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DAVID W. YANG

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INTERVIEW

Q: Good morning. Today is Friday, September 26. I'm here with David Yang, and we're going to talk about his experiences working in the democracy and governance field over a distinguished career.

To start, David, give us a little of your origin story—how you became involved with democracy and governance. When did you start—whether as a young child or as an academic going to school? Then we'll talk a little about your role before you joined USAID [United States Agency for International Development].

YANG: Thanks, Larry, for inviting me to be part of this oral history project. I'm excited to participate. Kudos to you and Heather [Heather Ashe, ADST Oral History Program Coordinator] for organizing it. You're actually a big part of my professional origin story, but I'll get to that after a dive into my family background.

A couple of thoughts. First, I got interested in the democratic governance sector because of my family background. We came as a family to the United States as refugees in 1956 under one of the early U.S. refugee acts [Refugee Relief Act of 1953]. My father and mother had been living underground—meaning under assumed names—through different parts of Asia for the previous five or so years, and that itself was a democracy story.

My father was born in 1913. He was politicized during the Japanese encroachments in Northeast China in the 1930s. He grew up in a rural area in southwest China, near the Burma [now Myanmar] border. As a young child, he was tutored by Confucian teachers. As a middle school and high school student in his provincial capital of Kunming, he participated in demonstrations against Japanese imperialism and boycotts of Japanese merchants. Later, he went to Nanjing to take the exam to enter the Nationalist Military Academy [Whampoa Military Academy, relocated to Nanjing in the 1930s]. He was admitted and studied for four years in Nanjing, becoming an officer. At a pivotal moment of his life, shortly before World War II began in Europe, he was sent in 1937—along with seven other officers in his graduating class—to European military academies. My father was sent to Sandhurst [Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, United Kingdom], and he and the British cadets toasted King George every night in the student dining hall.

He loved his training at Sandhurst, but his program was abbreviated when Hitler invaded Eastern Europe [1939]. His British classmates were sent to the front as officers. He then came to the United States, studied in U.S. military schools such as Fort Benning [U.S. Army Infantry School, Fort Benning, Georgia], and then went to work as a military attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Washington. Later, he became a young general in the Nationalist Army, fought in the Chinese Civil War, and then he and my mom, when they fled the mainland in 1949, had to decide whether to cast their fate with Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan [President of the Republic of China, 1928–1949; later in Taiwan].

He decided, momentously for our family, that he didn't feel comfortable going to Taiwan. He felt it would be an uncertain future there; but also, in principle, he didn't like the authoritarian bent of the Chiang Kai-shek government, even though my father was still very anti-communist. As a former Nationalist military officer, he became involved with emigre Chinese intellectuals and political leaders who were gathering in Hong Kong. They formed a pro-democracy organization called the Free China Movement [anti-communist exile group founded by Chinese intellectuals in the 1950s]. The CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] heard about them, and some CIA operatives in Hong Kong and Japan offered support. For the next five years, my parents lived a cloak-and-dagger, cat-and-mouse life, hopscotching from Hong Kong to U.S.-occupied Japan, to Okinawa, to Saipan, my father training former Nationalist soldiers as guerrillas to return to China and mobilize resistance. Because of this experience, my dad talked a lot about democracy while we were growing up as refugees in the United States. He was enthralled by the early Cold War rhetoric of John F. Kennedy [U.S. President, 1961–1963]. So, my father's background was the primary source of my interest in democracy, in terms of the principles and passions that I pursued as an adult.

The second source of my interest was my studies, which I'm sure stemmed from my family's story. When I was in college and graduate school, I became very interested in political theory—meaning political philosophy. In graduate school, I studied the great works from Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle all the way up through the twentieth century, with a focus on democratic theory. I was intrigued by the social contract theorists, including John Locke and his American interpreters—Thomas Jefferson [U.S. President, 1801–1809] and Thomas Paine [political activist, author of *Common Sense*]. By the time I entered the U.S. government in the 1980s, I was interested not only in democratic theory, but also in how the United States projected its democratic identity onto the world.

Q: Okay, so David, give us a little timeline here. First of all, fascinating about your dad—I'd love to talk to you more about that sometime—but just in terms of timeline: When did you finish graduate school, and did you go immediately from graduate school to the government, or was there an interim stage?

YANG: I first entered the government as what were then called Presidential Management Interns [PMI; later renamed the Presidential Management Fellows Program in 2003]. So, I was a PMI in one of the early classes, in 1985, when I graduated from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies [SAIS] with a master's degree. I served three years in the State Department's Bureau of Refugee Programs as a PMI during the Reagan

administration, when George Shultz [Secretary of State, 1982–1989] led the department. I enjoyed that work very much and wanted an opportunity to pay back to the United States my family's refugee debt. Towards the end of that period, I went back part-time to SAIS to work on my PhD and then started at USAID in the fall of 1993. That was my second job in the U.S. government—at USAID as a lower-level political appointee in the new Bill Clinton administration.

Q: Let's start there. What were you assigned when you got to USAID in 1993? What do you remember as your first assignment?

YANG: Here's some background on my USAID job. I remember being looked at with skepticism by some fellow political appointees because I hadn't worked for a Democratic member of Congress, hadn't worked on a political campaign, and hadn't had political party connections. My only connection was to Margaret Carpenter [Assistant Administrator for the USAID Asia and Near East Bureau, 1993–1999], who, along with Brian Atwood [Administrator of USAID, 1993–1999], did a lot of the recruiting for the Clinton administration. Margaret had served in the Carter administration [1977–1981] and did extensive foreign policy recruiting in the new Clinton administration in 1993. Yes, it's a kind of funny story because I had no political background. But at the urging of some friends, I had put in an application because they said: "Look, the Democratic Party has been out of power for 12 years, so they're looking for a new generation of leaders. Just give it a try. You need a job. You're finishing up your PhD. How can it hurt?" Margaret, who was in the White House personnel office during the transition, rescued my application from the garbage can. She called me up and said: "Great to see your name. I'll keep a lookout for you, but don't hold your breath."

Many years earlier, Margaret had recruited me to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. My first year after college, in 1978, she was a scholar-in-residence there working on the Kurds, and she was also recruiting junior research fellows. Being a fellow Californian, she also rescued me from oblivion as a young California college student who had never been to Washington. In her interview notes—which I saw after I was hired—she had written: "Quite sophisticated, given he grew up in Stockton, California," which was then a semi-rural town in the San Joaquin Valley. That was my start in Washington!

My first job in the Clinton administration: Margaret brought me into USAID as a special assistant to her. She was appointed, nominated, and confirmed to be the USAID Assistant Administrator for the Asia and Near East Bureau [ANE]. Margaret, being Margaret—so dedicated to professional service, whether one was a political appointee or a career service officer—said that she had a slot for a special assistant, but also that she didn't like working in government that way. She explained: "I like my staff to include career service people more than political appointees. But what are you interested in?" In addition to democratic theory, I had been studying UN peacekeeping operations as the Cold War wound down. In response, she said: "Why don't I assign you to the Cambodia desk for a year? You can learn about USAID, meet experienced career officers, go to Cambodia, and watch the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia [UNTAC] and the new USAID mission in action. And then after a year, let's take stock."

So, I did just that for a year, meeting wonderful colleagues like Jim Vermillion [USAID officer], Judy Gilmore [USAID officer], Chuck Howell, who later became Mongolia mission director. It was an excellent introduction to USAID.

Q: And so you were physically in Washington or in Cambodia?

YANG: I traveled to Cambodia several times, but I was stationed in Washington.

Q: And the UN elections took place during that period while you were manning the desk?

YANG: Yes, Jim Vermillion and I were at the Southeast Asia desk together. He and I shared responsibility for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. We supported Mission Director Lee Twentyman and his team in Phnom Penh.

Q: This is a quick aside, David, but I don't know if you know that Jim passed away about six months ago. And actually, I'm in touch with his family and getting a copy of his memoir, so we'll talk about that at some other time. He has really interesting insights. You did that for a year, and what came next? You then moved back into the mainstream at the Asia Bureau [Asia and Near East Bureau, USAID]. Or what was the next step?

YANG: At that point, the Brian Atwood administration at USAID, which you and I were a part of, had its feet firmly planted, and its new priorities were in place. Assistant Administrator Carpenter was part of that consolidation, and she asked me, "Okay, what do you want to do now?"

Margaret was in the process of setting up a new strategic planning office in the Asia and Near East Bureau. At that point, I had seen what USAID was supporting in Asia, particularly in post-conflict Southeast Asia. I was also watching you at the policy bureau and Chuck and Jennifer [Chuck Howell and Jennifer Windsor, senior USAID democracy officers] at the DG [Democracy and Governance] Center, and I was really inspired by this DG-related work and your and Brian's prior work at NDI [National Democratic Institute]. I observed all that, and I thought, "Hey, I don't have the field experience, but maybe I can contribute my political theory background to ask the right questions and learn how to apply them practically."

So, Margaret said, "It's a great idea," and she appointed me to be the DG officer on the strategic planning team. It was the ANE Strategic Planning Office. Dirk Dijkerman [USAID officer, later Acting Assistant Administrator] headed it up, and Leanne Ross [USAID officer] was his deputy. They were field-experienced leaders, smart, fearless, and respectful when needing to ruffle the feathers of their fellow mission colleagues to get things right strategically.

I did that job, and it was a great experience. I hope I approached it with humility, but I also felt I could ask incisive questions about democratic development. Looking back, it was one of my best professional experiences. I think you called the regular DG sector meeting the "Tuesday Group," where your Policy Bureau, Chuck and Jennifer's DG Center, and the regional bureaus' DG officers like me all came together to debate policy, discuss books and articles, and pick the brains of outside experts.

I felt, not only in retrospect but at the time, it was a valuable learning experience. To me, the Tuesday Group (and the camaraderie it fostered) was the model of a learning organization—even before that term became a bureaucratic buzzword. I used to look forward to those meetings every week. I say that because it really taught me a lot about how one does sectoral work within a development agency, where the regional bureaus (which I was a part of then), the functional bureaus (which I would later join), and the Policy Bureau (where you were) all had different but coequal roles.

It was a memorable time, and I applaud you for leading the DG work with your own humility and curiosity. Even though you came from a lot of experience at NDI, you always made everyone feel like we were learning together—new people like me alongside experienced people like you and Chuck Costello.

Q: I do want to move forward, but just quickly—was there one thing that you remember from the strategic planning process in the Asia Bureau that sticks with you, either in a positive way or perhaps in a negative but learning way?

YANG: I remember the strategic planning process being very rigorous, and in some ways it was quintessential Margaret Carpenter. I don't know if the process worked the same way in other regional bureaus. In ANE, we covered a huge swath of countries. I called it "the big ANE crescent," from Morocco to Mongolia, with all these fascinating DG challenges and opportunities.

I remember the consultation process between missions and the bureau was built on mutual respect, where the mission directors came in with their senior team members, and we at headquarters grilled them on their strategic framework, on their performance indicators, on their matching of ends and means, on their requested budget, on the intersections between DG work and other sectors—and having hearty discussions, flagging issues, and always resolving them.

I thought, "Oh my God, government can work pretty well when people of goodwill take part." There was no animosity. Sure, missions felt they knew best because of their on-the-ground vantage, but I remember the process being extremely rigorous and extremely collegial—which, I think, are two main ingredients of successful strategic planning.

I did that for about two and a half to 3 years. (I can chart the years by the Secretaries of State.) I did that job until about midway in the fourth year of the first Clinton term. To be honest—because you're an old friend—I still had a nagging thought: While I could be a good gadfly, in the Socratic sense, my contribution to USAID programs was ultimately limited because of my lack of field experience.

Particularly given my training at Johns Hopkins SAIS, I thought I could be more valuable at that time on the diplomatic side of the U.S. government. So, I tried to get a political appointment at the State Department's human rights bureau [DRL, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor], but there was nothing open then. Through my inquiries, I met people on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, and they encouraged me to apply

there. The Secretary's speechwriting unit was then in the Policy Planning Staff, so they encouraged me to apply for an open speechwriter position.

There was one lead speechwriter and three staff writers, and I got that open staff position. I served there for a year overall--six months for Warren Christopher [U.S. Secretary of State, 1993–1997] and six months for Madeleine Albright [U.S. Secretary of State, 1997–2001]. I loved writing speeches from a DG perspective. It gave me a lot of insight into my original interest—how to express America's democratic heritage and vision in our foreign policy. That was a fascinating year, but in the back of my mind, I still wanted to move to the human rights bureau, to be on the front lines of human rights and democracy diplomacy in the post-Cold War world.

A DRL deputy assistant secretaryship opened up six months into the second Clinton term—and I applied for it and got it. John Shattuck [Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 1993–1998] was the assistant secretary. DRL [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor] exploded in terms of staff and budget later, particularly in the Bush administration. But back in 1997, it was still small. And Congress was monitoring the State Department's size very closely, particularly Senator Jesse Helms [U.S. Senator from North Carolina, 1973–2003]. Warren Christopher and Secretary Albright agreed to cut mid-level management, so they downgraded the DAS [Deputy Assistant Secretary] job that I filled.

I wasn't one for titles, and my new boss, John Shattuck, told me two things. One: "Your generation is so lucky, because my [Shattuck's] generation couldn't make a living doing human rights and democracy work. But now you're the first generation that can do it, so don't waste the opportunity." And second, he said: "You can pick your own title. It just can't be Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor."

So, I scoured the State Department phone book and pieced together different nouns and adjectives that I liked. I liked "coordinator," I liked "senior." And while most of my DRL colleagues were focused on the traditional human rights agenda, my responsibility was to develop further DRL's democracy portfolio. So, I titled myself Senior Coordinator for Democracy Promotion. Assistant Secretary Shattuck said, "Fine, sounds good to me."

What was great is that he, and his successor Harold Koh [Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 1998–2001], trusted me on democracy issues. John later went off to be ambassador to the Czech Republic, which was his dream job given his great respect for Václav Havel [President of Czechoslovakia 1989–1992; President of the Czech Republic 1993–2003]. Titles aside, my DRL colleagues treated me like a DAS, and we were able to do productive things together.

To finish the explanation of the job: I saw my role, which Shattuck and Koh supported, as building a bridge with USAID—trying to give substance to the "reinventing government" rhetoric of having U.S. diplomacy and development programs work in tandem. In this case, in the democracy, human rights, and labor field. It wasn't glamorous in a diplomatic sense, but I saw the bridge-building as my wheelhouse, given the valuable experience I had at USAID in the first Clinton term.

Q: Great. Say a word about those days—because I want to get into it more when we get to the Obama administration—but during the Clinton administration, while you were at the State Department, how did you see the relationship between USAID's democracy programming and what you were doing at DRL? How did you view, at that time, the interactions, the coordination, the collaboration—however you want to characterize it?

YANG: As you know, Larry, given your mission director background, the most important aspects of State-USAID coordination happen in the field between the mission director and the ambassador. For me, the challenge was: What could we do in Washington to support that central relationship?

First, I sought to coordinate Washington support. DRL had a key role in advocating for the sector budget, including USAID's DG share of the government's overall democracy budget. In this regard, I saw my job as engaging the Hill—being an open book to Hill staffers about the importance of USAID programming and the importance of State Department diplomatic support for that programming.

Also, even during that early period, there was a kind of "whole-of-government" effort—particularly the "three Ds" (diplomacy, development, and defense)—for greater coordination. So, I worked closely with the Secretary of State's budget planning office. Craig Johnstone [Director of Resources, Plans and Policy, 1999–2000] was the director, and Anne Richards [Deputy Assistant Secretary for Resources, Plans and Policy, later Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration] was the deputy. They were right down the hall from me. So, I proposed to Craig and Anne, "Look, let us in DRL support USAID in coordinating that sector-wide budget."

Q: At that point, DRL wasn't doing programs per se—or not a lot of programs?

YANG: You raise an important footnote to the story of U.S. democracy programs. Two anecdotes. One is about Ambassador Johnstone and Anne Richards, who later assumed the head of that office. Because they encouraged me to work closely with USAID in coordinating the government-wide democracy budget, we counted all the dollars up, and it was like a billion dollars across the executive branch.

Later, when I was asked by John Shattuck and then by Harold Koh to establish a small program fund at DRL, many people around town said, "Oh, DRL doesn't need any money, because David Yang already oversees a billion dollars." I was embarrassed because, first, I didn't control any of it. I simply wanted to advocate for it and to build coordination across those many separate agency budgets. But the billion-dollar anecdote is related to—and you'll appreciate this story, and I'm sure you've heard some version of it—my second anecdote: how Shattuck and then Assistant Secretary Koh asked me to start up what became known as the Human Rights and Democracy Fund at DRL.

I told them: "You have no idea what a hassle it is to program money in the government, particularly in a foreign ministry where we have no established system to monitor programmatic funding. It would be a madhouse, and it'd be all I would do all day long, rather than developing the billion-dollar coordination project." In response, they said: "No, no. We need money when, for example, we're talking to Assistant Secretary Rice

[Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, 1997–2001], or the Assistant Secretary for the Near East. We're real players at the State Department table only if we have some funds to offer in support of their regional diplomacy."

I had to go up to Paul Grove [Senate Appropriations Committee staffer] and Tim Rieser [Senate Appropriations staffer] that first year, and they said: "What's this five million dollars for the Human Rights and Democracy Fund? Why does DRL need any money?" And I said, "Well, it would be to contribute to special initiatives that come up in the diplomatic arena." They grudgingly approved the fund in the appropriations process. And true to my word, we had to set up all these fiduciary apparatuses to make sure the funds were properly competed, well spent, and closely monitored—and we worked a lot with the management bureaus at State to do just that.

Q: Obviously over the years, that DRL fund grew, grew, and grew.

YANG: Yes, the DRL fund grew enormously, first during the George W. Bush administration. DRL's leadership at that time came from the International Republican Institute. Based on their experience at IRI, they felt that there were limits to what USAID DG programs could do, especially in supporting civil-society groups when political space was shrinking under government repression. During the Obama administration, as the DRL Human Rights and Democracy Fund budget continued to grow, it became, frankly, an irritant between USAID and the State Department.

Q: But it wasn't only DRL—it was also the State Department's Middle East Bureau's fund and the funds of other State bureaus. Okay, so you stayed until the end of the Clinton administration?

YANG: I stayed until the very last day. We were a good democracy team under Secretary Albright's leadership, and I worked closely with Morton Halperin [Director of Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State, 1998–2001] and the democracy folks at the Policy Planning Staff. We all assumed that Vice President Gore [Al Gore, U.S. Vice President, 1993–2001] had a good shot at winning the presidency. But my wife and I had small kids, and I promised her that I would look for a less consuming job.

You remember, there were additional hours reading classified cables at the office after your long meeting day ended at seven, and then getting home at eight-thirty or nine, day after day. By then, the kids would be either asleep or in the bathtub, and I didn't want to do that grind for another four or eight years. And so, I began telling all my colleagues: "I'm out of here. Good luck if Vice President Gore wins."

I stayed until the very last day, and it's important to note, especially in these polarized times today, that our handover to the Bush team at DRL was very collegial. In particular, Assistant Secretary Koh had good relations with the senior transition team of the George W. Bush administration. Being a Yale Law professor, he had trained many students over the years, and many of the Yale Law School grads were coming into the new Republican administration, some in senior positions. Our Republican colleagues asked us for advice on a DRL assistant secretary, and of course, we all shouted, "You should nominate Lorne Craner [President of the International Republican Institute, 1995–2001]."

I can't think of a better contrast to the animosity now. It was so cordial. I went on to work for NGOs and the UN in Washington, and some of my closest professional colleagues became the people who took over my job in the DRL bureau—Monica Kladakis [State Department official] and Gretchen Birkle [State Department official]--and the whole IRI [International Republican Institute] gang that Lorne brought in. I don't need to lecture you, of all people, but the democracy community has been fortunate to be so bipartisan.

Q: I actually stayed on for three more years. I was part of that, worked with Liz Cheney [Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, 2002–2004] and others. You left and went to work at UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] for a while. I want to get to the Obama administration, but are there any highlights that you want to share from your experience during the eight years of the Bush administration, when you were working outside of the U.S. government?

YANG: One footnote, and then a brief description of what I did at UNDP. The footnote is: I left government and was very excited about the democracy work we had done during the Clinton administration. I applied for a grant from the Hewlett Foundation to start what I called the Institute for Global Democracy.

Tom Carothers [Vice President for Studies—International Politics and Governance, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace] was on my board of directors. Carl Gershman [President, National Endowment for Democracy, 1984–2021] and Morton Halperin [Director of Policy Planning, 1998–2001] were also on my board. I told Tom I wanted my institute to be made up of a dozen full-time Tom Carotherses, rather than just his solo act at the Carnegie Endowment. He supported me in this ambition but warned me that it would be hard to raise funding.

I got a startup grant. But after 9/11 [terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001], the democracy money dried up, and foundation funds pivoted toward improving U.S. relations with the Islamic world. I gave it a good try. The institute lasted two years.

So, then I went to work for UNDP's Washington office. I gravitated toward it because Mark Malloch Brown [Administrator of UNDP, 1999–2005] was the administrator of UNDP at the time. He'd come from the World Bank, where he had been a vice president. He was close to Kofi Annan [UN Secretary-General, 1997–2006].

It was the high tide of post-Cold War UN support for democracy and human rights in an oddly unipolar world, where China was biding its time and Russia was in the middle of a complex transition. So, no powerful state was stopping Kofi Annan from planting the flag of democracy, human rights, and good governance on UN soil, something that had been impossible during the Cold War. Mark Malloch Brown at UNDP ran with that, and he wanted somebody with my background to build bridges with the Bush administration on democratic governance programs—particularly after the Iraq invasion, when President Bush embraced a global democracy agenda.

In small ways, I tried to reach out to Republican appointees in the Bush administration to say: "How can we help in Iraq, and how can we do it together, rather than the U.S. going it alone?" I did a lot of democratic governance work as part of the burgeoning UNDP

democratic governance community, which was impressive under Mark Malloch Brown. I also did bridge-building work on Iraq transition programs, and I convened in Washington for the UN as a partner to the U.S. government on human rights, democratic governance, and development generally.

Another priority of mine at UNDP—a holdover priority from the Clinton years—was getting the support of UNDP and the UN Secretary-General to support the Community of Democracies [founded in 2000 by Madeleine Albright and Polish Foreign Minister Bronisław Geremek], which aimed to build a multilateral organization composed of democratic governments and was dedicated to mutual support among democracies.

Q: And that takes you up to the election of 2008. Were you involved with the campaign at that point, or were you just waiting to see what happened?

YANG: I worked, like many of us who served in the Clinton administration, as a volunteer on the Kerry campaign and then the Obama campaign in my free time. After the election in 2008, Margaret Carpenter popped up again as a foreign policy recruiter for the new Obama administration. I said, "I'd love to do a democracy and human rights job, either at USAID or State."

When Raj [Rajiv Shah, USAID Administrator, 2010–2015] got appointed to be administrator—he had been Under Secretary of Agriculture early in the administration—Margaret introduced me to him, and he said: "What are you interested in? Would you be interested in heading up the Asia Bureau?"

As a proud Asian American, I was definitely interested in Asia, but I had gotten bitten by the democracy and human rights bug, and I said, "No, I would like to be the head of the Democracy Center." And he said, "Okay, I'll keep an eye out." After a very long wait, I got the offer, and I started in November 2010, almost two years into the administration.

Q: I actually just interviewed Dorothy Taft [Director, USAID Office of Democracy and Governance, 2004–2010]. She told me she left on October 30, 2010.

YANG: She was terrific in briefing me. She wrote me these long memos covering every nuance of the job, which I greatly appreciated.

Q: Now we're talking November 2010, two years into the Obama administration. Lots was happening on the global scene—but as the head of the USAID Democracy Center, what were your responsibilities? What were your priorities when you got there?

You got long memos from Dorothy [Dorothy Taft]. You obviously had your own perspective on some of these issues from your work back in the Clinton administration and through your work at UNDP. So, coming into the job, what did you see as your priorities for the Center at the time?

YANG: When I came back to USAID, the old DG Center was known as the Office of Democracy and Governance.

Q: It was re-worked into DCHA. [Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance

Bureau, USAID].

YANG: Yes, when I came on in November 2010, I was the director of the Office of Democracy and Governance under the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, led by Nancy Lindborg [Assistant Administrator, USAID, 2010–2014]. Sarah Mendelson [Deputy Assistant Administrator, DCHA, 2010–2014] had been appointed the Deputy Assistant Administrator supervising the Democracy Office. I had not known Nancy, but I knew Sarah from democracy and human rights circles. I was very happy to have the opportunity to work with both.

I mention the specific names of the bureaucratic entities because the number one priority that I was assigned—and excited about—was converting the existing Office of Democracy and Governance into a new Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance. That was my number one priority from day one. It took us the better part of a year to design it, get congressional approval, and then stand it up—which wasn't that long in bureaucratic time. It was initiated by Sarah, with Nancy's support and Raj's support. I was the lead implementer with their guidance.

The Center of Excellence was important to Raj because, as you know, Larry, he was very interested in making USAID a premier evidence-based agency. He liked the term "Center of Excellence," meaning a technical center that would gather evidence through innovative means and continue the work our Republican predecessors had started.

Q: But it also hearkened back, David, I think, to the Clinton administration, when Brian [J. Brian Atwood, Administrator of USAID, 1993–1999] had set up the global Centers of Excellence, including Democracy and others. There was a little bit of "back to the future" there, too.

YANG: Yes, very much. Thanks for pointing that out. The second important titular change was the "R." The R was shorthand for human rights—Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance. You might hear me use the term "democratic governance" a lot. It's more UN-speak, but I liked it because it was a pithier term. More importantly, I see democracy and good governance as two sides of the same coin. So, "democratic governance," I think, better captures that duality.

"Human rights" were, as you'll remember, very controversial in the USAID context, because it was seen as too "in the face" of host governments. "Democracy" itself—under Brian Atwood, you, and Chuck and Jennifer [Chuck Costello and Jennifer Windsor, USAID Democracy Center]—was hard enough to implant at USAID, but it grew organically from the rule of law programming that the first Bush administration had done. However, human rights were seen as too aggressive for a development agency.

So, we had Sarah—mostly with Nancy's and my support—persuade this audience of one, Raj, that promoting human rights wouldn't inflame our relations with USAID's host countries. Ultimately, Sarah, as a force of nature, persuaded Raj. I think he got to see that it was an important addition—if, like any new subsector, it was integrated into programming in a holistic way.

As Sarah's career later took a multilateral turn at USUN [United States Mission to the

United Nations], when she was Ambassador to ECOSOC [U.N. Economic and Social Council], she and I both made it a point to make USAID's human rights language, concepts, and programming part and parcel with U.S. history and UN history—from Eleanor Roosevelt's leadership of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights after WWII all the way up to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in the 2010s. In that sense, Raj later came to embrace human rights. But at first, when he saw it as a kind of American bullying tool, he didn't like it. Overall, it was a good discussion, though, and I remember it being an extended discussion within Raj's senior team, which I'm sure you were a part of. That was priority number one: to develop the new DRG Center, with human rights a key part of the agenda.

So, to rattle down my priorities in addition to that one: I had a PhD that I never really used for my own research, so part of my identity was that I was a self-styled bridge-builder between government and academia. I wanted to build on the work of Jerry Hyman [former Director, USAID Office of Democracy and Governance] and others—including you—in working with partners like the National Academy of Science's National Research Council. I wanted to figure out how to implement an evidence-based learning agenda. That became a huge priority in designing the Center.

As you remember, we created a learning team of four or five people—high-powered PhD social scientists—to help us, and we built bridges to academic units like J-PAL [Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, MIT] and their evaluation methods.

Another issue that was important to me came out of our early political economy discussions in the Tuesday Group, and my work with the Development Assistance Committee at the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development]. I felt that the international best practice was a holistic, political economy approach to development—where the political, economic, and social are highly integrated conceptually and programmatically.

To express that practically, I set up a cross-sectoral programming team as part of the new DRG Center, where we ran an initiative with every non-DRG sector, partnering with those sectors to figure out how we could do intersecting programming. All that was part of getting the Center up and running.

My other priorities were to respond to global events, like anybody in our jobs had to do. Of course, the Arab Spring broke out the month after I started—in December.

Q: Really January—but yes, at the end of December 2010.

YANG: In the following four or five years, there were many important events: the election protests in Russia; the Maidan demonstrations in Ukraine in 2014; the phenomenon of the "democratic recession" that scholars charted from 2005 onwards; the question "Was democracy delivering?"; and the authoritarian resurgences in Russia, China, Iran, and Venezuela, and those countries acting informally together and sharing bad practices.

There were also mass protest movements around the world—non-party, non-labor union-related mass protests—overthrowing a lot of dictatorships. And then the "liberation

technology" that came with it, using the early internet and social media tools to organize.

In addition, towards the end of the Obama administration, we faced challenges with migration in Central America, and the autocracy-related poverty and repression that were driving the migrations. And then, toward the end of our time in the Obama administration, the rise of populism in Europe and the U.S., and how that affected our work in support of democracy in developing countries.

So, this whole basket of regional and global issues was part of our efforts to demonstrate thought leadership and to support USAID missions in their work. Ultimately, it was about building the Center as a better source of technical support for the missions.

Two final priorities. One: atrocity prevention and conflict resolution—building DRG bridges to the atrocity-prevention and conflict-resolution fields. We were active members of Samantha Power's Atrocity Prevention Board at the National Security Council. And we worked with the Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations at State to bring a development perspective to those challenging issues.

Finally, one of my priorities—given my UN background and given that Sarah went to the UN after I occupied her DAA job—was to co-chair with Graham Teskey [Australian aid official; formerly World Bank, formerly UK DFAT] the Governance Network of the Development Assistance Committee [DAC], the same network that you and I participated in during the Clinton administration. It was one of the proudest things I did, because for all of George W. Bush's achievements, his administration was not that interested in multilateral groups like DAC. So, DAC colleagues were calling, when we came into office, for USAID to get re-involved. Co-chairing that committee for five years and developing the political economy and good governance work across international donors were very exciting for me.

Of course, we then supported the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals at the UN. Sarah was a key leader in providing U.S. support for the SDGs. We also supported Samantha Power's Open Government Partnership, which at the time became successful very quickly—and it's still going strong today. And we continued to support the Community of Democracies, which was flagging a bit by then not having a clear identity. But taken together, all those multilateral aspects of our work were important to the new DRG Center.

Q: Did you have a similar list of your disappointments, or is it much shorter?

YANG: Much shorter.

Q: Good that there weren't as many disappointments because that's a pretty impressive list of achievements.

YANG: No, those weren't achievements *per se*. Those were just priorities.

Q: I mean, a lot of them, you did carry forward. Maybe the flip side are some where it

didn't carry forward as much as you would have liked.

YANG: Let me list three achievements and three disappointments.

What I described earlier counts as an achievement. Our first achievement was to establish and consolidate the Center of Excellence. I think it was larger, it provided stronger support to missions, it demonstrated more rigorous thought leadership, it provided more innovation—and I think it was a good partner to the Policy Bureau, the regional bureaus, and the missions in ways that I had learned during the Atwood years.

The second achievement was a larger DRG budget at USAID. This was a sore spot (not for me, it's a point of pride) because it entailed a lot of conflict. Under Raj and Gayle Smith [USAID Administrator, 2015–2017], the DRG budget came under enormous pressure because the overall USAID budget was earmarked so extensively by the Hill, for health, education, and other sectors, and sub-earmarked for maternal and child health and other excellent programs. All these earmarks left very little discretionary funding for sectors like DRG.

So, early in my tenure—but especially once I was promoted to the Deputy Assistant Administrator position—I realized that the USAID budget was getting perilously low, and I alerted Raj and Gayle to that fact. What became conflictual was that, at some point, I advocated for the NSC's attention to the matter, and I sought the support of DRG-interested officials like Ambassador Power at USUN and Ben Rhodes [Deputy National Security Advisor, 2009–2017] at the NSC [National Security Council].

At the same time, I made it a point <u>not</u> to go to the Hill. I hated earmarks and was very loyal about wanting to avoid any earmarks—or even the perception that we in the DRG sector were interested in a DRG earmark. But I did speak candidly to leaders at USAID, and I said: "If you let the DRG budget go any lower, the NGOs will clamor further, the for-profits will clamor too, and the DRG-interested staffers on the Hill are going to slap us with an earmark. And I don't want that, so let's all work together."

Ultimately, Paul Grove and Tim Rieser did institute some type of DRG earmarks. So, it was bittersweet for me—I was proud of the DRG budget increase but didn't want that particular outcome. In retrospect, particularly now that I'm older, I ask myself: "At what cost do you fight bureaucratic battles to serve a parochial sectoral interest?" I have no regrets, but I was probably brash in my advocacy, as many people told me at the time. But the increase in the DRG budget was an achievement for the DRG sector.

Finally, as you noted, I was very proud of a third achievement—stronger multilateral collaboration, in all the ways I've mentioned.

The disappointments. First and foremost, even though we had done a lot of good work on building the learning team—trying to implement pilot projects on randomized control trials, semi-randomized control trials, and informal comparative studies on topics like "How does USAID or other donors intervene on democratic local governance in a federalizing system?"—I don't think we succeeded overall.

I found, at the end of those six years of my service and eight years of the Obama term at

USAID, that the evidence-based movement was sputtering. Maybe it was too hard to achieve in a large bureaucracy. There were too many obstacles, too many players. To do it well, you needed focused leadership from the DRG Center. You needed missions to participate. You needed academic consultants. You needed NGO or for-profit implementers to embed within their USAID programs learning questions and have academics support them on evidence gathering and data collection. Given the bureaucratic red tape, I found too many hurdles within each of these dimensions.

At USIP [United States Institute of Peace] a couple of years later, I implemented a learning agenda at a smaller organization. It was so much easier to do—but, of course, much less impactful, because USIP was a tiny agency compared to USAID.

Q: Just on that point—because I obviously have my own feelings about it—the way you just described it, with all those different points, even just listening, you can hear how the transaction costs associated with trying to do what you're talking about… and the reaction of folks in the field, or wherever, just saying, "Look, we have responsibilities in terms of policy requirements and operational requirements, and putting all these other things on top of it is just complicating our lives in a way that leaves us open to the types of criticisms that you hear from outsiders."

YANG: Yes, you raise good points. It cut both ways for me, because I would often go to the congressional Foreign Operations Subcommittees of the Appropriations Committees and sell the learning agenda as, "We're trying to figure out if this works or not." And they would say: "Yes, if your experiments can work, then that gives you good information. If it could work, it would be useful for appropriators."

But you're right—the transaction costs were huge. The question was: "How could you bottle Esther Duflo, at J-PAL [Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, MIT; Nobel Prize in Economics, 2019]?" I wanted to embed that Esther Duflo MIT enterprise into the USAID work. You can appreciate that, as a Mission Director, it was perhaps too utopian.

Q: I mean, that was always my concern, which I expressed when we did the National Academy study back in 2008—that the trade-offs are just so complicated. But anyway, I don't want to go off on that. As I heard you say it, I was reminding myself of the other side of the coin.

YANG: My second disappointment was in political economy analysis. I felt, in the end—this may be too harsh—but I felt that after all those years of your Tuesday Group, and you and I being the first USAID representatives with Norm Nicholson [USAID officer] to the DAC governance working group, and people really rolling up their sleeves to figure out what good political economy analysis was—from those years in the 1990s through 2016—I felt like we hadn't succeeded in getting USAID's DRG sector to adopt political economy analysis, especially in regard to cross-sectoral work.

When I left USAID in January 2017, I thought that political economy analysis was still paid mostly lip service. And so, I keep asking myself: "Why was it so hard?" Even though we had these great discussions at the OECD, Graham [Graham Teskey, Australian aid official] and I and our colleagues across donor agencies, I'm sure it was equally hard

for their agencies too—despite there being a vanguard of us hoping it could be different.

If I can proselytize a little bit, my disappointment with this issue was, in a way, emblematic of a bigger problem. I find, in the current self-critique of so-called neoliberalism and the globalization era generally, people are too quick to criticize only populist movements, too quick to focus only on the political aspects of the pushback against globalization—without trying to understand the economic failures of globalization in addition to its successes. As a DRG community specifically and the development community generally, we're still lacking a true political economy analysis that would help us programmatically. It's part of this larger blind spot, I think.

My third disappointment was about nuts-and-bolts interagency politics. I felt during the Obama administration, the NSC was inclusive and welcoming to USAID. We were active participants in the Atrocity Prevention Board and countless NSC meetings on regional topics. But in the end, I felt jealous. I would watch the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Tom Malinowski [Assistant Secretary, DRL, 2014–2017]—who I wrote speeches with during the Obama years—swagger into NSC meetings, plop himself down next to the senior NSC official chairing the meeting, and start taking off the gloves and speaking truth to power.

Whereas I felt, as a USAID DRG representative, I was always consigned to the kiddie table—and not out of self-selection, but because USAID was still seen as peripheral within the interagency. I can't tell you how many times the Administrator's office complained to me that the USAID regional bureaus reported that I tried, yet again, to play an independent, DRL-like role at NSC meetings. I did my best and tried to be diplomatic. But I think USAID's interagency role was limited because the DRG Center was never operationalized to be the DRL of USAID—in the way that Congress, I think, wanted DRL to be.

Q: Yeah, no—I mean, that's a great point. Bureaucratically, when you talk about the interagency, DRL was there as a principal, together with the State Department's Regional Bureaus. And USAID was there as a principal, but it was supposed to speak with one voice. When you came with multiple voices for USAID, people were like, "Wait a minute. You should speak with one voice, and we want to know who's speaking." And it wasn't like DRG had a separate voice the way DRL did.

Some of what you're saying is a great lead-in to where I want to end up—where we are now, and what it looks like to you for the future. But before we get to that, I'd like your reaction to some of the critiques that you and I heard regularly doing the work, both internally and externally. So if I could just go through a few of those, and then we'll turn to closing out by looking to the future.

The first is this whole issue that goes way back to the 1990s: the contractors versus grantees—the for-profits vs. the not-for-profits. Are we too reliant on the former at the expense of the latter? What are the relative considerations in terms of having an evidence-driven agenda versus allowing for more freedom to the implementing partners? And how did you think about it at the time, and how do you think about it now?

YANG: Yes, huge, important questions. On for-profits vs. non-profit implementers. At the time, like any good public servant, we tried to have good relations with both the for-profit community and the nonprofit community. To answer your question directly: I felt the nonprofit community—as you know—was much more politically organized and thus more powerful. Still, I don't think the non-profits' influence ultimately determined the shape of the DRG budget. The budget itself, at least the largest parts of it, as I recall (though I may be wrong fifteen years hence), was for the more technical subsectors: rule of law and local governance.

Those sub-sectors were dominated by contracts with the big for-profits like Chemonics and Checchi [Checchi and Company Consulting]. Those firms did that work well, closely coordinating with Missions, in very sensitive areas like legal reform, judicial reform, local government reform—where you do want contractual (rather than grantee) relationships and where there were huge budgets.

Overall, I felt there was equity in how the overall DRG budget was apportioned to contracts, which were meant to be more directive than cooperative agreements and grants. At the time, I was satisfied that there was a good division of labor between the for-profits and non-profits.

In terms of grants, for sectors like elections, political parties, and civil society, I did find convincing the non-profits' argument that the greatest contribution of those programs was bringing local actors—whether political party leaders or civil society leaders—into an international community and helping them learn best practices through a vast global network of practitioners. Building those relationships was as great a contribution as imparting the practical skills of political party building, election monitoring, or civil society advocacy. In that sense, I feel there was an appropriate comparative advantage for the U.S. NGO community in those political sub-sectors, including support for labor unions. I felt that to overly technicalize that more political work would have been based on a misunderstanding of those programs and would have misshaped those programs. By contrast, the more legal, technical governance work was more appropriate for the for-profits, given the technical expertise and experience they could bring to bear.

It may sound Pollyanna-ish, but I felt the division of labor back then was very good. Naturally, the two communities competed for funding and each always wanted more funding than they got, but I didn't feel there was something wrong with the allocation system.

Q: Let me ask you a related question, which is the critique that too much money gets kept in the United States—taken up by the big NGOs or contractors—and that USAID did not provide enough funds to local actors, whether they be NGOs, local companies, or even local or national governments. The critique was that too much went through international implementers, who obviously took off their own fees and jacked up the prices.

YANG: I did share in that critique—and I know all of us in the Obama administration did, led by Raj and Gayle [Smith], and then later USAID Administrator Mark Green in the first Trump administration. All of us wanted USAID to devote more resources to direct funding for local actors. Yes, I think the critique was valid.

In this sense, I didn't think it was helpful for the public affairs arm of USAID, in advocating for our budget, to say, “In fact, most of the money goes back into U.S. pockets anyway.” Like you, I witnessed so many underfunded local NGOs and host governments, and acknowledged that they could get only so much out of the vast trainings we offered. What they often most needed was funding—something that the multilaterals, particularly the World Bank (even though they didn’t promote democratic governance wholeheartedly) were more willing to provide.

Q: This is a question about the proliferation of subsectors within the DRG Center. Did it make things too diffuse—creating internal competition for funds among the subsectors? Or was that just the inevitable reality of the types of issues that had to be addressed within DRG? Did you ever feel like it was just ever-expanding and needed to be more consolidated in terms of bureaucratic organization?

YANG: Particularly as the budget dwindled—with so much non-DRG earmark funding—and then with the global democratic recession, I just felt it was becoming, in some ways, impossible to do what we were trying to do. We were expected to accomplish so much with so little funding, while still working across sprawling DRG subsectors. I think missions did as good a job as they could with their small discretionary funds, focusing on the key, strategic areas of DRG. But still, too often—perhaps for political reasons, meaning keeping implementers happy—funds were spread too thinly. The impact, as one could see, was usually too shallow.

Q: It wasn’t even implementation. It was more like advocacy groups in some ways—each with its own pet area of focus. We needed to keep them happy.

YANG: The proliferation was, in some ways, due to the intellectual development of the field. All those subsectors were important—you couldn’t just do elections and political parties. But in other ways, there wasn’t enough funding to warrant the subdivision into those many subsectors. It was a real dilemma.

Q: The last question along these lines is the one that you and I spent a lot of time on. It relates, broadly speaking—not the specifics—to how you respond to the critique that USAID and the U.S. government, by implementing democracy and governance programs, are interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign countries. This critique has been rebooted in different contexts over time. I’d love to hear what you were thinking at the time, and certainly any reflections you might have today.

YANG: I think I have more questions now than I did at the time. Back then, I thought this way: Our partner countries had signed on to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They signed on to any number of international legal agreements, and there were also bilateral agreements between USAID and these partner governments. Therefore, I felt that in most cases—even sensitive issues like support for opposition parties or civil society advocacy groups—our work was within the bounds of a legitimate bilateral relationship and in the spirit of the international covenants.

Of course, the thorny exceptions were in autocratic countries or when we were working without a resident USAID mission—where we were unwanted actors in those societies.

In retrospect, I have more misgivings, but probably not enough to stop me from supporting those actors in highly authoritarian countries that need our support.

What gave me, and continues to give me, doubt is wondering how I would feel if the roles were reversed. The classic counterexample was other countries sending election observers to the U.S., which I thought was a good thing. But would I feel the same way if the Russians or the Chinese were supporting U.S. civil society organizations or political parties they felt needed training or funding? Obviously, I would feel differently. That latter example, in particular, continues to give me pause.

Q: The issue also became a question of transparency. How much transparency do we owe ourselves—and do we owe our partners—when working in some of these more authoritarian contexts? I'd love to get your reflections on that.

YANG: I think we should be transparent as USAID, as a development agency. You can be transparent without compromising the identities of partners on the ground, because protecting them is paramount. Within those bounds of partner security, USAID should be transparent. I do remember, at the time, the Iran program was one of the most secretive.

Q: We also had that controversy around Cuba.

YANG: Yes.

Q: Yeah, it took up a lot of our time for a year or so. We developed a policy on it, and I think you and I were among the outliers—urging transparency—whereas others were more comfortable with saying, "Well, it's an authoritarian context."

YANG: I do remember that.

Q: Let's see—unless there's anything else you want to add about the Obama years, I'd like to close by focusing on where we are today, in 2025. Do you have any regrets, given how things have turned out? Are there things you think we could have—or should have—done differently? Or is this just part of the cycle you described: from Clinton to Bush to Obama to Trump to Biden? Is it one of those cycles, or were there missed opportunities that might have averted some of the realities we now face? And again, as you know, there has been a lot of criticism—especially from the right—of the democracy programs the U.S. government has been running.

YANG: My bottom line is that I continue to adhere to the founding spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I believe that, as a member of the international community, the United States has the right and responsibility to promote those values through both diplomacy and development assistance.

At the end of my career, though, I became skeptical of some nation-building interventions. I would absolutely support doubling down on democratic governance assistance and human rights assistance in the future, and of course for life-saving humanitarian assistance. But I would not favor unending nation-building exercises (like Iraq, even Afghanistan, and certainly Libya) in the wake of U.S. military intervention.

Particularly from what you saw more closely in the field—and what I observed from Washington—I think it is simply too hard to put societies back together after military intervention, unless, like Germany and Japan, they had some prior political experience with pluralist institutions. To do otherwise, I think, is kidding ourselves. If I were serving in a future administration, I would be cautious about anything resembling state-building or humanitarian interventions that required the toppling of a government by external force. But I would be fully supportive of anything short of that.

Q: David, what do you see as the alternative? One option is not to send in military forces to take out a government. But in situations where there is a vacuum—I'm thinking today, obviously, of Gaza—what do you see as the alternative? Other than some type of international intervention, whether you call it an interim government or something else, ultimately it has to lead to a state-building exercise so you can get out of there.

YANG: Yes, I would support a multilateral effort. What I took away from my career was that unilateral U.S. efforts—even under a veneer of multilateralism—were too fraught with challenges to succeed. In my view, multilateral support for post-conflict reconstruction (like in Gaza) is qualitatively different from a unilateral U.S. role in both warmaking and peacemaking.

Q: That's one of the ironies, obviously—the Bush administration did try to present an international veneer to its interventions, but they were basically U.S. initiatives. Any other thoughts as you look back on your time in government, particularly on the Democracy and Human Rights era? Or even as you think about rebuilding what's now been lost?

YANG: What I said earlier still holds here. If I were to serve in government again, I would want to promote liberalism—by which I mean human rights and democratic governance—but without the utopian economic underpinnings that once accompanied it. The idea that through the free movement of goods, services, finance, and people, everything will work out fine, leading to middle-class democracies and a world where all countries become Denmark—I would be much more careful about spinning that rosy narrative. I would be humbler about our responsibilities and avoid overselling the vision of a liberal international order, even though I continue to adhere to its basic DRG tenets.

USAID has an important role to play in such an order. But I think that now, in the rejection of USAID and the resurgence of isolationism, what we're seeing is a sad—though perhaps inevitable—revulsion against that grand package of liberal globalization. Now we know better. My hope is that USAID and the human rights work at the State Department can be rebuilt in the context of a humbler liberalism, a humbler globalism.

Q: This might be a great place to stop. I've appreciated going back through our time together, and I look forward to continuing these discussions—not only as we reflect on our past work, but also as we hopefully contribute in some way to the future.

YANG: Thanks, Larry, for this opportunity—and thanks for all your public service, which has been phenomenal. From the beginning of the Tuesday Group to now, you've

been a brilliant leader in our field.

End of interview