that? Or it probably wasn't in the Rockville area.

LEVINE: No, not in Rockville, and I don't think Rockville at that time was really what you would call a receptive community. What I do recall – again from my dad's work --was the Mariel boatlift, and the Cuban and Haitian refugees at that time. CRS, my dad's agency, along with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was helping to resettle and address the impact on communities where there was a large influx of refugees. So, it wasn't a local issue for me, but it was something we talked about.

Q: That actually does remind me that his agency probably was similarly involved with the resettlement of Vietnamese in the earlier seventies.

LEVINE: Yes. Again, CRS got involved with community conflict in fishing communities on the Gulf Coast in the shrimp industry between immigrant Vietnamese fishermen and other fishermen.

Q: Yeah, right. Also interesting, you started this by saying that this was an early brainchild of LBJ. It's interesting that there are a lot of things he did that people don't recognize.

LEVINE: Yeah. This figures later into our family's story as my dad had in mind to write a book about the civil rights movement as seen through the lens of the Community Relations Service. And he did; it was published in 2004. And a second edition was picked up and written by Grande Lum, CRS director during the Obama years, with a posthumous credit to my dad. That came out in 2020 with the title <u>America's Peacemaker: The Community Relations Service and Civil Rights.</u>

Q: So, your high school, you're graduating in 1979, and you're going off to college, and where did you go?

LEVINE: One of my friend's older sisters was the class valedictorian and she selected Earlham College, which is a small, Quaker school in Richmond, Indiana. That always intrigued me as a choice for her when she could have gone anywhere. On the other hand, my folks were very interested in seeing me go to the Ivy League. I was less interested. I

had the benefit of a college counselor who said I should look at this list of fine schools in the Midwest that don't have the same competitive application and level of competition. So, I was looking at Oberlin, Kenyon, Grinnell, and Earlham, but I was really sold on Earlham when I went out there. It's a unique experience, very much a values-based education with one thousand students or so. And in the middle of the Midwest.

I made lifelong friends, played four years of soccer, and really became politicized. Today you would say woke. I think it had a lot to do with U.S. foreign policy and our role in Latin America. So, with interests in Spanish and political science, I really started looking and studying Central and South America at a time that the Central America conflict was really heating up, and so that figures into my story quite directly.

I started out as a political science major and Earlham had just introduced an international studies major, which was really a hybrid between an established major and an independent course of study. The major had required courses, but you could design it according to your interests. I did a combination of political science, Spanish and economics and an off-campus study in DC for a trimester, and then foreign study in Mexico in my junior year.

The internship in DC was at a lobbying campaign called the National Peace Academy Campaign, which was responsible for establishing the U.S. Institute for Peace. I got to work with the folks that were organized to create it in its earliest form back in 1981 and led to its creation in 1984. It was really a grassroots citizens' campaign with a lot of support from the historic peace churches and the religious community, conflict resolution practitioners, and some academics. It first led to the creation of a commission to study the idea of the U.S. Institute for Peace, and then ultimately its passage and creation of what we know today.

Q: Well, I didn't know its roots at all. I thought the Hill had been very instrumental, but I was obviously wrong.

LEVINE: Congress was absolutely crucial in its creation. The champions really were Senators Spark Matsunaga (D-HI) and Jennings Randolph (D-WV). In academia, this was really the beginning of what is now called peace studies or what became international conflict management. For me there is a real through-line of politics, Central America, Latin American studies and conflict resolution that appears repeated throughout my career.

Q: Yes, right. And very much starting at Earlham. And you said it was a Quaker school, so a lot of this was presumably built into the essence of the college.

LEVINE: Absolutely. And to this day. My Earlham experience very much fit with my values even at a young age in terms of respect for the life and dignity of others, and the importance of working in community and for community.

Q: And you said you spent a semester—

LEVINE: In Mexico during my junior year.

Q: Was that in Mexico City or elsewhere?

LEVINE: I spent a week or orientation in Mexico City and then lived with families in Cuautla, Morelos (about two and a half hours south of Mexico City) and then in Puebla. Living with a family really was a deep immersion for learning Spanish.

Q: Right. So, this was primarily a language-based program, when you were in Mexico; it was mostly working on language and culture?

LEVINE: Exactly.

Q: So, by this time you're pretty bilingual in Spanish then?

LEVINE: By the end of it, I guess I would say that I spoke my best Spanish and I've been losing it ever since.

Q: (Laughs) Okay. So, then after graduation you went to the Hill.

LEVINE: I came back home to Rockville and started looking for a job. I was looking at public interest advocacy, service jobs, political jobs, and totally struck out. I couldn't find anything. I realized I was going to need to do an internship and volunteer my labor, so what would be the best place to work? I decided to apply for an internship with my local congressman in Montgomery County, who at the time was Rep. Michael Barnes (D-MD), answering constituent mail in his DC office. I chose this job because Mike Barnes was not only my hometown congressman, but he was also chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, putting him front and center in the Democratic opposition to the Reagan Administration's buildup and military response in Central America. After about six months, one of his staff members on the subcommittee went on medical leave, and they named an acting staff director, and everybody moved up a notch, which left a vacancy at the bottom of the staffing list for a receptionist/legislative correspondent. They moved me over from the personal office and ultimately on to the payroll of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. This was a ringside seat for me on the policy process, the role of Congress and my first thoroughly professional job. I say "professional" since it came with a salary.

Q: Yes, okay. (Laughs)

LEVINE: I wouldn't call it an adult salary, but it was technically a paid position—and, interestingly enough, started my federal service.

Q: Was Lee Hamilton the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee then?

LEVINE: He was not. At that point, it was Rep. Clement Zablocki (D-WI). He was succeeded a few years later by Rep. Dante Fascell (D-FL), who was there for the balance of the eighties, followed by Rep. Hamilton (D-IN).

Q: But George Ingram and Mike Van Dusen were probably on the staff, I would think?

LEVINE: I met both of them at that time and George and I worked together then and later when he came to USAID in the 1990s. We have been in touch with each other professionally ever since.

Q: How did you relate to the Senate committee? I ask in part because Helms and his staff were doing so much on Central America during that period.

LEVINE: Yeah.

Q: I'm wondering how the dynamics between the two were.

LEVINE: What I recall from the time was that the Democrats were in the minority from 1980 to 1986, so the subcommittee would do as much as it could legislatively, and then take their work to allies in the Senate, like Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) and Tom Harkin (D-IA) and other folks. They had to deal with Jesse Helms, who was at the time starting his career as Dr. No, and opposing a lot of those efforts. For example, the committee oversaw the human rights certification for El Salvador asking the administration to certify that the government of El Salvador was taking steps to improve its human rights situation. In retrospect, this could have been called our first encounter with fake news.

Q: (Laughs)

LEVINE: So, the headlines at the time were the church woman's case in El Salvador, the first efforts by the Department of Justice to help protect witnesses in criminal cases, and the earliest administration of justice programs carried out by USAID in Central America. That's where it all started, circa 1985.

I spent a year working for Congressman Barnes and then applied to grad school, ending up at Columbia University at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA).

Q: When you were at Columbia, did you continue to focus on Latin America and Central America?

LEVINE: Very much so. In fact, I had an internship at Americas Watch (now Human Rights Watch). I focused on the work of the UN human rights rapporteur's record in Guatemala. We found that rather than independently investigate human rights, the human rights rapporteur was really playing a diplomatic role and became, at times, a defender of the government of Guatemala's record, as opposed to a rapporteur. I contributed a chapter to a report called "Four Failures," which critiqued four different country rapporteurs, who Human Rights Watch felt had strayed from their mandate of an independent report. (Four

Failures: A Report on the UN Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights in Chile, Guatemala. Iran and Poland, Americas Watch, Asia Watch and Helsinki Watch, 1986).

Q: So, was there anything special about being in New York in graduate school that might have also been part of an important learning experience, because it's such a diverse city?

LEVINE: I loved New York. In fact, being born of two New Yorkers, my parents were very excited for me to have that experience. I really took to that big city experience. On the downside, I would say that the Earlham experience was so different in terms of having a very close-knit and small community, my Columbia experience couldn't be further from that. I remember thinking that New York would be a great place to live if you could afford to live there. I was barely getting by on a grad student's meager funds, and I think that wore on me. I would have stayed had I been able to get a job making enough to take the edge off the city.

Q: Did you have to do a thesis or major research?

LEVINE: My thesis was a comparative study of democratization in Central America, comparing El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

Q: Interesting. Okay.

So, then you're getting ready to graduate with your master's, and you were probably looking at multiple options and deciding what you were going to do?

LEVINE: You would think. (Laughs) I came home to Rockville and very much was looking at repeating the job search. I read in my local paper about a social worker for the city of Rockville who was a Chilean exile. Her son had gone to Chile and was photographing a demonstration where there were tires burning and they encountered the military. He was arrested and in the scuffle was doused with gasoline and burned alive, and subsequently died of his wounds. A companion, a woman, was horribly burned but survived. The woman in the story started an advocacy campaign for justice for her son, whose name was Rodrigo Rojas. Through friends from the Hill, I was recommended and started working for Veronica Denegri, Rodrigo's mother, who lived in DC, and I got injected into the community of the Chilean exiles, doing advocacy work. I only worked there for about six months, but in turns of advocacy, we were able to place a cover story in the inaugural issue of the *Washington Post* magazine. The story was also featured in the *Washingtonian* and *60 Minutes*. This was my first brush with major media advocacy and communications, along with what it takes to run a small NGO. Still not making an adult salary, but it's not the kind of work you do for money.

Legislative Assistant in Office of Congressman Edward Feighan/House Foreign Relations Committee: 1987 - 1993

I did that for about six months before I got a job—my first full-time staff position on Capitol Hill in January of 1987.

Q: And this was working for—?

LEVINE: I worked for Congressman Edward Feighan (D-OH) representing the Cleveland suburbs.

Q: And were you on his personal staff then?

LEVINE: I was on his personal staff and was his legislative assistant for foreign affairs. As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, he had two folks working foreign affairs. I was responsible for the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, and that was chaired by Rep. Lee Hamilton at the time, so I had a lot of interaction with the full committee staff, including some of the folks we talked about. I also covered Latin America, trade issues, veterans' affairs and his work for the Subcommittee on International Economic Policy and Trade.

Q: How does it work? Did he have any staff members on the committee? How does it work when you're on personal staff and then there's committee staff?
Can you describe that?

LEVINE: The subcommittee chair basically draws on the full committee staff, and he has three or four dedicated staff members that run the subcommittee. And then each subcommittee member has their personal staff that handle the committee work out of the member's office.

Rep. Feighan also chaired the International Narcotics Task Force. It was not a full subcommittee, but it acted as such. It held hearings and there were two HFAC committee staffers to handle narcotics issues. I worked very closely with them in terms of preparation for hearings, writing statements, and preparing legislation for my boss as the chair. But I was wholly in the member's personal office.

Q: Okay. I'm assuming you, over time, had a fair amount of contact with USAID. Is that correct?

LEVINE: My first contact with USAID came as a result of a very active local group called Results that worked on microenterprise development, and anti-poverty approaches for small microlending to the poorest of the poor. They had a local chapter in Cleveland that would write to the congressman, and they also had celebrity spokespersons that would come lobby on Capitol Hill. You may remember Valerie Harper who created the TV sitcom character, Rhoda. She was a Results spokeswoman and would come to our office from time to time to lobby and support the congressman's effort to devote more funds to microenterprise development for the poor. And if you think about it, at the time, this was a very niche issue. No one voted for the congressman based on his support for microenterprise but having interested constituents made him really pay attention to it.

Q: Was this the origin of the earmark for microfinance? As I recall, it was very big in Central America.

LEVINE: Yes. I explored what Results wanted to see in foreign aid legislation. They were particularly adamant about capping loan sizes at $300 to ensure money went to the very poor. What I did was to talk to a bunch of microenterprise implementing organizations and found that they were not as doctrinaire as RESULTS in targeting the loans at $300, due to their own experience working in many contexts around the world. I set up roundtables where I called in two or three implementors such as Acción and FINCA. Results was not an implementor, so they had a slightly different perspective. USAID folks would join these discussions so I could get a much broader perspective on how this played out in the field. This is when I met Michael Farbman who led the USAID microenterprise office along with Rose Marie Depp who worked in the Office of Legislative Affairs and who later became a mentor to me when we worked for the Bureau for Legislative and Public Affairs (LPA).

In sum, I tried to find a compromise that USAID could live with without earmarking, although there was plenty of support, and ultimately, there was an earmark. In retrospect, I thought that we could have found something much more workable, rather than make it such a hard mandate, given that different countries were in different situations, whether you needed a global rule to govern all the programs.

For me, it was my first exposure to USAID's technical office and capabilities, as well as the legislative affairs office. I also heard from Bette Cook, another dear colleague, mentor and friend, who would come and lobby our office for support of the foreign aid bill. My boss was on the committee, so his vote was never really in doubt. But you know, Bette dutifully would come visit and walk through the talking points and offer whatever assistance she could on behalf of the agency to support our position in getting the bill passed.

This would have been in the 1987-1992/1993 period, when I was working with USAID folks. Certainly, I saw USAID's general counsel for legislation, Bob Lester, in action whenever the foreign aid legislation was on the Hill. I also worked closely with Norma Parker who briefed the oversight staff on USAID's counter-drug efforts in the Andes. We later worked together in the Bureau for Latin America and Caribbean (LAC). Bob Boyer worked for the House Foreign Affairs Committee and would later be my boss in the Bureau for Legislative and Public Affairs (LPA).

Q: Using microfinance as an example, do you think AID could have more effectively presented itself to get its technical perspectives understood on the Hill? It sounds like you did have a lot of communication with technical people who knew what was going on, and therefore the answer to this is probably no, but I'm wondering if AID could have done more.

LEVINE: That's a really great question. I remember being very, very impressed with what Mike and Rose Marie were saying, and I was trying to find the middle ground. I

think what I would say is that they had a pretty hard brief, given everything that was going on. Remember, this is when there was stiff opposition to the administration's foreign policy in general. There wasn't a lot of trust in the room for the overall policy, nor, I would say, for USAID. Some of that might have been unfair. But I don't think there was a lot of wiggle room. What I realized was for me, it was just an education of learning how the federal government worked, and I thought it was kind of unique in terms of giving USAID a fair hearing about the issue. I felt from them a real willingness to work cooperatively.

Q: The other big issue involved with USAID during that period was Central America, presumably.

LEVINE: Yes. You may recall that this was during the breakup of the Soviet Union, and what followed was an effort by Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze to resolve all the brushfire third-area conflicts, including Central America. That shaped part of the context for the Esquipulas Agreement in Central America and winding down the war in El Salvador. This figured into the story when I joined USAID and the leadership of the Agency saying that it was our job in the newly arrived Clinton administration to aid in the transition from war to peace in Central America.

Q: Right, right. And so, that work began while you were on the Hill and then AID saw that you could be an important leader on this effort.

So, are there other things that you'd like to mention about the nearly six years you spent in a quite varied and often pressure packed experience working on the Hill?

LEVINE: By the time of the 1992 election, I was really ready to move on from the Hill. It was a difficult time to job hunt because we were in the 1991 recession. People who had the good jobs weren't leaving them and the labor market was tight for what I wanted to do. The natural step for me was to move from personal staff to committee staff, but none of those jobs were coming open. It was going to take the election to stir the pot and open things up, which is what happened.

Q: So, you did end up going to USAID to work in legislative affairs. Did you apply to USAID, or did someone from USAID come to you and say, "We'd really like someone with your experience?" Was it a political appointment? Was it an AD appointment?

LEVINE: All of the above.

Q: All of the above, okay.

AID/Washington, Political Appointee, Bureau of Legislative and Public Affairs/Latin America Bureau Coordinator: 1993 - 1995

LEVINE: All of that happened. So, obviously, as a Democrat—born Neil Adlai Levine—there was a giveaway of political sympathies. You'll recall when at Foggy Bottom and when you got a call from somebody, their full name would light up on the phone screen. For those of a certain age, this would be a dead giveaway of my political leanings.

I joined as a political appointee and this is how it happened. I approached my job search asking, "Who did I know at USAID among the career staff who I'd worked with before who could give me information and help me get a job there?" And so, I wrote to Bob Lester and to Rose Marie and to Mike Farbman on the career side.

And then, I asked "who do I know in the Clinton campaign?" This was where I had the extreme good fortune of once being hired by George Stephanopoulos, when he served as chief of staff to Congressman Feighan, George went from Congressman Feighan to later work for House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt and ultimately to the top echelon of the Clinton campaign. So, I wrote to George.

I also knew Dick McCall, albeit from a distance when he worked as a Senate staffer. Dick was on the transition team and I sent him my resume. I understood that my political contacts and my career staff contacts were all feeding resumes into the transition team.

When I got called for an interview with the Office of Legislative Affairs (soon to become the Bureau for Legislative and Public Affairs), I reached out to George. I sent him a fax, four lines long.

- I'm interested in working at USAID.
- There's an open position as a Congressional Liaison Officer.
- The contact who's interviewing me is Jerry Grant. His number is 202-647-XXXX.
- It would be great if you could call.

What I learned later is that George called about ten minutes before my interview—what I came to call my "thermonuclear recommendation." I interviewed and came out the other side. I was one of the first four USAID political hires in the Clinton Administration.

I was joined by Tom Vellenga who had worked for Rep. Leon Panetta (D-CA). Tom worked the Europe and Eurasia portfolio, then known as the New Independent States (NIS) bureau. Gretchen Sierra-Zorita had worked for Congressman Robert Garcia (D-NY) and handled Africa. Molly Reilly came from the office of Rep. Tom McMillen and was assigned to Asia.

Q: So, you were there before the leadership was appointed.

LEVINE: Yes. It was the four of us, which gave us kind of an interesting standing because all of us had political rabbis that nobody really knew about except for the folks

that hired us. It was not known to the career staff, but it wasn't known to the political staff either. So none of my political bosses at the time, Administrator Brian Atwood, LPA Assistant Administrator Jill Buckley and LAC Assistant Administrator Mark Schneider had anything to do with my appointment.

Jill Buckley was a great boss and really challenged me to take my game to the next level. She very much appreciated my political instincts and my take on what was going on in terms of our Hill constituency. What I remember her saying was, "Great analysis, Neil. What do you think we should do about it?" From that day on, I never took a problem to a boss without having a recommendation in mind.

I also had the opportunity to work closely with Brian Atwood. The one time that stands out for me was when I was staffing him for a hearing on USG rule of law programs. It was tricky because the House Foreign Affairs Committee invited USAID, State and Justice to testify at the same hearing. In that scenario, there is always a risk that issues about coordination and duplication -- the usual turf fights we have – would be aired in an unfriendly forum. Brian did a great job in quoting to the committee why they created administration of justice programs as part of the foreign assistance program. I recalled an incredibly tense moment when Jamie Gorelick, the Deputy Attorney General, the #2 official at the Department of Justice, discussed how the Justice Department should be seen as the lead organization working on justice issues overseas. Brian followed by explaining how USAID's institution-building approach allowed us to work with many justice actors—courts, lawyers, law schools, police and other ministries, not just law enforcement—to strengthen overall administration of justice. He concluded with a clarion defense of the agency, saying "With all due respect to my colleague, Congress didn't create USAID as a bank for other agencies to work overseas."

I also had a close working relationship with Mark Schneider, from my time in LPA and later in the Latin America Bureau. Mark was a demanding boss, with an insatiable desire for information, particularly when it came to dealing with Capitol Hill. As a former staffer for Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Rights during the Carter Administration, he was a player on all things having to do with Latin America during the Clinton administration. My job was to try and keep up with him. Over the years, we formed a tight bond that we share today.

I recall going to brief Senate Foreign Operations Subcommittee Chairman Pat Leahy (D-VT), on the human rights situation in Haiti during the mid-90s before the return of democratic rule. The people were suffering from the abusive rule of a military government and at the same time, living under U.S. sanctions that was making a bad humanitarian situation even worse. Much of Congress was skeptical about efforts to dislodge the "de facto" regime and replace it with the democratically elected government led by the exiled Jean Bertrand Aristide.

In the meeting, Leahy seemed concerned about the drift of our policy, well aware of the humanitarian crisis, but skeptical of whether the administration understood the long-term nature of its own Haiti plan and even more important, the overall impact on the foreign

aid budget. Mark listened and agreed with the Senator's points while he delivered the brief for more robust diplomacy and aid, ending on a plea for support that would save people's lives. The meeting ended with a still skeptical Leahy, acknowledging the need for a change in policy.

On a lighter note, I worked many late nights preparing Mark for a hearing on the Hurricane Mitch reconstruction program in 1999. We had developed the testimony, along with three dozen Q&As, all assembled in a three-inch binder for him to take to the hearing. We did a mock hearing, the so-called "murder board," where we peppered him with questions. Mark would always think of additional questions the night before the hearing; we would then research the answer, draft a response and run it by him for approval.

At the hearing, Mark excelled in defending the program and answering the committee members' questions in detail. What I learned is that there will always be a question that you don't expect. In this case, it came from Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY). Ackerman represented an upper income district in Queens where he recently visited his local dry cleaner. The store's owner was interested in donating unclaimed clothing to hurricane victims, showing him a full room of his constituents' suits, shirts and other apparel. Rep. Ackerman asked Mark what he thought of the idea, saying, "you know they have no idea where the ticket is."

This had all the makings of an episode from Seinfeld and taught me that hearing preparation was about making your witness feel confident, whether you know the answer to every question or not.

In terms of my introduction to working at USAID, I give a lot of credit to my colleagues in the LPA bureau. The bureau paired all the incoming political appointees with extremely knowledgeable career staff who mentored them from Day One on. I had the good fortune to be assigned to Rose Marie Depp. Molly Reilly was assigned to Bette Cook. Gretchen worked with Joe Fredericks who had been a Bush political appointee and was retained by the Clinton folks. Tom Vellenga was assigned to Bob Boyer. They were responsible for really teaching us how the agency worked and what kind of help really helped the agency. When you think about it, you really need to know that: you come in with your knowledge of the Hill; what you don't know is the agency.

Q: Do you know where that came from? Who made that decision to do it? Because you were there before any of the political appointees.

LEVINE: Marianne O'Sullivan was the acting head of the Legislative Affairs Bureau. I don't know whether it was her idea, or if this had always been done. David Liner had been my immediate predecessor handling Latin America issues and he was very conscientious about ensuring we had a good handover. When you think about it, where was the guidance coming from during the transition? There was no political assistant administrator in place, so our job really was to get our nominees confirmed and find out

what were the needs of the bureaus and of the agency to effectively lobby and use the political talent to leverage the institutional direction.

LEVINE: At that time, Aaron Williams was acting assistant administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean (AA/LAC). Stacy Rhodes was the head of Central American Affairs (LAC/CEN), but quickly moved up to be acting deputy assistant administrator), acting DAA during that time. I got to know both of them very early on. And I will say that this was very significant in learning about USAID from the pros—just the best of the best.

My first days of work were taking John Sanbrailo up to the Hill to meet with the Helms staff for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. This was the week after the El Salvador Truth Commission findings were released. The next day, I escorted Liliana Ayalde, for briefings on Nicaragua.

Q: Yeah. Could you maybe talk a little bit about what John Sanbrailo was having to confront and talk about in his meetings on the Hill and the same with Liliana? It would be interesting to hear some of those.

LEVINE: This was a time when polarization was just drastically differing views of policy in Central America. So, it was very, very difficult for mission directors when they went up on the Hill to walk into that environment because everything you said positively about one side would be immediately criticized by the other. So, the Democrats would be interested in what aspects of the Truth Commission's recommendations was USAID prepared to embrace and enforce. But if they were too forward leaning the Republicans would be highly critical. If we were seen as holding back or being too status quo, which was fine with the Republicans, it would be criticized by the Democrats. So, there was no middle ground. This is when you hunkered down because oftentimes, the two staffs would fight with each other, and the USAID posture would be to observe.

Q: Just sit there and let them argue among themselves.

LEVINE: Exactly. My job was to navigate those engagements. What I found was that USAID too often found itself on the defensive, often as a result of its own practices. First, USAID staff would walk in without an agenda and would just sort of say, "Do you have any questions?" That reinforced a reactive and defensive posture by the agency. What I tried to do was get as much intel on where the staff was coming from and talk to mission directors or whoever I was escorting to the Hill and say, "What are our three points that we want to be sure to make? What do you want to showcase about your program? Here's what you can expect from them. How do you want to handle the hard questions? And where do we want to be at the end of the meeting?" This became my practice. It included having a written agenda. I usually would be responsible for framing the meeting so we immediately started out speaking and delivering a message, to which the staffers would respond.

Now, that didn't always work. We got roasted plenty of times, but it changed the way we worked. I found that USAID delivered its message best when we had our expert people talking about their programs.

Q: Right.

LEVINE: And what I experienced was a deep abiding respect, regardless of party, for the professionalism of USAID's development field leadership. Hill staffers knew that our folks knew what they were talking about. Their problems were generally with the policy, and to the degree that that policy could be identified with USAID driving it. You had to take that criticism and defend that policy. But a lot of times, it had to do with State Department policy. We had to be prepared to defend that policy and take our licks or make the case. But what I felt is that we needed to be much better prepared for those encounters.

Q: Right, right. Do you think it would help if people had more frequent consultation with the Hill? Especially by senior USAID mission leaders?

LEVINE: I certainly did. Because of the way we work, frequency is not as easy. Certainly, at the office director level, we were frequently in contact with the Hill.

But one practice I started that really helped was that, along with the congressional consultations, we'd meet with NGOs as part of the consultation. At the time and to this day, the Latin American Working Group serves as an umbrella organization of all the advocacy and development groups paying attention to issues in the region. We developed a practice of taking every visiting mission director, following their Hill meetings, we'd organize a session with the Latin American Working Group.

Q: Why was that important?

It was Dick McCall, who was chief-of-staff at the time, and intimately involved in the El Salvador peace process as a Senate staffer, who said the job of this administration was to see the successful implementation of the peace plan brokered by the last administration. That effort was bipartisan, and we worked under that guidance throughout the Clinton years,

When you look at the peace plans that were developed, they were national development plans as well. What this allowed USAID to do was to fold a lot of development work into those country-generated plans for peace and development. There was a natural framework against which USAID could apply a country strategy that already had a good measure of political buy-in, having been brokered by the most consequential political elements of the society.

The advocacy group that comprised the Latin America Working Group wanted the same thing. So, we basically developed relationships between our mission directors and folks who did this work. The experience for mission directors like Stacy Rhodes, George

Carner, Ken Ellis, Liliana Ayalde and others, all of whom were well-known to the NGOs and had a lot of support because they basically got it. They recognized and respected the perspectives of these NGO representatives and above all, were open to talking to them on a regular basis.

Q: No, that's an important lesson and one that people probably need to be reminded of periodically.

LEVINE: Yes. It does live on. I believe that there is a legislative requirement for consultations on the Colombia human rights program. USAID and the mission now hold consultations in-country and in Washington with the human rights community. I think that process really grew out of what we started with the Central American mission directors.

Q: Can I just ask a somewhat off the wall question, but since you mentioned John Sanbrailo and his consultations on the Hill. He had also been part of that 60 Minutes broadcast that criticized USAID for its support to the private sector in Central America saying that it led to exporting U.S. jobs. I'm wondering if when he went up to the Hill to talk about the Truth Commission work in Salvador, was he also confronted with that issue?

LEVINE: I remember it well, and there was an overhang as the *60 Minutes* story had aired in the fall before the election, but in that spring, it was very much in the air. What I recall was that, as a result of the politics as well as policy preference, as AA/LAC, Mark Schneider pretty much rolled up all those projects that could be viewed as exporting U.S. jobs.

Q: Yes. (Laughs) I was just curious.

So, you were doing this important work in the Legislative and Public Affairs Bureau, but then did, in 1995, move over to the Office of Central American Affairs. And I assume that was something that you really relished the chance to do.

AID/Washington, Latin America Bureau, Office of Central American Affairs, Deputy Director: 1995 - 2000

LEVINE: Yeah, I mean, that was sort of a no-brainer. What I was told was that they were looking for candidates for a new civil service position, which would mean resigning my political appointment. It was somewhat controversial with the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) in that this position had traditionally been held by a foreign service officer.

Q: Ah, okay.

Now, during this period, Mark Schneider was the assistant administrator.

LEVINE: Yes; but it was interesting that Ken Ellis and Liliana Ayalde, career officers, who recruited me in spite of the usual concern about burrowing in of a political appointee. Mark was happy to have me right where I was in LPA. I was his principal Hill advisor. Truth be told, Mark was his own principal advisor. And I say that with great affection, because I just talked to him yesterday, as a matter of fact. But he would have been happy to see me stay in LPA and didn't see the advantage of me going to Central American Affairs. He liked me right where I was.

Q: Yeah. Who was the director of the Office of Central America?

LEVINE: Ken Ellis.

Q: Okay.

LEVINE: And Liliana Ayalde was going to move up to be director and I became her deputy.

Most folks think of her as forever in the field. I was lucky enough to be with both of them when they were in DC. But moving me over was Ken's idea.

Q: It was Ken. That's great. How was the process of converting from AD to Civil Service, did that go smoothly, or were there issues with the unions and others?

LEVINE: AFSA (American Foreign Service Association) took note of it for sure. What was going on behind the scenes wasn't visible to me. I let my candidacy go forward. What I was told was that they didn't like the bids that they got for the needs of the office. So, the idea was to convert the position.

Q: Right, because it got converted from Foreign Service then to Civil Service, okay. And that in itself was controversial.

LEVINE: It was controversial because this had been a very large office, and it was a significant position of authority within the agency at the time. If I was in AFSA, I'd probably have raised the same complaint. I think I benefited from the moment and from having patrons that supported my candidacy. I also think I benefited from the fact that this particular set of issues had a high political profile and strong Hill interest and my background and contacts were seen as an asset.

Q: Right, right. And you obviously had expertise on Central America. So, you moved into that position sometime in 1995, then?

LEVINE: Yes, December of 1995.

Q: I believe that a lot was happening in Central America during that time. (Laughs) Maybe we could just pick up a couple of those pieces. Given your long-time interest in

human rights, I assume that was probably a continuing and important part of the work that you were doing?

LEVINE: Absolutely. There was a public fixation on Central America and U.S. policy there, a lot of it stimulated by the policy question "how do you aid countries with poor human rights records?" For the development community, interested in supporting this transition from war to peace and from dictatorships to democracies, and free market economies from closed systems, it was still problematic in how that was being done and who won and who lost, and who benefitted from the assistance.

Someone once said that when it comes to U.S. policy towards Latin America, we tend to oscillate between fixation and benign neglect. And this was a time of fixation. So, it was very exciting in terms of feeling like you were very close to the headlines, if not in them. You didn't want to be in the headlines, but you wanted to be involved in the significant issues of the day. Because of the bipartisan interest in Central America, I looked at the Office of Central America Affairs as kind of the traffic cop between official Washington, meaning the administration and the Hill, and the field missions in each country. Our job was to know our programs backwards and forwards to represent the interests of the missions and the agency as best we could. We tried to handle it at our level without having to elevate it or put it on the plate of the administrator or anyone else. It was great to work with seasoned field managers who knew the region, knew the language, knew AID, and working with super competent, knowledgeable desk officers with a bit of political savvy to do that job.

Q: It's interesting, the Latin American bureau has always been criticized a bit for being insular, but at the same time, it had people who spent long periods of time in the region and therefore, were very knowledgeable, which provided tremendous benefit. That balance between the two was always a tension.

LEVINE: So, yeah, you'll recognize this as really interesting, given the time you served there as the nineties were really the breakup of the old boy network that I heard about but really came to the Agency after.

Q: (Laughs)

LEVINE: You can see almost as a class that moved up through the ranks. But by the time I was there, Liliana Ayalde (later an Ambassador to Paraguay and Brazil) had gone to Nicaragua as mission director. Elena Brineman was director in Honduras and Marilyn Zak was in Nicaragua. These women, along with Janet Ballantyne, were really the first generation who kind of took the reins of power during that time. So the old boy network was on its way out.

I benefited from mentoring from all these folks, the mission directors that worked in Central America during the 1990s. Because of the administration's commitment to the peace processes underway in El Salvador and Guatemala and the bipartisan support of

these programs on the Hill, I spent a lot of time in D.C. and the region getting schooled on our program by those who knew them the best.

The late Eric Zallman was an early mentor for me. He was the Deputy Assistant Administrator for LAC. He took a strong interest, routinely inviting me on his "smoke break" for a little talk when he would ask me to consider a career in the foreign service. At his memorial service, I recall the huge number of people who shared similar stories about how Eric sponsored their careers.

I met Ambassador Liliana Ayalde in the early 1990s as she completed her tour in Managua. She had been one of the staff sent to reopen the mission following the election of Violeta Chamorro in 1990. She became my boss in the Office of Central American Affairs in 1995. We spent a lot of time on Capitol Hill advocating for our programs across Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Liliana was really a "secret weapon" dispatched to handle some of the more delicate and politically sensitive programs, not just in Central America, but the entire region. In this regard, she regularly traveled with First Lady Hillary Clinton when she travelled to the region. Her Nicaragua experience resulted in her becoming a point person for briefing an often hostile and suspicious Republican oversight staff on our programs there. Her mastery of the details of our programs, extensive network of contacts and her unflappable diplomatic skills made her the perfect interlocutor. While things got hot, I never saw her sweat. Not once. I benefited from her knowledge, great management instincts and her insights into Latin culture and language, which made me better at my job.

I worked with Stacy Rhodes, first in D.C. and then when he became mission director in Guatemala as the peace accords were being signed and then implemented. A lawyer, Peace Corps volunteer and program development officer, Stacy shared with me his strong commitment to development, human rights and bringing people together. We spent time in meetings, cab rides, field trips and more than the occasional baseball game, talking about politics, foreign policy, development and leadership. We still talk about his "dream team" in Guatemala where every officer director went on to become mission director in several USAID posts: Hilda "Bambi" Arrellano, Kim and Tom Delaney, Beth Hogan, Deborah Kennedy-Iraheta, Liz Warfield and Ken Yamashita to name a few.

Stacy shared a love of Haiti from his service there and he introduced me to the work of Guy Malary, a Haitian lawyer and close friend, who I later got to meet when he became Justice Minister. Stacy shared the story about how he and Aaron Williams had worked to support Malary in setting up a free legal clinic in the 1980s. Stacy was excited about Malery's appointment to the Aristide government before its overthrow. Sadly, Guy Malery was assassinated in October 1993, about a month after we met at a signing ceremony restarting USAID's administration of justice program.

In Guatemala, I joked with her on sharing "one of Beth Hogan's best days" as I accompanied Administrator Atwood on a visit to support early peace accord implementation. As head of the mission's DG office, key parts of the peace accords fell across Beth's portfolio and we attended three site visits where Brian underscored strong

US support for the process, acknowledging publicly policy mistakes of the past including the 1954 coup. I recall his visit to the parliament where USAID was helping to strengthen its function while broadening its reach to indigenous communities. Brian was impressed by the recent election of indigenous women, whose dedication speech moved Brian to throw his arm around her for a picture, apologizing that he couldn't vote for her.

When George Carner took over in Nicaragua, he once sponsored a reception in my honor when I came for a visit. I was a bit overcome. That started a week-long evaluation of preparations for the upcoming regional elections. George introduced me to high-ranking officials, sharing the agenda with me and asking me to take the lead where my rough Spanish was put to the test. I felt that I only partially returned the favor when I escorted him to the Hill on his next visit to D.C. During those reciprocal visits, he shared his career insights along with his philosophy of his development career, his broad experience and future plans.

Elena Brineman hosted me in Tegucigalpa on a number of occasions. Again, we travelled widely throughout the country and she shared with me how the mission's programs were arrayed against the development challenges of one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere. Her background in health as well as DRG, along with her earlier service in El Salvador during the war made her impressive, but her incredible work ethic and commitment to development made her unforgettable to me.

Q: I'll oversimplify this, but during the eighties, during the Reagan Administration, they obviously poured huge amounts of ESF (Economic Support Fund) money into Central America, and much of it was supporting structural adjustment programs. Many of those reforms in the 1980's presumably fueled the significant economic growth of the 1990's. Did you see it as a positive period in which there were real opportunities to do more because of those earlier reforms?

LEVINE: This was hotly debated at the time. The region experienced growth, but the concern always was whether it was equitable growth. When the distribution of wealth was so uneven and portions of society were excluded, it begged the question of whether our approaches were truly broad-based and inclusive. I think the record is kind of mixed. Certainly, you can point to the evidence of growth. A lot of that was pent up demand when the country was at war. Where we did less well, I think, was on equity. I think the El Salvador mission in particular really took that on. They said in effect, "We are going to work in areas that were poor and greatly affected by the war -- and we're still wrestling with that issue today. The administrator's recent Georgetown speech (November 2021) about inclusive and responsive aid still speaks to the fact.

Central America still suffers from inequality of wealth. The power structures probably have changed the most in El Salvador, but they're very much as they were in Guatemala. The Guatemala governance problem still remains the same. Answering that issue of broad-based equitable growth still is elusive for us.

Q: As I mentioned earlier, I had been involved in El Salvador much earlier when the U.S. was trying to support land reform, but I don't think much ever happened. Was that still an issue on the table during the period that you were there?

LEVINE: I would say that we really didn't have the wherewithal to do more. Land reform was an element of the peace accords, specifically getting secure title to ex-combatants. This was part of the USAID program and I recall this was done more as a reconciliation in a peace program than a land reform program, just by virtue of the size and urgency in relation to the conflict, it was a priority. The question was one of resources.

We did a lot of advocacy with the World Bank because they had a land reform program and we tried to open that up to make sure that it wasn't done exclusively through the government. This is one of the central lessons of post-conflict programming. Assistance needed to be evenhanded and seen as serving a much broader base. We were concerned that, if not designed with this in mind, this program might not benefit both opposition communities as well as those that supported the government.

Q: Given the high profile of Central America, could you talk a little bit about the interagency process more generally on Central America. Were there any unique twists for individual countries?

LEVINE: When it came to the interagency process, probably the area of greatest concern was the justice sector. This had to do with the salience of the human rights issues at the time as well as the fact that we had a crowded field when it came to administration of justice and police training programs. For example, in Guatemala, we had—in fits and starts—worked in the justice sector with USAID generally working with prosecutors, the local bar, advocacy organizations and also ICITAP (International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program) coming in from the Department of Justice with very different operating models. USAID was much more focused on an institutional reform roadmap. ICITAP, on the other hand, favored a "train and equip" model, without (by our lights) the attention to long-term institutional reform.

Q: Where were the dialogues on how that all fit together? Would those take place in the field or were you in Washington involved also through discussions with the Department of Justice?

LEVINE: Yes, in Washington and in the field. It played out in the embassy country team. In Washington, when a mission director would come back to DC, we would meet with ICITAP. There were dialogues where the Office of Central American Affairs was really the mission in Washington in meetings with ICITAP to address issues such as coordination and duplication of effort, getting roles and responsibilities ironed out. This helped when we had to go to the Hill to make sure we weren't sniping at each other or airing dirty laundry.

I remember a vignette in Honduras in this time where there was a country team dispute over the course of the criminal procedures code, and this was a classic case where we had an expert, contracted through the National Center for State Courts, NCSC, a long-time partner, and there was an FBI guy from ICITAP. ICITAP's mandate is looking for congruence between Honduran law and U.S. law. Our approach, advised by our expert and in consultation with the Hondurans, would involve sharing comparative cases of different laws throughout Latin America. We would offer alternatives to them based on what worked in similar countries. "You could go this way, as they've done in Argentina, or you could go this way, as they've done in Bolivia. Next door they do it this way." Then the Hondurans took it to their Congress to decide what law they wanted.

So, you can imagine those disputes coming to the country team and saying, if we let the Hondurans decide what their law should be, this may cause ICITAP agitation in terms of congruence with U.S. law. This is a natural policy debate, and it was appropriate to see that played out in the country team.

It's a very complex issue with lots of moving parts and reconciling what the U.S. posture should be and how we support it and to what end meant that everybody at post had to be on the same sheet of paper. Beyond the USG players, we had other bilateral and multilateral donors, like the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) and the World Bank. I think the walkaway lesson is that it has to get on the screen of the ambassador to reconcile those issues. An effective mission director has to figure out how to make the development case. USAID is not going to win every time, but I think we could win a lot by putting this in the more institutional frame and point to long-term sustainability provided by the buy-in of local actors.

Q: Was the National Security Council very active? Was Central America a frequent topic? Were there a lot of meetings that brought together the various elements of the U.S. government?

LEVINE: This is actually a nice segue to another chapter. The mid-nineties in my career was really about the peace process, and then in 1998, the LAC Bureau's response to Hurricane Mitch was quite significant.

To answer your question about NSC involvement, I think the resolution and the winding down of the conflicts and the alignment of policy really kept Central America off the NSC's radar. If USAID and State were aligned, and I think we really were in terms of democracy support, justice, and putting in place the infrastructure to support free and fair elections, we had a real unity of effort. I think this kept it off the radar or off the plate of NSC. It did come up in terms of response to Hurricane Mitch and reconstruction, very much so.

Q: Okay. Well, why don't we talk about Hurricane Mitch. It was obviously a huge tragedy and a huge issue that you all had to confront, so walk us through how it happened.

LEVINE: Here's a cliché I can offer. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the worst of times in the sense of a calamitous, climatic event that just did horrific damage to Honduras, in particular, and four other countries in the region. In the immediate aftermath, it was all-hands-on deck for a period of several months in responding and pivoting the program to disaster response. It was my first experience in seeing a fully deployed OFDA (Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance) working in combination with the missions. I realized, as a headquarters person, the difference between when a crisis hits your country, you may be working hard, but it doesn't compare to what folks in the mission are doing. Your work is hard for different reasons, but it's not about life and death, or it is at a remove. The first thing you realize is that for Honduras, the Honduras mission had to account for all its people and their families, who were threatened by the storm. What follows is an unyielding op-tempo of work that follows for several months.

Q: Was Elena Brineman the USAID mission director then. And was Frank Almaguer the ambassador during that period?

LEVINE: Yes.

Q: You said they had to account for their staff. Did USAID/Honduras lose anyone?

LEVINE: You know, I don't recall that we lost anyone, but I know that certainly homes were lost or extensively damaged. What I recall was the best of times, which was really seeing everybody in the bureau pulling together. I think if you talk to anybody who worked in Washington at that time, they would say that working on the Mitch response really broke down silos between offices because we had a common purpose, and everybody was allowed to shine. The technical offices supporting mission programs, the regional offices representing the missions in Washington, it really felt like we were staffing the ramparts together.

Q: Was AID named the lead agency on this?

LEVINE: It was, and if you've worked at AID, this is the model of how you like it to be. Formulating the strategies and the response really started in the mission along with the request for supplemental resources for reconstruction. But there were a lot of recommended solutions coming from the interagency. It started with a cabinet meeting with the president saying, "how can your agencies help with the hurricane response?", which is the natural thing to do. What we learned was that those agencies with an international mandate knew how to work overseas, and those without one didn't. So, we had very good cooperation from USDA (United States Department of Agriculture), the Forest Service, the State Department, and then others who really needed a lot of handholding at every step of the way.

What OMB said is that USAID would be the technical secretariat for the effort and all proposals to do work in hurricane response were run by AID and ultimately decided on by the assistant administrator, with a few exceptions. One was the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers due to the fact that its Latin America headquarters sat in Alabama in the district of the chairman of the House Foreign Operations Subcommittee on Appropriations. State INL (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs) got $10 million because they were able to make the case that crime would rise because of the weakened state of the system and they should do additional programs. Pretty flimsy stuff and they ended up asking USAID for help in programming the money.

Q: Well, given where we are today, I don't think they were very successful. (Laughs)

LEVINE: True. I think the takeaway was that USAID knows this business well, and making USAID the technical secretariat and lead agency gave us a lot of power. Otherwise, you have a food fight and a "supply push" of solutions that only by luck bears resemblance to the problem as it is on the ground.

I think I had to up my game in terms of representation on the Hill. I went through the entire $911 million supplemental appropriation and created a matrix of every requirement asked of the agency. It became our briefing document of two or three pages of items where Congress said you shall do this, you shall do that, and these are the levels of funding. We would provide periodic updates, walk them through the matrix as a way to structure our response to oversight. Support for the effort was bipartisan, exceedingly supportive of what we did, and appreciative of the absolute transparency.

Q: Since you mentioned the bill, to what extent was AID helping to draft that bill at the outset? I mean, how involved were we directly?

LEVINE: Yeah, I think we shared with them what we would do with the money, what our plans were in terms of reactivation and reconstruction. It ended up being handled as an appropriation, so there was very little—aside from a funding allocation, there was not—there was hortatory language which we took as important, particularly in oversight and accountability.

Additional to the appropriation were allocations for the USAID Office of the Inspector General (OIG) and the General Accountability Office (GAO). We also said measures we were taking programmatically to bolster in-country accountability as well as what we were doing on donor coordination. So, these were some of the accountability measures we would share in our dialogue with the Hill.

Q: Okay. And you all were involved—as those provisions got put in, you were aware, you were talking to the Hill about them, so they weren't things that were imposed, particularly. In other words, you were consulted.

LEVINE: I don't think we felt hamstrung particularly by them. Where we were vulnerable and remain so today is we made a big deal about the urgency of getting assistance and getting the supplemental passed. And then, we had to deal with the delay and lag in reprogramming and procuring a reconstruction program. So, the big issue was

around the question of "how fast are you spending the money after having politically made such a point of the urgency?"

The first briefings were the hardest to answer "to what extent have you obligated the money that we gave you?" And I remember, the obligations were in single digits of percentage of funds appropriated. So, that was a tough brief. (Laughs)

It got better over time, and it really blended into overall programming. It was two-year money, so it was a sizable injection. It was over $900 million appropriation, most of it going to USAID, with $100 million going to the interagency. Of the amount going to USAID, over $300 million went to Honduras.

Q: I assume that the obligations were done in the field and so at least some of the slowness because missions were trying to consult with their counterparts about needed programs. I assume that Washington sent help to work with the missions?

LEVINE: I recall accompanying a congressional delegation (CODEL) with staffers from the House Foreign Operations subcommittee doing an oversight inspection for hurricane response in Nicaragua and Honduras. I also recall accompanying the administrator to Guatemala and really, again, in the same way of when you take mission directors to the Hill, when the administrator is in the field it's an opportunity for the mission to really shine, and for them to get facetime, talking about their programs and giving them insight to really how is the mission really doing to affect people's lives. And so, I had the opportunity to be, you know, part of those visits and it was a part of my education in terms of how the agency does its best work.

Q: Let me ask a question about Nicaragua. Was Ortega in or out during that period? It's a country that's been flipflopping back and forth and struggling, and not particularly going in the right direction. And I'm just wondering what it was like during this period.

LEVINE: Arnoldo Alemán was president during the Mitch time, and subsequently was convicted for all sorts of malfeasance. I've watched Nicaragua for a long, long time, and it was a revolutionary situation that struggled to be a democracy and then we have witnessed that window of opportunity close. Now a new generation has been born under an authoritarian system. In subsequent roles in the democracy office and conflict office, I have had opportunities to look in on things. What I recall about that time was that there was still an overhang of our program in Nicaragua was much smaller than it had been previously in comparison to the other countries, which really was a Cold War overhang, that there was a still very competitive political process, but growing signs of authoritarianism and backlash. And it became, in essence, a winner-takes-all political situation, but I would call it now with *mano duro* (strong hand) policies. While it was historically clad in ideological terms, I think people who have watched this now conclude it's just about power. The ideology is a thin veneer and it's really two *caudillo* (strong man) clans dividing up the spoils and screwing the people. What I've watched in my career is that a whole generation of folks have been locked out of political and economic life in favor of this elite-based power struggle.

Q: One other thing I wanted to ask you about during this period, USAID closed about 25 missions globally. I believe Costa Rica was one of those. It had been doing very well and was "graduated." Did the Central American Affairs office get involved in the close-out process or in identifying ways to celebrate Costa Rica?

LEVINE: I'm glad you brought it up because I've not thought about it for a long time. I would say that this was not a wrenching decision from a policy standpoint at all. Costa Rica was a peaceful, middle-income country and a candidate to evolve from being an aid recipient. There were two legacy issues to deal with. One was that it forever has been the site of an OFDA regional office, and it was seen as too disruptive to move to another location, so that was going to stay. Second, there was a very expensive building that was going to be sold or gifted to the Costa Ricans.

Q: I heard the government didn't want it. It was too ostentatious a building. (Laughs)

LEVINE: Exactly. It was too expensive to maintain. So, I think there was a growing pain there as well.

Part of the legacy was a Costa Rican foundation where we wanted to transfer whatever residual local currency funds to go in the form of an endowment. There was also the celebration of Fifty years of USAID in Costa Rica. Our office was tracking the close-out of the mission and the celebration. What I recall was that there were testimonials or honoring of employees who had been there for fifty years in one form or another associated with the U.S. assistance effort, going back to predecessor agencies.

Q: Right. They had an extraordinary group of Foreign Service Nationals. They really didn't need very many Americans there.

LEVINE: I always thought it was very unique in terms of our presence for fifty years or more in some of these countries. USAID was a part of that political economy and a major political and economic player. And the smaller the country, the more outsize our role there. But the reputation of the missions was exceptional, particularly in El Salvador as a tremendously well-run mission, as was the talent in Guatemala. In Honduras and Nicaragua, it was much more difficult in terms of human capital in those countries. But when you're talking about AID and the culture of AID, it is an FSN culture that we're talking about. And I don't know that we in Washington always appreciated that.

Q: Yes; that's important. After mentioning Costa Rica, I remember there was another Central American country that I think was supposed to close: Panama. Do you recall anything about the decisions about Panama?

LEVINE: One of the things I would like to highlight is really just having the opportunity to visit and see the Panama Canal. There were many U.S. properties that were going to revert to Panamanian control within the canal zone, not just operation of the canal. The canal had been operating under de facto Panamanian control for many years, so it was

almost kind of a lowering or raising of a flag in terms of the transition of operations. The issues at the time were part of the political overhang of our Cold War policies in the region. The Chinese had bought properties and terminals at each—the Atlantic and Pacific edges of the canal and so, there was a concern about freedom of the seas with these Chinese organizations. It was a concern only on the far right because the fact of the matter is, transit is largely by air or truck. The Panama Canal is not exactly the strategic point it used to be. But still, it will always have a hold in the minds of folks as this strategic asset.

At that time, the Panama program focused on how we can productively help the Panamanians use those properties that will revert to Panamanian control coming out of the canal zone. We were also involved in management of environmentally important areas and tropical forests there. It was a very small platform and program, so really, how do you be strategic in a portfolio that might be less than $10 million?

Q: Okay. Let's stop for now. Next time, perhaps we can talk about Central America today, including the high levels of crime and violence, and whether the beginnings of this were already appearing in the 1990's.

(End of Session)

Q: This is Carol Peasley, and it is March 2, 2022, and this is interview number two with Neil Levine.

And Neil, when we finished up our initial conversation last week we were talking about your responsibilities as the deputy director of the Office of Central American Affairs. Before leaving our discussions of Central America, I am wondering if in retrospect, were there any things that you think we could or should have done differently? Any thoughts you might have on that subject, looking at it twenty years later.

LEVINE: Yeah. It's a really tough question, what we would have done differently because it suffers from sort of 20/20 hindsight, as well as I don't know that we had a solution at the time, had we the will or the resources to implement it. I think there were two issues that still plague us looking back. If you think about a region that was in conflict and really a highly ideological split over issues of power and haves and have nots in a landed class was particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala and to some extent in Honduras, Nicaragua a different kind of governance model. But with all the reform and the millions of dollars, we really did not fully address the insecurity around justice, law and human rights. And I think it wasn't for lack of trying. I think there were investments, there was, you know, some very important both legal reform and land reform, whether it was deep enough or thorough going enough, it did seem to create a power vacuum that, while it wasn't an ideological conflict, the susceptibility to criminal syndicates, armed groups, irregular forces kind of moved into that power vacuum. And that continues to create the kind of insecurity that is at the heart of the refugee flows today. That's one.

The other part is the economic piece, which, you know, looking back in the eighties and nineties, I believe it's the case, I couldn't swear to this, and I'm not an economist, but the region always sustained high levels of growth, and while I was paying attention to this, a lot of it could have been attributable to kind of pent up demand post-conflict, that once the countries were at peace and there was free flow of goods and access, more people had access to incomes, demand increased and the economy grew. But it was unequal growth, and I think, so, that's why it's a hard question, what we would have done differently, because we hadn't solved the issue of equity and equitable growth or a broad base. We had some theories and hypotheses, but I think there were really—what was called for was a real transformation. And I would think that you would find in looking back that the governance bargain in Guatemala between those who have and those who have not is still essentially the same. And so, in terms of addressing poverty and long-term prosperity when so much of the populace is locked out of the political life of the country is still a problem that we have not addressed in a thorough way. And there's a question in my mind of whether any external actor can do that.

Q: Right, right.

LEVINE: Salvador, similarly unequal holding of wealth in that country, but a lot more assets in terms of productive labor, but in a very small geography.

Q: Did we see any of this in El Salvador during that period? Gangs and violence have plagued the country in recent years. Did we see any early signs of that? Also, I gather a lot of the issues today in Honduras revolve around drug trade. I'm just wondering whether we were looking at those issues then, about the drug trade?

LEVINE: There were drug cartels transiting the region, but it was not in the headlines. There was always a fear that the isthmus was highly susceptible, mostly because it was ungoverned space with vast coastlines that were very permeable. The drug trade was definitely much more of a growing presence through the late nineties and early 2000s. I had a chance to go back to Nicaragua about ten years ago, so that would have been twenty years after my first visit there, ten years after my first visits, and there was a concern about crime. Now, I think there was some intermingling between right-wing paramilitary forces and criminal gangs, and I think that just accelerated after the conflict, when the ideological fires were put out. Rather than ideology, there was greed. Greed and all the other elements such as weak institutions, little law enforcement, ungoverned spaces, and people with money and power.

Q: Right. And Hurricane Mitch might have even contributed to some of that as well, right? Because I would have thought a lot of infrastructure got destroyed and—

LEVINE: There was a concern about a weakening of the counties' ability to respond post-conflict to issues of crime. I don't think people experienced the level of insecurity that would have motivated them to leave as we see today.

Q: Yes; thank you. It's hard not to think about it given how prominent Central America is in the news these days.

LEVINE: It's a real opportunity for the agency to step up because the language that they're using relates to root causes, which AID is really first to identify, and it's hard to get a policy hearing on that. Now, starting with the president and the vice president, we're saying that the long-term solution lies in addressing root causes, and we don't get that often. It's a real chance for the agency to step into that space with the kind of programming that we have seen to be effective.

Q: Right. And they will have resources, which you all also didn't have very significantly in the 1990's.

LEVINE: And that goes back to that earlier question about whether it is within the capabilities of an external actor to address some of these deep structural problems.

Q: Which, again, is a key factor in considering how USAID is currently thinking about localization.

LEVINE: Yeah, I think the two things are looking at localization and looking at human security, you know, what are the multiple ways you can address and make people feel more secure.

Q: Yes.

Well, let's move on to some other things going on at USAID during the second half of the nineties while you were in the Office of Central American Affairs, including the viability of USAID as an agency. And I know that you—when you were at the War College as a student did a paper on this. But I'm just wondering if you, given your previous work on the Hill and in LPA, were involved at all in the discussions with the Hill about their legislative attempts to fold AID into the State Department?

LEVINE: Yes, although I had not yet moved to Central America when these fights began.

And ultimately, I was pretty much in LPA for the balance of that attempt, so very much in the cadre of folks working on opposing attempts to consolidate the foreign aid agencies. And so, it was a great opportunity, a decade removed from that, to be able to study and write on it and do the research. I had a combination of reporting at the time the first draft of history in the reporting that was done, but also access to people who were the principals. I did a paper based on those interviews and some primary and secondary resources and shared that with John Norris for his book. The outlines of the story are interesting in that with the changeover of the Senate, Jesse Helms was in control of the authorizing committee, the Senate foreign relations committee was always an opponent of foreign aid, but also had taken on what he was calling Cold War structures of U.S.—the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) and the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and called on the administration to reassess and consolidate those. If that

wasn't bad enough, Warren Christopher, the secretary of state at the time, seemingly endorsed that effort, and so the leadership of the agency, Brian Atwood at the time, effectively was fighting a two-front war, one internally with his own State Department and his boss, which had to be uncomfortable, and with the folks who held the purse strings in Congress. It was truly a battle over the existence of the Agency.

You know, it's interesting. I tell this story now in terms of the atmosphere on Capitol Hill compared to the 1990s, and I say, you know, back in the nineties, we would walk into the office, and they would say, "We don't believe a word you're saying, and we want to get rid of your agency," and in hindsight, we call that the good old days. What was interesting from a historical standpoint was the effort to reach out to folks within the agency who had served on Capitol Hill before joining the agency, so they bulked up the legislative and public affairs office with veterans of previous administrations who had Hill contacts and Hill experience to help with the advocacy effort. We brought together the press and the—the public affairs press and legislative operation much more closely in its daily operations. It created structures like a war room to coordinate activities and messages. That was important because we haven't always behaved with that singularity of focus. The existential struggle required a superior level of effort. that needed more attention. There was definitely outreach to the NGO community, the media and friendly Hill offices to beat back the attempts because AID does have a constituency, getting it to act coherently on behalf of the institution of USAID was different. We have constituencies for education, for health, for disease-specific, for microenterprise, but saying that the fate of those programs is also tied to the ability of the agency to independently carry out a development mission, that was a new case to be made, or had to be made in a new and more urgent way.

Q: Right.

LEVINE: So, I thought—the other kind of internal lesson, and I think that many of the people interviewed for this project would agree with this, is that those times when you're under siege or in big fights that matter tend to bond the staff to each other and to the agency. They create immense loyalty, I think institutionally and personally, to the people you go through that experience with, and I think that is somewhat of a theme of my career. When I think of the moments that meant the most to me, they were intense, not always, you know, difficult, but certainly, intense periods of closely working with others and going through that together really makes one loyal to what people call the AID family of both the institution and the people.

Q: It's interesting you mentioned that LPA brought in some new people who had experience on the Hill. I wonder how often that happens.

LEVINE: It was good because it was more bodies, but also often different networks than the current staff had. And they weren't new to—they also knew the agency quite well, but they, in one form or another, had served in a member's office or on a committee, then come down to AID and moved in, you know, over time, but knew the process and knew AID to be helpful in kind of both strategy and delivery of message.

Q: Were they moved into LPA, or did they retain their other jobs and just coordinate with others?

LEVINE: It was more like being on a task force.

Q: A network, okay. That's an important lesson to learn when you've got serious issues on the Hill. You need to mobilize everyone.

LEVINE: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q: So, are there other important issues the Agency was facing at that time?

LEVINE: The two big internal issues, I don't know if other folks have talked about it, was the RIF and if you recall, the NMS system.

Q: The New Management System, yes.

LEVINE: The New Management System because—and which I thought was like the worst acronym ever created for a number of reasons. Number one, how long would it stay new, you know? And then, it quickly was called NMS by someone who had to use it. And then, I really have to applaud the folks who, when it was ultimately deemed a failure, probably a full two years when folks found that no one was satisfied with it, the follow-on was known as Phoenix, which I thought was great. So, it showed me that someone there had a sense of humor.

Just to talk about the RIF, I mean, as a political—coming as a political appointee and then as a civil servant, I was protected from any consequence of the RIF, and I didn't really fully understand the potency of that experience, particularly on the Foreign Service, who really felt that they had joined a service and there was some loyalty due for the agreement to be worldwide available and had put in many, many years. From a management standpoint, it was a math problem. The budget had shrunk to the point that there were not sufficient operating expense funds to fund the staff that we had and so, the decision was, as it was described to me, was really matrixed.

We need one hundred positions at this level in areas that we're going to deprioritize, and at that point, once those decisions were made, it got very mechanical, and it cut into the FS two and FS one levels in unprotected backstops. So, education, economic growth, and private sector officers were seen as particularly vulnerable. And before the names came out people were aware that that was the matrix, and so folks knew, you know, who was the most vulnerable, I would say.

I remember—and I didn't know enough about what policy tools were available to understand what could have been done differently. They could have gone more junior and taken out more people. They could have done, you know, a straight seniority, which is sort of eating your seed corn. They could have—the reason they went on the Foreign

Service side and not the Civil Service side is the bumping rights protection, which means they could have aimed high and because of seniority those cuts would have been absorbed at lower levels. And AID is very top heavy, so there aren't a whole lot of lower-level TS employees that they could have RIFed, which meant the cuts would have been greater on the Civil Service side. I didn't fully appreciate the scarring that it did, I was too new in the agency. But people talk about its long-lasting cuts. I was in the room when people got the word that they were going to be separated. You know, those are very real, very human, very tough discussions, and felt deeply by both the folks who were receiving that news and the folks who were giving that news. And it fell to the career staff often to make those announcements to staff, to handle the separations. It didn't fall on the political side, as far as I could tell.

Q: I think that's right, although I think the assistant administrators were all given the list of the employees, and I think they all did it somewhat differently.

LEVINE: I think that's right, I think that's right.

Q: So, there was lots of turmoil going on in the second half of the 1990s, and then there was an election in 2000, which had its own turmoil associated with it. (Laughs) It certainly didn't get resolved very quickly afterwards. But at some point in 2000, you left the Office of Central America Affairs. Was that before the election or after the election?

LEVINE: Before; it was the sixth of June of 2000.

AID/Washington, Center for Democracy, Chief of Governance Division: 2000 - 2007

Q: How did you decide to become the chief of the governance division in the Democracy Center at that point? I think it was still the Democracy Center.

LEVINE: Yes; Democracy Center in the Global bureau.

I think there was one internal factor and one external factor. The internal factor was, I'd come aboard as a political appointee and legislative specialist, but my academic training was in Latin America. I'd served on the desk, and I thought I had no technical development skills or any sort of expertise, and I thought that to make a career at AID, I should have some technical background. International political economy had been my training, but I felt more at home with political science and what was then the embryonic DG sector. I'd been involved as an advocate in human rights organizations and was interested in democratic institution building and democracy promotion. But that field really didn't exist as a coherent and identifiable field. I thought if I was going to develop a technical expertise, that would be it. And so, that was the internal reason for going to the Democracy Center.

The external reason was that the leadership there, Jennifer Windsor, had been a Hill colleague of mine, and then a political appointee at the beginning of the Clinton administration. She came to the agency as a Presidential Management Fellow (PMF) and

then was deputy chief-of-staff as a political, and then retained a political position as the deputy of the DG Center. We had one of those professional conversations that took place over several years about "when are you coming down to work in the Center?"

A GS opened up for a division chief, and I competed for it. My strong suit was leadership and political savvy, but there were probably stronger technical officers who were candidates for that position. What I realized and which informed the rest of my career was there was no shortage of able technical experts at all levels. But there were very few leaders and managers who really understood that you need both. You can't do one without the other, and you can't be a good manager unless you have some technical knowledge. As a governance division chief and then later as an office director, my job was to bring together talented technical officers and remove barriers and develop them as technical experts. And that worked for me over and over again. Along the way, I developed a good understanding of technical operations. There are certainly better program designers than me, there are certainly better local government experts than I am, but I saw a real lane for creating the conditions where those people could excel in their work.

Q: That's an important point.

So, you became the division chief for the governance division. What kinds of things was the governance division supporting? In the early days, there was a lot of attention on elections and parliamentary work. What were the earliest efforts on the governance front that you all were focusing on?

LEVINE: Yeah, it's a great question, and again, from the outside, the DG kind of office and theory of the case is very opaque unless you've kind of lived through it. But what I liked about it, there was a model of basically, how democracy works, and the office was structured to implement that model. So, there were—the characteristics of democracies are free and open elections, we had an elections division; governed by rule of law and justice, we had a rule of law division; civil society and the non-government role in media play an important role in strengthening; there was a civil society media division. And then, the governance really took what might have been called public administration, and as a management challenge, while it held together in terms of basically supporting accountable, transparent and responsive institutions, but there are a lot of those. There's legislatures, there's local government, there's ministries, and there's the policymaking process or legal environments that allow all of those to exist. So, that's a fairly sweeping bit of territory within democracy, human rights and governance.

So, very simply, we were structured with experts in each of those—as many of those as we could staff. So, we had one or two local governance experts, we had a legislative strengthening expert, we had an anticorruption expert or two who kind of worked across sectors and across other parts of the democracy programs to promote good governance. And so, the governance division as a technical office was basically to bring that technical expertise to inform AID strategies, AID project design. There was a large interagency

role in representing what does USAID bring to the table in terms of those technical areas, particularly on anticorruption.

Q: Were your staff members direct hires, or were they fellows, or did they come through some sort of institutional mechanism?

LEVINE: It's a great question because I experienced all the hiring mechanisms. I had to be very entrepreneurial in getting staff, so I had civil servants, U.S. direct hire civil servants, a few Foreign Service officers along with staff hired via Participating Agency Service Agreements (PASAs) and Democracy Fellows, a special program that we used to bring more specialized talent.

Q: And as I recall the Global bureau centers had staff that went out and helped missions with strategies and programs, as well as managing their own global projects. Do you recall what kind of projects you had within your portfolio and that balance between providing services to missions and doing your own thing?

LEVINE: I'm a big believer in form following function, and so, as a technical support office, we should be supporting the field. There wasn't a lot of money for global programming. What we did do is spend a little money on putting in place indefinite quantity contracts (IQCs) that field missions could buy into. We designed a global omnibus capability that whenever a mission wanted a local government program, it could buy into pre-competed awards. The DG Center created IQCs (Indefinite Quantity Contracts) for local government, anticorruption, legislative strengthening and policy reform. The core staff, with contracted support generated technical publications, guidebooks and handbooks, all under the rubric of field support.

We also supported certain organizations that we believed should exist as a public good in the democracy field. For example, we had a grant with Transparency International, a premiere anticorruption organization. Under the strategy, I thought it made a lot of sense to partner with the best of the best in the field. It's typical in the agriculture field. Rather than giving a grant to a single farmer, we would have a flagship relationship with an agricultural school, or a business school that was going to turn out tens of thousands of graduates and multiply our investment. By supporting this flagship organization, we were associating ourselves with that kind of brand. The grant was for a couple of years at $500,000 a year. It was a very generous grant to get them started. In the scheme of things and versus the anticorruption problem, it was a very small amount of money.

Training, I think, along with field support—so we sort of divided up field support, all the things we do to support the missions including mechanisms that are available for buy-in. Technical leadership, which is the development of handbooks, guides, programming tips. What we call cadre development, which was training. You know, if you think about it, there were no—there were folks that would have a public health degree and come in and become a health officer. There wasn't really a particularly obvious path, professional path to becoming an AID democracy officer and so, that—what we considered the kind of

training that everybody needed to have had to be developed and then delivered by the staff. And we did most of that in-house. That would not have been contracted out.

Q: I assume that you yourself and your staff also provided support to some missions in developing strategies or programs. I'm wondering if there were any particularly significant efforts that you all might have been involved with in any specific countries or missions on the governance front.

LEVINE: Yeah, you're testing my memory synapse now. Certainly, at the time there were really robust, what I would call full-service democracy programs in many of the countries in Latin America, so there's a good chance that there was significant assistance to local governments across Central America and in the Andes during that time. I'm trying to remember; by this time, I'm thinking that a lot of the NIS (Newly Independent States) countries had their own mechanisms, and that was run out of the bureau directly. They had the resources to support those programs there.

One of the things we did, I think one of the big achievements, was that the agency's first anti-corruption strategy was developed during that time. That would have been about 2003. And that was the result of leading research coming out of the governance division, but also a task force or working group that was formed internally to give input. And then, contracting out with experts in each of the sectors to come up with a unified strategy or inputs into a strategy that could speak for the whole agency. And I would call that a fairly—a landmark publication coming in, and the roots of it are still, I think, operative today. So, it sort of stood up the test of time.

Q: You mentioned that the anti-corruption strategy also looked at the corruption issue in different structures. I'm wondering whether there were some sectors —whether it was health or agriculture or education or others – that might have been particularly interested in your work. Did they come to you all to discuss governance issues?

LEVINE: Yeah, it was always an uphill fight to sort of, you know, we're from the governance office and we're here to help you with sector colleagues. One idea we had that took some time to take off was that in the strategy we recommended that we formalize this anti-corruption working group and that the chair of it, it would rotate through the bureaus so that each bureau would designate somebody to chair that effort for six months at a time and then it would pass. And we did get some resonance at the time, and our office would serve as the secretariat for the working group. And I think the rotation, the chair passed once to Global Health, and at that time we were able to offer then Gloria Steele, who was a DAA in the—as chair—there was the release of a Transparency International report on corruption in the health sector at an event that she would be able to speak at as she took the leadership of this. And it was just to keep momentum and policy focus on corruption issues on an ongoing basis. It kind of ran out of steam after one rotation and—but I still think it was a good idea.

I think it did have subsequent life in, you know, almost a decade later when the Democracy Center created a cross-sector programs team that was to more thoroughly

embed governance practices throughout the sectors, and really devote both programs and staff to exploring that. And that was pursuant to the next iteration of the democracy strategy for the agency.

Q: You had mentioned interagency as well. Were you involved much with interagency meetings, and did you have many discussions with the State Department and the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL).

LEVINE: Very actively involved. At the time, it was the first time in the international scene where you would have global anti-corruption conferences. They seem very pedestrian now, but that was at a time when corruption was not talked about so openly. At Transparency International they started the annual International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC) and that was the largest non-governmental international conference, and at the same time, a few years later, governments created to Global Forum on Fighting Corruption where governments at the ministerial level would gather to assess the state of the global fight against corruption. My first experience with the Global Forum was a part of the U.S. delegation led by then-Attorney General John Ashcroft. These conferences sought the buy-in of the ministers and high government leadership to sign onto international anti-corruption commitments, like the Anti-Corruption Convention.

From the development standpoint, the goal was to educate and raise awareness of what could be done to address corruption through strengthened democratic institutions and civil society watchdog efforts. We were very active in preparing for those conferences, in particular, we would share our strategy as a development agency working on corruption with other donors as I did with the Organization for Economic Co-operation Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) in that period.

In terms of other areas of intense inter-agency activity, we worked in security sector reform. It was always quite controversial, and it became more and more relevant to countries in transition to democracy. We were involved primarily with the State Department Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), sometimes State Counterterrorism Office, and the Department of Justice Office of Professional Development and Training, OPDAT for prosecutors, or the International Criminal Investigation and Training Program (ICITAP), which handles the police training function.

Q: When you first started the work in anti-corruption, were there any issues with the State Department or DRL? Was there any concern about AID getting involved with this kind of work? And if so, how did it get worked out?

LEVINE: For the anti corruption work, for what could have been a fractious State Department relationship, we had very, very good relations, and mostly because they were very small. There were only a few full-time staffers and there was a heavy amount of diplomatic work to be done. What generally foments State-AID rivalry is overlapping programmatic jurisdictions. In the anticorruption space, State had very few programs so we could work very well with them. Our counterparts were positive collegial

personalities and that certainly helped, particular when we staffed large conference delegations.

Q: You went into this new position shortly before the election. There was a change in administration in 2001, and I know that that ultimately led to a restructuring. Did the change in Administration lead to other changes in priority? Also, do you recall the discussions when the Democracy Center, which was part of the Global bureau, moved to the new bureau for conflict and humanitarian assistance. Do you recall the discussion that took place in making that change?

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. I would say that, first of all, going back to my every two-year conversation with Jennifer and finally going down to the Democracy Center, we worked together for six months before the elections and then, she was out. So, that was a long incubation and then very little time of overlap.

The creation of the DCHA bureau, Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, happened fairly quickly. And I would say, I don't know if it healed over. It wasn't a wrenching kind of thing, at least for me. Our day-to-day function changed very little. We were certainly wholly moved into this new bureau. It suffered from, I guess more so in terms of not having a front office that was focused on our issues. That wasn't the case in the Global bureau. In the Global bureau front office, every so often your day would come up as democracy and you would be able to get a principal involved in one of your issues. But they were even more spread across development issues in the G bureau front office. The problem in the DCHA universe is that there is always a more urgent crisis going on that calls on the attention of the administrator. And while there's a devoted deputy assistant administrator, they—oftentimes you need a Senate-confirmed principal to carry the weight of the agency into these discussions, and those folks are often busy on—today it would be Ukraine, let's say.

Q: Yes; who was head of the Democracy Center when the move was made? Did that person move on to head up the office in DCHA?

LEVINE: Jerry Heyman was the political appointment there. And then—

Q: And you retained the same kind of divisions with governance and actions?

LEVINE: Yes, there was no real change under the DCHA formulation.

Q: And the assistant administrator was Roger Winter – I believe he spent much of his time on Sudan, as I recall.

LEVINE: Yeah, Roger Winter at first.

The DAA was Paul Bonicelli, who was largely an academic, and was fairly hands-off on the day-to-day running of the office, although he took a real inordinate amount of interest in our travel budget.

Q: So, you didn't really see any significant change, then, with the—

LEVINE: I think I would say there was—there were two—there was one personnel change that's important, and then some policy changes that were very important and relevant to history. The internal change was the creation of a legitimate democracy officer backstop or—now, if—and it wasn't even a democracy—they created a backstop for the bureau, which is problematic in itself in that the bureau is a mixed bag of specialties. Very unlike Global Health, for example.

Q: Yes; it was a very mixed bag. There's a difference between humanitarian assistance and democracy.

LEVINE: Right. And so, if you're sitting—so we created a—what was called the Conflict Stabilization and Governance backstop, CSG Backstop 76. And that accorded with the formulation in DCHA, which doesn't exist in the field. And so, the theory of the case was that in the course of your career you would likely spend time in a stable developing country, a country in transition, and at some point in your existence it would encounter a natural disaster in which the skills of a humanitarian response officer would be needed. The problem is that that's not how we staff—that's not what the Foreign Service tends to do. It staffs heavily in the steady state development country and the bulk of positions are democracy officers, and there are very few U.S. direct hire humanitarian response devoted—it's all program-funded contracted personnel.

Q: Yes.

LEVINE: Which makes sense for surges and everything else. So, there was a classic disconnect of form following function in the creation of the backstop, which they're in the process, as I understand it, of unwinding today.

The other structural problem is that the policy around democracy issues in specific countries really calls for an assistant administrator to represent that area and so, we were always underrepresented, I thought, by level and bodies in the interagency meetings when we were in DCHA. That—not everybody agrees with that view, but I think for folks who come out of that tradition, they certainly felt different, could point to examples of that happening.

The dominant policy issues were in Iraq and Afghanistan, What I observed was that when the country goes to war and it's a military mission under the direction of the Department of Defense, the concerns about reconstruction, post-war what happens next were not adequately addressed, even by the best efforts of the State Department up to the Secretary of State. And that all has been well-documented. What I would say was that AID had tried and failed to get its best analysis into the interagency deliberations to raise some of the issues that were likely to unfold and did unfold.

Q: I believe there was an AID task force that was doing some planning for what would happen after the invasion of Iraq. Were you involved in any of that as an AID person or was anyone from the Democracy Center there?

LEVINE: For AID, there really was no center of gravity. Two stories – one involves the operational level where we were able to communicate—I would say, not influence—because I don't think we influenced that much. The State Department organized a Future of Iraq Task Force that did a very thoroughgoing, sector by sector, political and developmental analysis of what would be needed. This is a very familiar situation of AID trying to get its views into policy discussions with the State Department. At this time, the State Department was having the same trouble getting its views on policy into deliberations at the Department of Defense.

Q: Right.

LEVINE: So, we were now twice removed from the center of gravity. I remember the one apocryphal story about someone asking, "Where's the interagency on Iraq?" The answer was simply stated "The interagency is Wolfowitz," meaning it was the undersecretary for defense policy who was basically making the decisions. So, there was effectively no interagency that we could plug into.

Remember, there was the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) that was stood up right after the invasion. At that time, USAID had its first responders from the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). But these folks were not working on longer term reconstruction issues.

Q: Right. My question really is, did you have any personal involvement in any of this or did your office?

LEVINE: I have two war stories. The then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice asked Larry Diamond, a colleague from her days at Stanford, to go and be an advisor to the Coalition Provisional Authority. Larry is a renowned expert and democracy advocate and had been a speaker at our annual conferences and we knew him quite well. He did us the favor of stopping by for a consultation before he took the job and I recall then DG Director Jerry Hyman sitting in Jerry's office and talking. We were discussing the question "What's the fundamental governance problem in Iraq?" You had these three very distinct ethnic groups—Sunni, Shia and Kurds—trying to hold power collaboratively in a way that keeps the country together. And in all the planning and all the things about what they were doing in terms of the strategy, very little was being done to address that fundamental governance problem. Instead, our military was focused on the question, "How do we get U.S. forces out as quickly and as safely as possible?"

What DOD wanted was evidence of civilian activity and stability. They asked AID to design and deliver a local government program. They wanted to make sure that civil society is activated so we got resources to work with civil society. Let's do rapid community reintegration, so there was a sizable OTI (Office of Transition Initiatives)

effort. All good things that helped on that mission, perhaps, but not really touching the central issue of the governance problem. All this was remarkably frustrating, but look, our own secretary of state could not get his counsel listened to, so what was AID's democracy office going to do?

The second story came later once we had reopened an embassy and USAID mission and AID/Washington was asked to evaluate the democracy and governance office's first strategy. And with great ceremony, it was brought to Washington for technical review. But it was a bit of a charade in the sense that all the key decisions about USAID strategy had already been made. This was really to satisfy the bureaucrats. We were smart enough to ask, "Do you want us to review this?" We were told, "We want nothing less than a full, candid, technically sound evaluation." So charged, we went off and did our job. We identified significant issues, we made technical comments for the benefit of your colleagues working at the mission, and we presented them at the strategy review.

It was evident that we were basically listened to politely, but it was clear that we weren't getting anywhere in terms of getting our issues considered. At the end of the meeting, the mission director said we would take this all back with us but the strategy had already been approved by the State Department and the commanding general there! So, we were disheartened by that, but that was my kind of teachable moment there when your influence is so circumscribed.

Q: So, if you all realized that you weren't going to have much impact working on Iraq, were there other countries or other issues that you spent particular time?

LEVINE: That's exactly right and that's what I took away from that issue. It definitely informed my thinking about Afghanistan. I knew that in Iraq and Afghanistan technical issues were going to be among the last considerations of policy there and so, we would work in those areas based only on demand signals from the missions, where a mission colleague needed help for a particular problem or wanted us. But it ended any kind of entrepreneurial leadership because there wasn't a lane for us. It was the first time I heard this phrase "stay in your lane." I didn't think that was a good thing.

Q: So, you ended up spending a lot of time on Iraq, even though it wasn't a very satisfying experience?

LEVINE: Absolutely. It was all hands-on deck. It was very frustrating because we were just told to stand up programs.

Q: Right.

LEVINE: But we were told which ones to do.

Q: Okay. So, you were having an impact because you were getting programs started, but they weren't really asking you whether these were the right programs to be doing.

LEVINE: Exactly. Yeah. And the right programs—

Q: Local governance was a big part of the Iraq program. Was that one of the things that you spent a lot of time on?

LEVINE: We were told to run a competition from a short list of offerors to stand up a program on civil society and local government.

Q: So, there were three different projects for which your office did all the bureaucratic work to get those contracts put in place, or grants, whichever they were?

And local government, I know, was a very big one, and that went to RTI (Research Triangle Institute International), I believe.

LEVINE: Exactly. There was also a ministerial program that MSI did, which was very interesting although what we found was that there was basically the inner cabinet, or the power ministries that were off-limits because they were headed by what were seen default actors on the political scene and too hot to touch in terms of the politics. We were left with the peripheral ministries to do, basically public administration programs. And I'm sure, did good work. They just weren't central to the problems the Iraqis faced.

Q: Right, right. Did you make any trips to Iraq?

LEVINE: I did not. I have been to Iraq, but as a congressional staffer in 1988, which was fascinating. Looking back, I was very interested in working on Iraq because not many people had been to Iraq. I really was quite interested in not just the governance division, but the office as a whole because I thought we had a capability to offer.

Q: Now, as I recall, there was an Iraq task force in Washington that in 2004/2005 met on an almost daily basis with the administrator. And were you involved with that task force?

LEVINE: No.

Q: They would just come to you if they needed something from the Democracy Center?

LEVINE: Exactly. Jerry Hyman participated in those meetings as the DG office director. I remember Wendy Chamberlin was very involved in representing the agency. I recall a quote she used during inter-agency budget deliberations: "You've created the neutron bomb budget. Where are the people?" The budget was heavy on infrastructure and building things, but no kind of engagement with the Iraqi people.

Q: (Laughs) Yes. Well, it doesn't sound like it was a very fun experience for you, that you spent most of your time on something that you felt you didn't really have any influence on.

LEVINE: It was a real education, and certainly when you disagree with a policy, some folks sort of turtle and don't get involved. We didn't really have a choice. You make the

best technical recommendations you can and then, if they go against you, you salute smartly and execute, and that's kind of what we ended up doing.

Q: I recall that President Bush declared democracy as one of his highest priorities. And I remember sending a note to Andrew Natsios asking if he thought the Office of Democracy should be buried in this big DCHA bureau, or should it be pulled out to show the priority that the president had given to it? Obviously, he didn't agree with my assessment.

But I'm just wondering, since it did get such a high profile from the president, did that filter down to you all in any way?

LEVINE: Absolutely. I think rhetorically the Bush Administration's language on democracy was probably the strongest we've ever had. The problem was that it became inextricably fused with the invasion of Iraq. And so, democracy promotion was fused with regime change. It lost all of its potency and all of its kind of bipartisan support. I think it's unfortunate. There would have been a different narrative had we not elected to invade Iraq.

Q: Yes. You've mentioned the downside of having the Democracy Office in that broader bureau focused on post-conflict and humanitarian assistance. I know other Democracy Officers object to it being integrated into a bureau focused on broader development issues. I'm wondering if you have thoughts about where it is best positioned?

LEVINE: What I struggled with is how much does its bureaucratic position really mean anyway? Most good AID folks figure out how to get things done regardless of how the boxes are drawn. In the DCHA formulation, it's a crowded field. The front office operation has changed because of their other responsibilities. In terms of the workaday level, very little changed if the office is here or there.

I have the same feeling about whether you centralize your technical people in pillar bureaus, or put them in the regions. In the regions, it may give you more customized programming, but you lose sharing of lessons learned across the agency. Decentralize, you get much more uniform programming, but you have less people in the bureaus doing customized programming. That issue certainly is not at the cutting edge of what ails our effectiveness.

I am always amazed as people coming into AID as political appointees arrive and start re-working the Agency's mission statement and advancing new policies. That's expected and it's fine. Elections do matter. But to be effective as a federal agency, it comes down to moving money and people. And they don't take up either of those two systems, they don't take that on generally. Maybe Samantha Power is different. I hope she will tackle the procurement system and change how we do business. I hope she will tackle the HR (human resources) system. I'm a big believer in localization as an attempt to really change the business model. I think she's talked in a serious way about meaningful structural change.

Q: You had mentioned the OECD's Development Assistance Committee earlier and I know that the DAC really took on the Democracy Governance issue. And I'm wondering if you did have many discussions with other donors and the World Bank and/or the British and others about these issues around democracy and governance.

LEVINE: Yes, particularly with the World Bank and the World Bank Institute (WBI) around anti corruption. WBI created the first global data set called Governance Matters, and that became important to the MCC (Millennium Challenge Corporation) because they used it as part of their eligibility criteria for country selection.

In terms of bilateral donors, we worked closely with the Brits. We invited our British counterparts and subject matter experts to sit in on our anti corruption training. And usually on the margins of these anti corruption conferences we would do a lot in terms of donor coordination, particularly around countries. The hard part was after talking headquarters to headquarters, it was about how to take the next step to particular countries, because none of us really have decision making authority on what happens at the country level. So, I found there were a lot of good things you could do in terms of policy coordination and training with your counterparts. When we took the step to try to do in-country coordination, that was really the country team's prerogative and depended on how big we were in the country, how big the other donor was, and what the relationships were like on the ground. So, we could advocate, but from where we sat, we really couldn't execute all that much with other donors.

Q: Okay. That's good. You then went off on long-term training in 2007, I believe. Was that at your initiative or did someone ask if it was something you'd be interested in? How did this come about?

LEVINE: I pursued it. I found every leadership training opportunity to be just amazingly helpful to me. And it was with the Federal Executive Institute in 2001. And it was well-timed to get that training and be able to—and just two weeks in that case—deploy it within that governance division.

National War College – Student: 2007-2008

In 2007-2008, I attended the National War College (NWC), a more serious nine-month experience, and then came back and ran an office fresh from that experience. I thought that my career really took that step as a result of having that year of training. Later, I went back as faculty at the Eisenhower School. I became a real big advocate for AID to send folks to all the military schoolhouses, across the board, recommending people and trying to keep our representation there robust.

Q: Were you the only USAID person in the War College in your class or were there—

LEVINE: No, there were three of us, and generally that's the number we would try to get up.

Q: I assume it was a very positive experience. That's what most people say.

LEVINE: Absolutely. Everyone will tell you that the first thing they say is "It's all about you" for the first time in your career maybe. Take this year and make it about you. I had certain goals there. First, as a Latin Americanist, I wanted to study another region. I picked Asia. I studied the Vietnam War, terrorist organizations in Thailand, and I did a field study in Vietnam and Thailand. I think it was a great decision.

Second, you get it in National Security Strategy and so, in terms of moving to thinking at the strategic and systems level, I found that remarkably helpful in returning to AID with a new set of tools for looking and problem solving and coaching and teaching. Within six months I was able to deploy a lot of that stuff in managing the conflict office.

Third, in terms of interagency networking and connections, it was quite helpful. As simple as having another classmate back me up in an interagency. I was at an inter-agency meeting where right after I finished my brief, a classmate of mine from the intel community said, "No, Neil's absolutely right. This is how we use this information in our work." I think that doesn't happen unless you've had that experience.

Q: Yeah. Well, that's profound.

Since this was 2007-2008, I assume that a lot of the students were—particularly the military had come out of Iraq.

LEVINE: Yes.

Q: Were there a lot of discussions about that and did it further reinforce your views?

LEVINE: That's a great question and it's very interesting what happened there. At first, there was a real unity of effort and folks coming back there were incredibly and rightfully proud of having accomplished the military mission. By 2007-2008, you heard a lot more criticism of the whole enterprise. I remember, the conversation was, the bloom is off the rose. I followed those debates very, very closely on the surge: first, the military surge and then the so-called civilian surge. And if you recall, we didn't have the capacity to surge that kind of number of people there.

So, I think the concept of a surge was a faulty analogy. They think that the military is the way of answering problems if only we could have a civilian counterpart. And we don't, but even if we did, would that be the way? We are outsiders to these countries. Development is different. And it really is interesting how many times we have to retell that story, that our work is different in-kind.

Q: At the War College? Did you have an opportunity to talk about the work that you'd been doing on the anti corruption front, and was there much interest in that on the part of others?

LEVINE: Yes. With 243 students and three of them from AID, I would describe you an exotic bird. People seek you out and they really are interested in the mission. Again, another apocryphal story is that a lot of folks in the military really don't know AID and they don't know that we're part of the government. So, one story is a soldier commenting "Yeah, we were in Afghanistan, we had some really great NGOs. There was CARE, CRS, AID; they were all there, you know."

Q: (Laughs)

LEVINE: Or "You guys are great. We love what you do. Could there be 300 more of you here?" They don't understand in terms of going to a foreign operating base and looking to collaborate with AID, and it is the chief of party of a local government implementor, not somebody who is a civilian from AID. Now, we tried to change that. Part of the civilian surge was getting people to go to the Provincial Regional Teams (PRTs), and you'd sometimes have AID Foreign Service officers, sometimes personal service contractors, but at least they were AID employees at that point. AID had not been deployed that way in 30-40 years. You'd have to go back to Vietnam for a similar footprint.

(End of Session)

Q: This is Carol Peasley, and it is March 7, 2022, and this is interview number three with Neil Levine.

Thank you, Neil. When we finished up the last time you had just completed long-term training at NDU, the National Defense University, and you returned to AID as the director of the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation in the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance. Could you tell us a little bit about that office, what you—what its responsibilities were and what kind of work you were doing?

AID/Washington, Director, Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation: 2008 - 2013

LEVINE: This was the initiative of then-Administrator Andrew Natsios. Among other things, he was a scholar of conflict and had done a lot of work regarding humanitarian assistance in conflict settings, particularly in the case of North Korea. He was interested in creating within USAID a place that specialized in assessing and programming in conflicts to avoid business as usual, bringing an underlying appreciation of what mitigated conflict or how unintended consequences could actually promote conflict. Andrew wanted a dedicated space within the bureaucracy where knowledge about conflict and its relationship to assistance could be generated, shared and deployed in the service of the agency's mission. The office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (CMM) was created in 2003 or 2004. I was its second director at the time and I owe a real debt to Elisabeth Kvitashvili, who was the founding director and did all the hard work of establishing the office, laying down a strategy, and delivering the first generation of

technical resources. By the time I got there, I likened it to getting the keys to a shiny new car and being told not to wreck it.

The CMM experience informed my thinking about how you drive a new idea through the agency. It always helps to have high-level policy support, but it also is important to have a vanguard office that is organized with that mandate to carry it forward. The ambition of that office was never to grow a bureaucratic fiefdom, but really to be a support office to the rest of the agency, principally the field missions and the bureaus to make conflict analysis more mainstream. I think that the need for such an office had to do largely with the geography of poverty by the twenty-first century where global poverty exists in two geographies: large scale poverty in large countries (like Brazil, Mexico and India) where AID was not a very large presence and in countries in violent conflict or emerging from violent conflict most recently. I applaud Andrew Natsios for having an agency response to conflict as a focused field of analysis, institutional learning, and programming.

Q: As I recall from the early days when they were first setting up the office, they were trying to identify the countries with the greatest risk of conflict. In some cases, this could lead to modifying existing USAID country strategies. Was that still a part of your work?

LEVINE: Exactly. This was an orienting charge that I inherited. And again, Elisabeth had set that up by developing an open source of data that was related to the same sort of analysis that was done at the intelligence agencies by what was called the Political Instability Task Force. The intelligence community was talking to the same academics to understand which countries were most at risk for conflict, but their own materials were all classified. But because the academics' databases were not classified, we could produce our own analysis in a non-confidential form. We used it in a Sensitive But Unclassified (SBU) way in that we did not publicly release our AID list, but we did make it widely available within the agency and the interagency, and it guided us in just the way you suggest.

We shared the analysis with the regional bureaus and missions so they were aware of outside, independent, academic analysis of which countries were more likely to fall victim to conflict. We could then work with the missions to see what might be done that wasn't already being done. A lot of it was awareness raising and making available what tools and programming advice that we had developed. What I always said was that it was a pretty good bet that the countries that scored highest on those lists were already in the headlines -- Afghanistan, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali. I was always interested in the second tier of countries where they were out of the headlines and there might be scope for preventive action that really was within AID's wheelhouse to program upstream of conflict before conflict would either start or recur.

Q: Could you give us an example of a country, perhaps, where that might have been the case?

LEVINE: Kenya was a country that had a full-service AID program and democracy program, but experienced spasms of violence around the time of what were seen as

transitional or crucial elections, both in 2008 and 2013. We asked, "Is there anything more that we can be doing to protect the programming and protect the country from the onset of violence?" In 2008, it was much more of a surprise that it occurred and so, there was a lot of additional resources and programming that was done in advance of the 2013 elections to avoid a repeat.

In the Central African Republic, we identified a high conflict risk with potential for atrocities. USAID did not have a mission there, so it was that much harder to generate resources or programming. But there was some programming and other donors that were interested, as well as a strong State Department interest. Building on that base, we were able to muster about $5 million in programming that otherwise would not have been applied in that case. So, I think around the margins in countries that were out of the headlines, there were opportunities to raise the issue of conflict and conflict mitigation and apply programming.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the interagency aspects of this, because obviously you were dealing with a lot of key political issues . How often did you coordinate with the State Department and others? Were there any particularly difficult issues that you had to deal with?

LEVINE: At our best, at the working level, we would undertake joint conflict assessments with the State Department regional bureaus, and first the coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (State/CRS), which later became the Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO). We enjoyed more unity of effort in terms of the analytical role of getting a whole-of-government or at least State and USAID congruence around countries that were at risk and how we might move both USAID and State programming together once we got a willing country team that would allow us to undertake an assessment. Again, Kenya would be an example along with Burundi. I participated in a needs assessment in Nicaragua with a joint interagency team.

Where we had problems was when the State Department attempted to do parallel funding of programs where they really didn't have the expertise or the country platform for programming. They weren't set up to do the kind of work, even those bureaus that were set up to do programming, like the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau. INL colleagues were often shopping ideas to AID or taking advice from AID on things that they should do because, by virtue of the AID mission their very textured understanding of the country, could suggest things that they might do. It's the programmatic area where there is a danger of duplication and a challenge of coordination. So, in the conflict area we were able to form a strong alliance with State on the analytic side of the house, but it would tend to be much more of a turf fight in terms of programming and who got resources to do work there.

Q: Was that particularly with the conflict and stabilization bureau within the State Department?

LEVINE: Yes. First CRS and then CSO. And again, to understand that they were also fighting for relevance in the State Department, and that made our job more difficult.

Q: Right. And they had issues with the regional bureaus and presumably you did as well then.

LEVINE: Exactly. During this time, there was high-level policy focus on atrocity prevention. The Obama Administration declared atrocity risk a national security concern of the United States and issued a presidential finding to that effect, followed by the creation of an interagency Atrocities Prevention Board (APB).

Q: Was that when Samantha Power was at the NSC and presumably led that process?

LEVINE: There was largely a group of senior level Obama officials, including Samantha Power, Don Steinberg, deputy administrator, and Sarah Mendelson, who was a deputy assistant administrator for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, along with some interagency champions. There were regular monthly meetings, at least at the deputies level, with DA Steinberg participating and CMM along with the regional bureaus were called on to staff those meetings. Samantha Power was responsible during her time at the UN for coordinating a very informal "coffee group" or friends of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which was the UN parlance for atrocities prevention. At the staff level, I was responsible for keeping the momentum going with those countries that were like-minded on atrocities prevention, particularly the Brits and the Scandinavians.

I think what I'm most proud of during our time at CMM was seeing that issue raised both as a policy issue, but then followed up with programs and approaches to assessing and responding to the risk of atrocities. We initiated a study of the experience of AID in countries that had experienced atrocities, which was called *Voices From the Field*, which interviewed current and former AID and OFDA officers.

Q: What countries were highlighted in that?

LEVINE: I'm not going to be able to recall. I also think because of the sensitivity, those may not have been shared.

Q: So, it wasn't a report that was publicly—

LEVINE: No, it was not publicly distributed. It was an internal report because of the sensitivities and wanting to get people to speak candidly.

Q: But how do you get lessons learned out of something that's not shared? (Laughs)

LEVINE: Well, you incorporate it in training, and we were able to do that. No, and I was one who fought for disclosure, and that was an inter-bureau battle.

Q: Well, what kind of lessons learned might have come out of it?

LEVINE: I think we learned that there was a sensitivity to reporting bad news up the chain, so we recommended that there be a direct channel, akin to the dissent channel and that was instituted during the Obama years. Reports that may have been deemed too sensitive or deviated in perspective from the official reports could be sent directly to the deputy administrator. His would be the mailbox to which such a cable would be sent.

We also designed and delivered training on recognizing conflict risk and designing conflict sensitive programs. The goal was to mainstream the value of conflict prevention, so that when you know that a country is at risk of conflict, business as usual may not be the best policy. It meant watching out for favoritism between ethnic groups, for instance, or the emergence of hate speech that we've seen can create a tinderbox for conflict. And sadly, we've got a lot of experience in places like Rwanda, Burundi, the Middle East and elsewhere.

Q: Were there times when country strategies were being reviewed in Washington and you all thought they had not looked carefully enough at these potential conflict issues and might need to rethink their strategy?

LEVINE: Yes. We would recommend the use of "crisis modifiers" or interim strategies that had to be developed because it was evident to everybody that the steady state strategy was no longer operative. Returning to the Kenya example, where an election can become a triggering event, we'd call for campaign codes of conduct, hate speech monitoring, security and training and deployment of areas that are likely to be flashpoints for violence. On the technical side, developing and collecting best practices and being able to disseminate that to missions that are experiencing those situations became kind of what we did in partnership with the DRG office at the time. Because that's where the agency expertise really was.

Q: Okay.

So, you had an office that had some instruments. You had some program money, and you had some instruments in place. Were most of those analytic instruments?

LEVINE: We had a small budget. I presided over a sharp decline in budgetary resources from about $9 million when I started to about a little over a million and a half when I left. Not something I'm particularly proud of, but I didn't think that we should ever have a very large central budget. What was important was that we had, number one, the alert list, and that was a budget of about a million dollars to fund research at the headquarters level that no one else would be able to do and then present it at the global level. That's the stock and trade that I think technical offices should be able to do. It fills a need.

The second is to have a programming mechanism like an indefinite quantity contract (IDQ) that allows for buy-ins, and we had the first generation of mechanisms that missions could use to develop programming. We had pre-competed implementing

mechanisms with partners standing by ready to go. The third area is what I would call flagship organizations that we thought should exist as a public good, like the International Crisis Group and a group called CDA Collaborative Learning. A disclaimer here, I'm now on the board of that organization. I was recruited in retirement. CMM owes CDA an intellectual debt in terms of their research on conflict sensitivity and conflict programming and we thought that CDA led in this area and should receive support. So, as a technical office at headquarters, we focused on creating prepositioned programming mechanisms, research and training for all officers as our natural purview.

In thinking about my five years as the head of that office, my job was to institutionalize operations of the office after a very well begun founding period. I inherited a really good staff, which I tried to deepen. I tried to recruit more Foreign Service officers, including hiring a deputy who was a Foreign Service officer. I always thought that we could call on the agency to fill positions in the program office and in the environment where the agency had a record of producing top technical experts in those areas, and there's no reason why we couldn't have a hybrid office or a much more homogenous workforce, along with fellows or personal service contractors (PSCs) who brought more specific expertise that wasn't available either in the Civil Service or the Foreign Service. The office expanded from about twelve people when I arrived to eighteen. I would never have gone much higher than that because I didn't see the need for a large office. Our job was to make every Foreign Service officer a conflict officer —or know where to go for the resources.

Q: How did it work within the Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance Bureau? Could you talk a little bit about the whole dynamic of that bureau and whether you saw it differently from the CMM perch than you saw it previously?

LEVINE: DCHA was established during the Bush Administration under Andrew Natsios, and the theory of the case was that you needed specialized response for humanitarian assistance, so the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and the Food for Peace office as the first responders to a crisis. You had the Conflict Office, the DRG Office, and the new Office of Civilian-Military Cooperation. You had a program office, the Office of Private Voluntary Cooperation, and ASHA, American Schools and Hospitals Abroad. Many of these have long tenure in AID, fifty years in the case of Food for Peace, almost as long with ASHA. PVC (Office of Private and Voluntary Cooperation), a creation of the Congress in terms of first building out an American non-governmental capability to deliver assistance and now, more recently focused on local capability, all with congressional champions. And then, the Office of Transition Initiatives. So, there's a lot of capability, much different than a regional or the other pillar bureaus in terms of both specialized missions, humanitarian and lifesaving operations, and then politically flavored programs in the case of the Office of Transition, Conflict and Democracy and Governance.

The dynamic, in terms of putting all those capabilities together, is that the urgent sometimes will crowd out the important because there will always be a "hair on fire" complex emergency kicking off, and as a result of this kind of complexity, conflict and

climate change, these were getting more severe, violent and frequent. So, in a given year, OFDA and Food for Peace might be responding to two or three major emergencies each year. During my time there, it was much more like five or six multiple, long-lasting conflicts. And that would get the attention of the bureau principals.

Q: Were there cases when, for example, you would be identifying potential conflict in a country and perhaps working with the regional bureau, and the OTI would be brought into the process, perhaps to come in with some kind of resources on the ground? Was there a strong synergy between you and OTI.

LEVINE: Absolutely. There were multiple countries when five or more offices from DCHA would be involved. During that time, DCHA created Action Coordinating Teams (ACTs) so that we would meet regularly to coordinate and have visibility on what each office was doing in a particular crisis country. It got to a point where we might have four or five ACTs operating at the same time.

The ACTs definitely helped us work together better and present to the rest of the agency in a more friendly fashion. The ACT could also plug directly into the cases of an agency task force. Now, it multiplied the number of meetings for our front office because, you know, at 9:00 a.m. they'd go to the agency task force, then they'd go to State, then an NSC meeting later in the afternoon. They'd come back at the end of the day wondering what they accomplished.

Q: Did your office do much with the two behemoths, Iraq and Afghanistan? Or were they pretty much handled by other people? Just curious if you have any insights on those.

LEVINE: The answer is yes in the case of Iraq, and no in the case of Afghanistan. In the case of Iraq, there was a call in the late going, not in 2003 but more in the 2009-2010 period for a conflict assessment, which was sort of a bust in that our staff could not deploy outside of the Green Zone. People had to be brought in. What I recall being the major finding was that our presence was a defining factor of the conflict in that the heavy Green Zone occupation footprint was a source of many complaints among the Iraqis we talked to. Our team couldn't deploy meaningfully to really talk to Iraqis in terms of the Iraqi political situation, not discounting the fact that the Iraqis we talked to had a real problem with the U.S. footprint.

In Afghanistan, less so. I do recall, in terms of one specialized case, they were really interested in our staff working on the deradicalization and reinsertion of former combatants. We had some but not much expertise in the form of a staff member who had studied this and followed the literature, and he was asked to do highly specialized work with an interagency task force that was working that issue.

Q: One other thing that occurs to me that was taking place during this time was—in fact, when your office was under threat, the QDDR (Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review) and I believe that there were a lot of discussions about whether your office should remain in AID or whether it should go over to State —

LEVINE: It really ended up being OTI that caught somebody's eye. This was seen as a potential outcome or splashy reform coming out of the QDDR at the expense of OTI and USAID. It got elevated very quickly and resolved that it would not be a good idea. This was an example where our interaction with the Conflict and Stabilization Office really was heightened because we were called on to write the chapter of the QDDR on conflict together. We had no problem reaching agreement on the importance of conflict prevention and being better able to predict and respond to crises. However, in terms of deciding who does what, there was no way that, as representatives of folks with an active interest, we were going to resolve or recommend anything. So, it had to be taken out of the staff's hand and elevated. I think principals had no way of determining a right or wrong answer to that. OTI became more of a political football of wanting to do something bold, but I think the cost and disruption of doing that and the fear of breaking an asset that was working, keeping the status quo prevailed. It was just seen as too disruptive a change and whether anything was gained by the move.

Q: Yes. One other country pops into mind. Did you all have any involvement with Colombia and Plan Colombia? Are there any lessons?

LEVINE: Two stories. One is the CMM story and then one is more personal. On the personal side, I had a request from the mission to facilitate a retreat, distinct from my CMM role. Later, I came down to work with the mission on their strategy and reorganization plan. Both requests came from the mission directors, Susan Reichle, and then Ken Yamashita.

One CMM program capability that I didn't mention was a congressional earmark for people-to-people programs of $26 million, $16 million for the global program and $10 million for Israel-Palestinian cooperation programs. Under the global program there were people-to-people programs in Colombia. I visited the Colombia program to learn more about that program.

I learned a lot about conflict and reconciliation from those programs, particularly that there are many different kinds of affected populations from the conflict. The first were folks whose land was expropriated by either the rebels or the paramilitaries. There were internally displaced people (IDPs) and then there were folks who were human rights victims. I learned about the role that trauma plays in working with these affected populations. I thought this was a deficit when it came to agency knowledge. We're economists and agronomists and health officers and environmental officers and political scientists; we're not psychologists or sociologists. And when you're talking about conflict and war, you have people that are broken. They need to heal before they can reconcile, and I think that was playing out in Colombia. There's a lot of stigma associated with conflict from those who left versus those who stayed behind and experienced the conflict in place, and so for me, by virtue of studying these programs, I got a firsthand, highly rich exposure to the complexity and the role of trauma in resolving conflict.

There was also experimentation about the role of reconciliation and truth telling there, and this is something personally interesting to me going back to the El Salvador and Guatemala experience with truth commissions. Having read Aaron Williams' book and talking to colleagues who experienced the South Africa truth and reconciliation commission, and then seeing it on the ground in Colombia, I found it personally interesting. I was truly gratified to be able to pursue this career long interest through my professional assignments.

In terms of the mission and organizational development issues, I think part of the success of the Colombia program during this era was the close relationship with the government, and the excellent leadership out of the mission, first from Liliana Ayalde and then Susan Reichle and Ken Yamashita -- three of the best officers that AID produced during a critical time. I think they oversaw strong country teams that really had a unity of effort.

The embassy divided the country up into zones that were in active conflict, that was really for the Colombians to resolve and in essence pacify or find peace. These were known as red zones. There were also yellow zones where some work could be done, but this fell mostly to the area of drug eradication and the INL mission. And then, the green zones, former conflict areas for development where USAID could play a more traditional role or a transitional role in bolstering government presence and allowing the benefits of peace to flow more broadly into the country. So, it was a very interesting country, very successful, but I think in every case the credit goes to the leadership of the country and with USAID really in a supporting role. I think CMM was there as an additive to that, but not central. We had a small programming presence. OTI was very important in getting kind of to the point of the spear of some of these.

Q: It's interesting that even when a country is on the road to reconciliation, one still has to continue to monitor all of those variables that could easily tip back into violence, so that conflict monitoring is still a very important part of the peace.

LEVINE: Right. What we learned from our experience in developing the Alert Lists was that prior conflict is a leading indicator for conflict recurrence.

Q: Very interesting. That's a lot of very good work that you all did for that five-year period you were there. And you helped to institutionalize an office which continues to do good work today.

LEVINE: I think one experience of your best jobs when you hear about the praise, you recognize that it relates to having a great staff. I just had great people from day one and a shared ethic around the privilege of getting to do this work. I always said as a manager I have the luxury of solving most of my personnel problems at the front door. I had my pick of very, very talented officers from the start. It was never a case of hiring a person who wasn't going to make our office better; it was a question of how they will make it better. And we were always able to recruit and retain very good talent.

On the management side, I was highly experimental in remote telework, in job shares, and in looking for win/wins in staffing arrangements to keep a high performing staff happy and able to manage the work there. We experimented a lot with hiring—regionalizing and sending folks to the field which we financed so that we would bring our advice one step closer to the field. We stationed staff in Thailand as part of an experiment with a regional officer. We did a staff exchange where we sent someone to the International Peace Institute and worked out of New York and had a New York presence to monitor what the UN was doing. In exchange, we got staff from the International Peace Institute to cover the Africa portfolio, and it was a real example where both institutions got talent as a result.

Q: Were you able to do this on your own, or did you have to run it through HR or whatever HR's name was at the time?

LEVINE: I used the Interagency Personnel Act to do the exchange with IPI (International Peace Institute), so I had an IPA (Interagency Personnel Act) with the IPI, which was confusing in itself. In Thailand, we hired a PSC (Personal Services Contractor) who was long tenured in Washington to experiment with how we get someone into the field quickly who could be what we called "CMM Outbound." So, we had CMM Outbound in Thailand and CMM "Big Apple "in New York. And CMM Outbound in Thailand was a PCS who we got the NSD-36 (Embassy staffing approval directive) for them and made them part of the USAID mission. That gave CMM the opportunity to assist programs in Nepal, Burma, and in Thailand proper. We then asked HR for approval for this as a Foreign Service position. We argued that the officer be assigned to DCHA/CMM, do a year in the office to get familiar, and then be deployed for two years there. We could not get HR to go along with that, so it started and ended as a PSC pilot.

Q: Right, but good that you were able to innovate. Your mention of Nepal reminds me of Bob Gersony and the detailed work he had done there around 2004. That was before you were at CMM, but I wonder whether Bob Gersony did any work for you while you were at CMM?

LEVINE: No. And I have read his book and it was great to see him again during his speaking tour. My time with him goes back to the Latin America days and mostly Nicaragua. But we crossed paths several times during his career. We probably couldn't afford him. I didn't work with him, but I was always on his briefing list.

Q: One more question related to Bob. He has spoken a lot about his methodology. When you had people in the field, did you talk about how he did his interviews? I am wondering what kind of impact methodologically he might have had.

LEVINE: I have a great appreciation for what he can deliver because of the care he takes. He has a specific methodology that gives you a textured understanding of a particular microclimate in a particular area at a particular time. Bob comes back with recommendations that are bankable because they represent his observations of what's working or what could work at the time. The problem has been that they're not

generalizable because they are very, very context specific. He is very much in sync with a bottom-up evaluation of local knowledge and understanding the politics and the culture.

As a conflict intervention it can be highly successful because it does appreciate all those factors, and he's very meticulous and very careful about his judgements. So, I don't think he often gets it wrong. The question is, can it be applied two valleys over from where he's done his study.

Q: Right; good point.

LEVINE: And I think he'd agree with that.

National Defense University, Eisenhower School Faculty: 2013 - 2014

Q: Yes, I think he would. Okay; sorry for my diversion. We are now at 2013 and you are going off to teach at the National Defense University. But I see looking at your CV you had earlier started some teaching at American University. Is that what got you thinking about teaching at NDU?

LEVINE: Yes, this is when I was first contemplating what I would do after AID. Teaching at American University really lined up nicely as I worked on conflict during the day and taught about it at night. I think it made me better at my day job and the day job made me a better professor. The students are very hungry for the views of practitioners. I think they are seeing that folks who are doing the work as a good way of getting insight into how to get a job in the field. I found them very engaged students, and I enjoyed the teaching.

I was able to share a lot of the work from a donor perspective. If there was a downside, it is that I really do have that donor and policy perspective. I am not a field person, so they weren't getting all of that. But that's the beauty about teaching in Washington is you can bring in such expertise. I did not want to run a speaker's bureau, so I decided that in thirteen class meetings, the magic number was four for bringing in outside experts. I brought in an expert on conflict analysis, usually someone from my staff who had just completed a conflict assessment. Next, I would bring somebody in on conflict programming. I had the students vote on what topics were most interesting and built lessons around those three topics. Chances were that I was not expert in all of them, so I would hold a space open for a guest speaker for one of those topics. And then, my last class was always a heavy hitter, the highest-ranking person I could get. That usually was an assistant administrator from AID or a former assistant administrator, including the likes of Susan Reichle, Mark Schneider, and Nancy Lindborg – all of whom spoke to my class. When I took this show up to Boston and did the class at Fletcher, I was able to get Brian Atwood to speak to my class, so that was a lot of fun.

So, I did start thinking about teaching. The animating factor about the return to NDU was to get on the staff of the Department of Strategic Leadership and be able to teach on leadership topics.

Q: Ah, so it was not going to be in conflict or development?

LEVINE: Yes. And that was very much by choice. I liken it to a mid-career MBA on leadership because you are given the curriculum and you have to deliver it in a classroom at the senior levels of government, a mixed class of colonels and lieutenant colonels, SES (Senior Executive Service) civilians, and other civilian agencies at the office director or principal level. It was graduate school seminar discussions that I had to facilitate.

Q: About leadership, okay.

LEVINE: About leadership, based on a strategic framework that has been well developed by the faculty there. I loved engaging the material and it has given me all I need to launch a second career in coaching and leadership development, which is what I'm engaged in now.

Q: And presumably, when you were a student at NDU, is that when you were first exposed to the Department of Strategic Leadership and therefore became interested in it?

LEVINE: Yes, but only peripherally. The War College and the Eisenhower School programs are designed differently. So, as a War College student, I took a course from the Eisenhower School, but every student at the Eisenhower School has a required year-long course in strategic leadership, and they really focus on it. I think the theory at the National War College is that many folks have had leadership training by the time they've done it. That was not my case except for the Federal Executive Institute two-week course.

I'd like to say something about just the ethos towards long-term training. The most celebrated graduate of the National War College is probably Colin Powell. When he talks about training, he said, "You know, in thirty years in military service, six years of that would have been in training, in a training role." And there's no civilian equivalent to that level of investment in training. I know because I have extracted as much training as exists within AID, including two stints at NDU. I swear by it. I highly recommend it for AID. I think we should double the number of students from three to six at each school. The problem we have is that we don't have a training float and we can't afford to put these folks in training mode. That would be twelve officers who we need to run missions and to serve overseas. But it would do us well. I found both of those experiences transformational in my own career. I think the National War College experience increased my ability to think broadly about strategy and how the interagency works and giving me that network allowed me to take over an albeit small office. I think training and teaching at—on strategic leadership allowed me to come in and manage an office that is larger than some bureaus.

Q: Right. Were there any other AID faculty members at the time?

LEVINE: Steve Brent. He was the head of the economics department there. And Larry Garber was also at Eisenhower during my time there.

Q: So, USAID had three faculty members there. Wow.

LEVINE: And Terry Myers was at the National War College.

There was an AID group there that was always there to give advice and support. You also had a teaching team that you worked with. We were delivering the same lesson each week, so we would huddle and develop materials together, which was a great experience. I was teamed with an Army colonel and an Air Force lieutenant colonel (both women of color) and that mix really helped bring some diversity of views to the material we presented.

Q: Had you done anything other than the FEI course? I'm just curious how much advance training or experience they wanted before having teaching in the strategic leadership program. Did you have any academic training in this area?

LEVINE: None at all. We were able to follow our own interests. Traditionally, folks go to the economics department. But there had been people in strategic leadership before me, so that there was precedent. I followed Erin Soto to the Strategic Leadership department.

Q: Okay, so AID has had at various times a position in that department. That does help explain how you got there. Your intention was to stay longer, but you then got—

AID/Washington, Director, Office of Democracy and Governance – Political Appointment: 2014 - 2017

LEVINE: Yeah, I got a phone call from Nancy Lindborg to say, "Would you allow your name to go forward on a slate of candidates for a political appointment?" And I said, "where do I sign?"

Q: And this was 2014 at this point?

LEVINE: Yes. I was familiar with this process having served as a political appointee in the Clinton Administration. In this case, I was the agency's choice and a career choice and so I had to demonstrate that I had some political support. I reached out to my congressman at the time, Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), who I've long been a supporter of, and he wrote a letter of endorsement for my political appointment.

Q: Did you have to meet with anyone in White House personnel to do that?

LEVINE: I was vetted a couple of times. White House personnel wanted to get to know me. These were the last two years of the Obama Administration. Gayle Smith became administrator shortly after, saying "My initiative is to have no more initiatives." The idea was to implement the programs that had been put forward by the administration and play to the whistle. As an institutionalist, I knew how to get things done in the bureaucracy. I wasn't there to invent new work. I also had the benefit of having served on the policy

task team that was responsible for the democracy strategy, so I was carrying out something that I deeply believed in and had worked on three years earlier.

Q: When you were the head of the CMM office you worked on developing the strategy?

LEVINE: Yes. The policy bureau wanted someone with that perspective and I also because of my previous work in democracy.

Q: Okay. So, in 2014 you do get the okay from the White House and become the head of the Democracy and Governance Office, which is quite large.

LEVINE: On paper it's probably a hundred folks with between seventy-five and eighty-five folks onboard at any one time. Nine divisions. I thought it was really built for purpose, organized to implement the 2011 DRG strategy, emphasizing those elements of the strategy that were seen to be the most important: elevating human rights, evidence and learning and emphasizing democratic principles across all development sectors.

Q: And what were those priorities that your office had set for itself?

LEVINE: Going all the way back to the establishment of the Democracy Center in the mid-1990s, our democracy promotion efforts were structured around supporting competitive elections, a vibrant civil society, rule of law and good governance. Looking at that structure twenty years later, we asked, "What's the next horizon?" First, we wanted to continue and strengthen the work we had done to establish good practice across those four core areas. Second, we wanted to elevate human rights so there would be a distinguishable mandate for work on these issues, not just as a by-product of having elections, functioning judicial systems and good governance. We saw the need to spotlight and address human rights abuses in our programming. And so, we created a Division of Human Rights that would bring more specialists and more specialized programming.

Third, we identified governance issues and issues of power and participation throughout the development mission. We need to better understand what those constraints are in health programs, in education, and other sectors to see how we might achieve even greater results by fully understanding who holds power, how decisions get made, how to open up the processes to participation and working closely with civil society. So, the new division for Cross-Sector Programming worked with other technical offices to learn the vocabulary, identify the pain points and constraints on programming in other sectors. Were the challenges they faced technical? Political? Are they power based? Can we understand and kind of analyze and recommend fixes together. And I think that remains a potent part of our strategy.

The fourth area was learning and having a robust learning agenda. That meant putting money into research. Everybody wants to have their decisions be evidence-based, but they tend not to want to pay for the evidence that creates the base. We spent a lot of time in partnership with academia identifying the burning questions the field has for which

you want to generate evidence, and then going out to folks who know how to do top tier research with advanced social science methods. That expertise doesn't exist naturally in the Civil Service and the Foreign Service. So, guided by the experience of the direct hire staff to generate the questions, and identified academics, practitioners and others to get the answers. This involved a much more systematic and collaborative approach to learning which I believe we were responsible for during that time.

Q: I know during the Obama Administration, there were lots of debates about government-to-government work, and the financial management people put in place a slew of new processes. I believe the democracy folks were also raising lots of questions about when it was appropriate to work directly with host country governments and when it wasn't. Some thresholds were set. Were you familiar with that dialogue?

LEVINE: There was a big case about Ethiopia that became the center of controversy, as well as in Rwanda. What do you do in cases where there are increasingly authoritarian governments with highly successful health or education programs? Democracy teams looking at the human rights performance and closing political space would point this out while the health and education folks would say that in all of Africa, no one is performing better on certain measures. And I won't swear to those statements, but that was effectively the argument. What do you do? We assess their ability to oversee and transparently manage funds in a government-to-government way, but would working government-to-government convey an endorsement of authoritarian policies? That was the essence of the policy debate.

Q: Right. And where were you on this issue? I'm going to try to pin you down.

LEVINE: I felt that if our strategy for underscoring the commitment to human rights was to mean anything, we would have to object to providing government-to-government assistance. We lost that argument.

I think the investment in the health sector in particular was very, very heavy, and there was a legitimate counterargument to ask, "who would suffer were we to cut back our investments in health?" I would counter that counter argument by pointing out that there are other ways besides working with the government to deliver results. We do it everywhere around the world when we don't work with the government. But I think the idea goes back to constructive engagement and are you likely to get better performance by maintaining your engagement with the government. Again, as a democracy and human rights advocates, we heard the same arguments with South Africa and chose a different course.

Q: Right, there's a little bit of a difference there. (Laughs) Okay. Were there other big policy debates like that that you can recall?

LEVINE: Yeah. At the very end of the Obama administration, a similar debate arose around aid to the Philippines. The issue was whether to renew a compact offered by the Millennium Challenge Corporations to the government of Philippines. At the interagency

discussion, traditionally the regional bureaus of the State Department will, in essence, defend continuing the relationship. In this case, we developed some unlikely allies. We expected that the DRG office and State DRL would have something to say about deteriorating human rights conditions, the appearance of death squads, and dehumanizing speech to characterize political opponents. Interestingly, State/INL had a police training program going on, and they raised the issue about reputational risk of being associated with poor human rights records of folks they were training. They didn't want to end the program, but they raised the concern, which allowed us to amplify our argument. It became a moot point because President Duterte rejected the compact for what he deemed U.S. meddling in domestic affairs.

Q: And this would have been preparing Gayle Smith, the administrator, to attend MCC board meetings and vote?

Right, this was the preparatory meetings that—and it never came to a vote because Duterte rejected the compact.

Burma was another big policy question.

Q: That program was just starting up, is that correct?

LEVINE: There was a lot of anticipation of progress following the democratic opening in Burma. The concern that arose involved the atrocity risk involving the Rohingya. There were some difficult comments made by Aung San Suu Kyi relevant to the Rohingya that reflected a leader very much locked into traditional views of the Rohingya, which were not very progressive. There was no doubt that we wanted her to succeed but there were tensions in the relationship and debate in the interagency on this issue in terms of justifying or recognizing any kind of rights for the Rohingya.

We also had Sri Lanka, another transitional case and a breakthrough election where the USG got very involved in terms of how we might work early with a reform minded government to support progressive moves to address longstanding conflict risk and democratic backsliding. Again, we witnessed a lot of pent-up demand and expectations, and then almost immediately there was backlash, and the window of opportunity shrinks before our eyes. I think there's a scope for a learning agenda in what seems to work, what holds that window of opportunity open longer and gives oxygen to forces that are looking to change things.

Q: As office director, you now also have to coordinate with the rest of the DCHA bureau on issues. How were things with CMM? All happy?

LEVINE: One thing I wanted to see us move on was the atrocity prevention agenda from both offices and felt that I needed the collaboration of CMM. We couldn't do it alone. I proposed increasing the staff in both offices, in essence creating an interoffice team of two people in each office working these issues. I hired two fellows, one to work in DRG

and one to work in CMM -- with DRG paying for it. I thought it was so important that CMM be part of it that I was willing to cover their stake.

Q: That's a good technique to remember if you want buy-in from someone. (Laughs)

LEVINE: Exactly. I guess that was a buy-out as opposed to buy-in.

Q: Right; giving them a staff member.

LEVINE: I'm very proud of that work because it allowed me to go out and hire the best people in town working on these issues. I hired two people: the first one worked at the U.S. Institute for Peace and had been the staffer who wrote the Albright-Cohen task force report on preventing genocide. The second hire came from the Friends Committee on National Legislation. She co-chaired the non-governmental advocacy group called the Atrocity Prevention Working Group. At the end of the day, USAID pulled in the top policy analyst and the top advocate and had them come work for us for a year to drive this agenda. For me, it was a rare opportunity to not just get the policy right, but also get the people. As they say, personnel is policy. That staff developed follow-on policy, initiated field support, designed training, wrote technical publications, and really put us on the map as an interagency player.

Q: Right. I was next going to ask about the interagency, the degree to which you had any sort of a single counterpart at the State Department. Certainly in your work to prevent atrocities, obviously you must have had to collaborate with the State Department.

LEVINE: We're often twinned with State's Human Rights bureau. What was an education to me was that they have a very different perspective. While we look at the same problems in very similar ways, bureaucratically they operate very differently. When we briefed the Hill, DRL would discuss their budget, not about human rights policy around the world. They defer to the regional bureaus. They would talk about the programs they managed. Often, they would defer to us to give that presentation on the "state of democracy" from our analytical perspective, not a diplomatic perspective, because that really wasn't their role within the department. They were probably smarter from a bureaucratic and resource mobilization perspective, but it didn't accord with my idea of representing the administration's human rights and democracy policy. That was a tough lesson for me to learn.

Q: Did your office or those working on human rights play a role in the annual human rights reports? I know that the reports come in from the missions, but I'm not sure if the State Department does anything to those reports in Washington.

LEVINE: No, they hire a lot of former State Department folks to review the country reports from the mission. We definitely clear on those, but we're not going to play a heavy role in editing what was generated from the field. We would assume that AID has chop at the field level.

There were always half a dozen cases where we had national security and human rights concerns at play. We discussed Burma, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and those are the kind of cases where we'd really scrutinize the language to see if we were soft pedaling the human rights concern. That was our job. I don't recall fights over the human rights report. It would really be what do you do from a policy perspective about it.

Are there other important points about the Democracy and Governance Office during that period? You were there 2014-2017, so presumably, you left shortly after the change in administration?

LEVINE: Yeah.

Q: That was the one disadvantage of a political appointment.

LEVINE: Yeah, but I was ready. You know, I knew I was coming up on my thirty years and age and tenure and so, it seemed like a natural transition. I definitely felt like I was going out on a high. I think like many folks who live through that transition, that we did our level best to—we were very proud of the work we did and wanted to see it continued, and I think my experience, I was there long enough to go through the transition, which was the landing team from the Trump Administration was theorized but never witnessed, that the landing team got as far as the State Department, but—and AID would brief the folks that were over at State. And in contrast to, you know, having just read Erin's recounting of the Obama transition where that transition was loaded with folks who had AID experience, were fans and were eager to get briefed up on and made use of what they were—what was shared with them, the exact polar opposite, no team, and that did not bode well. What I was watching as I left the agency was, you know, how long it took to get an AID administrator in place and what kind of leadership would come in. I think AID counts itself lucky in getting the likes of Mark Green during that time.

Q: Had Mark arrived before you left?

LEVINE: No, but I had a funny experience with him. As part of my duties as director, I get to meet with the—what's called the consortium, the CEPPS consortium (Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening)—

Q: Right. He was the head of IRI (International Republican Institute), wasn't he?

LEVINE: He was the head of IRI. I get to meet regularly, every six months, with Mark Green and Ken Wallach from NDI (National Democratic Institute) and at the time, Bill Sweeney, who was the head of IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems). And in my last—I did a kind of a round robin of—this was related to the transition, so we're preparing—in preparing, we said, "What are the big issues in democracy and what should the next administration do?" And I know that all the implementing partners are doing much the same thing, and I would meet with a lot of these folks to share here's our look, what are you seeing, or let's compare visions of what needs to be done. I met regularly with the CEPPS folks and so, I'd open the meeting, I said, you know, "I know

you guys. Before we get down to the business of elections and what's on your minds, I know you're interested in the transition, and I'd really like you to be up to date on what's going on with the new incoming Trump Administration. Mark, would you like to handle this?" Because he was already rumored as the nominee—and he sort of laughed, but he was—he said absolutely nothing except to say that he was encouraging the IRI staff to express interest—for those who wanted to serve because he saw that, you know, there was a real divide between the never Trumpers and the folks that he wanted. And I think, you know, Mark Green would be on anybody's short list on the Republican side no matter who had won the election for that job. So, I was glad that he came and stayed as long as he did. And he also brought in a fairly good team with some notable exceptions who did not honor the agency in any way.

Q: Yes. Now that you mentioned NDI and IRI, could you maybe talk a little bit about the roles that the two of them play and what you've seen? I've seen them primarily from the field side, but your observations on the roles they have played the last twenty, thirty years would be valuable.

LEVINE: Yeah. I've had a chance to watch them over time and I really enjoyed that special opportunity to regularly talk to the leadership and to get the sense—. I think the first thing I would say is that NDI and IRI, you know, are born of the same NED (National Endowment for Democracy) universe, but they institutionally have grown in very different ways with very different missions. NDI has a much more ambitious view of both its size and mandate, whereas IRI has remained much smaller and more focused in its work.

And I think that has played out institutionally in some weird ways in that because of the need for bipartisanship the—as the donor we want to be evenhanded in—but we're finding the capabilities because of the way, by their own choice, are quite different, and they are unequal. And this certainly is the view held by NDI, in saying, like, you know, in the crass—the crassest explanation is we can always count on half the money going to—of any money that is offered, half of it will go to IRI because of this evenhandedness, even if we have more capability, longer time in the country, you know, better idea, whatever it is and so, that's kind of a weird political economy that I didn't fully appreciate until having to oversee them. They're fractious and call for a very strong and savvy management as a program manager within the AID office. We've been doing it for thirty years, I think, and so, I think it suffers from any kind of monopoly where sometimes they can be counted on to do just excellent work at the highest level by virtue of their experience in the country and their contacts. Other times, they phone it in and take very little care, so the quality suffers.

So, a USAID program manager stirs up issues at his own peril. That said, on balance it's been a very, very successful partnership. I think there are headaches, and I think we've gotten much better at being very savvy in handling issues at the appropriate level, otherwise, you know, it would be phone calls from the presidents to the administrator or worse, to the Hill, and then to the administrator. I would say the division in charge of our elections and political processes program is one of the best run divisions we've had over

a long period of time. I don't know if you had this experience, Carol, but like, there are offices that you oversee that started good, stayed good, and enjoyed that reputation, and then there were others that were sort of born under a bad sign. I remember one mission director told me about her experience with office dysfunction, saying, "you could feel it in the walls of the mission."

Q: Yes. Yeah, there were missions like that; regardless of the people, there was friction in the air.

LEVINE: And what is to be done about that. I think it persists to this day. When I was briefed by our elections team, they had been doing this for so long that they knew the principal technical issues, they had a fix and a recommended course of action, and they had sussed out the politics and how that was going to line up. And what more could you ask for as a leader? Other times you'd walk in and get a technical briefing and you didn't know where to start because they didn't understand what information was needed or could not communicate their issue at any level.

Q: Right.

Let me ask you about another group that you just mentioned. While it doesn't get USAID money and is very independent, did you have much involvement with the National Endowment for Democracy, NED itself, that is a grant-making institution.

LEVINE: I would say that two things that I didn't do well as the head of the DRG office, I didn't cultivate a relationship with my counterpart at State at the assistant secretary level. And I did not reach out more to the NED. One of the things the Hill really wants to know is what is the level of coordination between our programs and the NED, so it's something that you avoid at your own risk. I did not have the level of personal connections nor contact with NED that I should have had. The reason you want to do that is because of the danger for duplication, particularly in smaller countries with fewer grantees. The NED tends to make smaller grants and they reach a level that we're probably not reaching.

Q: So, but if you were recommending to someone heading up DRG in the future you might suggest that they spend a little bit more time with NED?

LEVINE: You know, yeah. And I would say it's a target of opportunity because it's in transition now to new leadership, and there are probably things that we could have done that for lack of exploring. I would see it as a possibility now in a way that it hadn't been. I also am excited that Liliana Ayalde recently joined their board.

Q: Okay. Other things about your experiences, the director of the office of DRG, and I should remember that the rights go in there as well, the DRG. (Laughs)

LEVINE: Yes. Coming out of the NDU experience, I had the advantage of putting into practice a lot of the leadership lessons I had learned. The first thing I remember doing

was to ask, "who are the best facilitators on the staff, who really has that skill?" Let's put them in charge of facilitating three listening sessions that I'll do with the staff in the first couple of months or weeks. Second, I sought out the person in charge of training. I said, "I want to pay much more attention to the leadership culture here, and I'm going to put you on the senior staff." So, I elevated her and made her part of the senior staff, and we created a Training and Leadership Team (TLT) with representatives from each of the divisions.

Beyond these smaller structural issues, the listening sessions identified other lingering pain points. The staff was adjusting to the open workspace, which I learned was kind of a stalking horse for other issues. They had complained about space, but it wasn't really about space. Sometimes it was, but it was about really other behaviors. Issues of not being heard, action not being taken on other things.

My theory of the case was to manage the office through the nine division chiefs. I knew that my supervisory time was really going to be about making them better leaders. What I learned was that the office was only as strong as its weakest leader. I spent ninety percent of my supervisory time dealing with the folks that either shouldn't have been leaders, or had really good intentions, but had to be skilled up a lot. The others just needed a very light touch and were already ready great leaders.

I couldn't have had a better orientation to that job. Running an office of eighty-five people, I always thought about the senior staff and then another circle of the natural deputies, and then among the technical staff, if I had the buy-in of about fifty of them, that would be okay. I didn't need 100 percent, but I needed the center of gravity to really be bought into these last two years of the administration -- what are the maximal accomplishments we can make playing to the whistle and implementing our strategy. I wouldn't have succeeded without going through the two extended long-term training experiences. I used the tools directly from those two experiences in running those offices.

Q: Yes; that's an important lesson.

So, when you did decide to leave early in 2017, you made the decision to go into coaching?

Leaves USAID Becomes Professional Management Coach: Early 2017

LEVINE: Yes. I actually started my certification before I left.

Q: And so, you were—I know that you were doing it as a business, but I also know that the USAID Alumni Association also has grabbed onto you to help run the UAA mentoring program as well.

A*ny thoughts on what you've learned either through your private coaching business or your exposure with the UAA mentoring program? Thoughts on USAID, human capital development, and leadership and management?*

LEVINE: Thanks. I appreciate the question just because I've thought about it a lot, and I still think what holds is that AID is blessed with a very, very talented staff, but this human element of leadership and management continues to be an area where we underdeliver. Mentoring and coaching was thought of as a nice thing to have but my experience tells me that it's an essential part for somebody who hopes to lead. If you really want to succeed -- as self-serving as this may sound -- coaching is extremely helpful.

This is especially important in cases where it's lonely at the top, so for our senior most leaders or a mission director who has a difficult ambassador, where do they take their insecurities? Their challenges? Their struggles? They are often out on that island, the beyond the beyond, and they look back to Washington and they see a political appointee that they've never met and a deputy assistant administrator who they may know very, very well, but who is strapped and pulled in a thousand different directions. Where do they get meaningful feedback or guidance or direction? They're left with either peer support and mentors, but those folks have their own day job too, right? But a mentor who can devote an hour of their time solely to listen and ask questions like "Have you tried this?" Or someone who asks "Can you check my thinking on this?"

What I found is that these people are profoundly alone in that struggle, and just by sharing it with someone else, it becomes a powerful tool. It can really lead to insight for the client or mentee. When I facilitate these mentoring workshops and see the accumulated knowledge of 500 years of development experience, you realize you're not the first to experience this, and that people have really good ideas that might help you.

Beyond my work with the UAA, I work with a lot of USAID implementing partners like Creative Associates, Mercy Corps, Chemonics, the Solidarity Center, many of which are making coaching a part of their support and staff care. In these cases, I am a "two-fer." I'm a certified coach and I've spent a career in international development. There's very little translation that needs to go on; I understand the context of their work and what they're going through. I've been able to find a niche practice where, I would say, two-thirds of my clients are in international development or more. And I was pleased, that was surprising.

Q: So, any other sort of final wrap up thoughts about your thirty years in and around AID?

LEVINE: After reviewing the transcript and adding a few more stories, I've been reflecting on how many people refer to USAID as a family. It truly is a place with amazing opportunities to do exciting work with phenomenal people. Over the years, those friendships grow quite deeply. My closest friend in the Agency, Madeline Williams, recently died in a scuba diving accident and I think about her often. We met in new entry training in 1993 and served together multiple times in the LAC Bureau and DCHA. I recruited her to be my deputy in my last assignment and we talked about whether good friends can also work together and still be friends and effective leaders. We decided to

work together and really build on that trust relationship to maximize our leadership. We were different enough to complement each other while agreeing on important core values. I leave it to others to judge the result. Now, I just miss my friend.

There are others who are with the agency serving around the world. For many of today's mission directors and senior leaders, I remember when they arrived at USAID. Over the years, we worked together, or I had the chance to visit them at post. Even closer are dozens of Civil Service colleagues who I mentored and sponsored who have become leaders and experts in their own right. They are my family as well and continue to support me to this day.

Q: Let's end with that. Thanks very much, Neil.

End of interview