

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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RUTHERFORD POATS and JOHN BENNETT

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is February 2nd, 1990. This is an interview with John Bennett and Rutherford Poats concerning their time in Vietnam. I wonder who went to Vietnam first?

POATS: I was never stationed in Vietnam. I was the assistant administrator of AID in the Far East.

Q: I wonder if you could give me a little background on yourself and then how you got involved with Vietnam.

POATS: Well, Vietnam was the recipient of US military and economic aid from the earliest days of AID programs. At the time of the heightening of the insurgency in South Vietnam in the Eisenhower Administration, there was a sharp acceleration in the concern about Vietnam. During the Kennedy Administration, which took a posture of containment of communism on a global basis, the Viet Cong was seen as a global threat to the United States and the response was in response to that view of it.

The economic aid was increasingly pressed by political authorities and the defense department, to intensify efforts to support the Vietnamese government - then of Ngo Dinh Diem - with the view to strengthening his capacity to win the support of the people or to retain their allegiance against the pressures of the Viet Cong.

Beginning in 1962, there was a major increase in economic aid. My first direct involvement was January 3, 1963 when I went with the Administrator Dave Bell and the Assistant Administrator for the Far East Seymour Janow, to Saigon. We met with the government officials and our representatives there to discuss what would be a useful kind of increase.

Q: Could you let us know how you came into AID and what was your position at that time?

POATS: I came into AID at the request of Seymour Janow in December 1961 at the same time he did. It was just when AID was being created out of several agencies involved in foreign assistance. I agreed to come in for one year and in fact remained.

I had been an economic news reporter and I was bureau chief in Tokyo and traveled extensively. I was initially a special assistant, then program officer and so on and, at the time of this trip, was the program officer of the bureau.

Q: John, to complete the picture, could you tell us who you are and where you came from and if you would carry on the questioning.

BENNETT: I worked twenty-six years in the foreign service. I went to Saigon in February 1963 as the financial economist in the economic section of the embassy. Saying that, however, doesn't quite convey what was going on.

The economic section of the embassy was in the same building as AID and we worked very closely, not always cooperatively, over the years. I stayed in Vietnam through 1965 and then went back to Washington.

In Washington I was seconded to AID, first in the Far East Bureau and then in the Vietnam Bureau, when it was broken off of the Far East Bureau, until 1969. I went back to Saigon as the Deputy Director of the AID Mission in 1973. I became acting AID Director in February of 1975 and stayed until the last of the helicopters.

Q: Rud, when did you become assistant administrator?

POATS: May of 1964. Janow resigned in November 1963 and about the same time the deputy in that bureau, Jim Fowler, was sent off to language school preparatory to going to Columbia as mission chief. So I moved up from number three to number one in a few days.

I ran the Far East Bureau from then on -- that is from November 1963 until May 1967 when I was sworn in as Deputy Administrator of AID. I kept an eye on Vietnam after that but we split the Vietnam section off to form a separate bureau at the time I was promoted. Jim Grant came in as the chief of the Vietnam Bureau.

BENNETT: Let's go back to when you arrived in Saigon with Janow.

POATS: At that time the program was pretty conventional for politically motivated AID programs. It had a supporting assistance element -- I don't remember it being very large - - a number of conventional technical assistance institution building activities and a few capital projects. The intention was to provide much quicker impact on the political opinion. We searched for reasonable ways of doing this. We didn't have a lot of experience in these kinds of things. This was rather new to me and to AID. We had somewhat similar concerns at the same time in Laos and Thailand, where insurgencies had begun.

We developed ideas for quick impact AID programs in those three countries in parallel. I went on that same trip to Laos to talk with the people there about how they were responding to this problem.

The roof began to fall in upon the government. The scale of our involvement grew exponentially. AID became involved in support of CIA-led counter insurgency efforts and that was true in Laos. We were in fact financing the air lifts and the food and other non-lethal supplies to the forces opposing the Pathet Lao in the north. Similar programs developed in Vietnam.

BENNETT: I went there in February of 1963. In May we had the beginning of the mess in Hue where the Buddhists got pretty beaten up. Then we had the Buddhists monks burning themselves and the events of that summer.

I was delighted to be going to Vietnam. I was in Curacao at the time. I had very little preparation. My second question was "Where is it?" As soon as I got to Washington, however, I began hearing that this guy Diem hasn't got it. Then I became increasingly aware of the crossfire over those who wanted Diem and those who wanted him out.

How much of that splashed over on your side of things?

POATS: I recall as a newspaper man the efforts to generate press support for aid to Vietnam as early as 1959. So it was a controversial topic even then; but not a national one.

But you are right that we all went into this situation blindly. We had no notion of the depth of the quicksand we were walking into. We had no notion of what social engineering in that kind of culture meant. We were quite naive as to the motivations of the government officials we dealt with, shocked to see that they were not committed to

the national cause, weren't even loyal to the people who put them in office. The extent of the corruption was simply staggering. This we discovered quite early on.

Once you plunge into something like this with the kinds of rhetoric that Dean Rusk surrounded it with, it was impossible to do anything else but keep plugging to find a way to make the policy rational. A lot of people spent a lot of time doing just that. We gave it our best and were loyal to the cause.

There were very few who were ready to give it up inside the government. We were somewhat mesmerized by the repeated visit of high officials, like McNamara, and top State Department people. They were constantly finding the good signs and prospects. I must say that we never saw these signs and were pretty skeptical about these CORP's and rural operations.

BENNETT: I want to go back to that. Were you involved with that when it was first set up? I think Rufus Phillips first set that up.

POATS: He was quite new there and picked by Lansdale. Lansdale was in charge of the counter insurgency effort. A man of towering stature as far as all of us were concerned because he knew something about the country. That put him head and shoulders above everybody else.

Q: Did he really know something about Vietnam or about the Philippines?

POATS: Well yes. He transferred by analogy an awful lot. But we also had the British counterinsurgency specialist, Sir Robert Thompson, from Malaysia.

Anyway these were two people of considerable stature and those of us who were shoveling out the money were not prepared to debate with them.

BENNETT: The first question that was paramount was whether or not we would stay with Diem. The one that was never asked was, "Could we win." There was the assumption that if you changed people, you could. But that was an unexamined assumption.

POATS: The general assumption made at the time of the murder of Diem was that a new cast of characters was bound to be likely to win public support. That he had just simply worn out any chance of winning the hearts and minds of the people.

BENNETT: My feeling at the time was that we sure weren't going to win with what we had. Our mistake was that we continued to try for the next ten years with the next set.

POATS: William Trueheart, the DCM, was one of the few who expressed his skepticism in meetings to the extent that he was just at the point of being tossed out on his ear.

BENNETT: There was enormous skepticism, skepticism was understating it. The atmosphere was very poisonous. I can remember writing a very academic and uninteresting report on agricultural programs and the next thing I knew, I was summoned by Ambassador Frederick Notting. He wanted to go over it, almost word by word. At the time he said that he had all these people who were shooting at him back in Washington. He didn't want to give them something they could use against his policies. The facts were allowed to stand but a different spin was put into it.

POATS: There are two turning points that I would like to describe, and I may as well get right to them.

One was the set of meetings at a CIA safe house in Virginia at the time of the initial entry of the US troops. Harkins (the general in charge of MAC/V, the assistance command) General Richard Stillwell and a few others came back to brief the Washington establishment. Present were Alexis Johnson, Len Unger, deputy assistant secretary for the Far East, White House and CIA staff and me, representing AID. It was on what it would take to win, militarily. This was in the summer 1965, I believe.

The MAC/V team presented a plan that entailed putting in about 400,000 troops. That was quite a shocking number to all of us in Washington. Even so, they estimated it would take a four-year effort, which was also quite shocking. Doing the arithmetic, it was clear that we were talking about a big expansion of the federal budget. That kind of war effort also entailed a huge increase in military aid to the government of Vietnam. One could easily project a vast amount of economic aid as well.

The question then was how was this going to be presented to President Johnson for a decision. Those of us who thought this was an excessive amount of lives and money for that cause said that we wanted to be sure that the President was given the facts unvarnished. He could decide the politics of it in consultation with his economic and budget advisors and others. Unger said that Alexis Johnson would present it. I asked Chet Cooper of the White House if he would make sure it was done. Well I heard later that Johnson had presented it, not to the President, but to Rusk. Chet Cooper had not found a way to report to the President for reasons that I never quite understood. There was no indication from the White House economic or political staffs that the President was given this shocking projection; he only learned of the projected costs gradually. He got used to it in increments. MAC/V came in with a more modest immediate request of another 20,000 troops, I recall. But the long term forecast was the thing that would have alerted the President politically to what he was getting into. That was one thing that I observed. I felt later that I was derelict in not having somehow seen to it that the people around President Johnson who should have done something about it, did it.

The other turning point, in my view of the war, was the decision that in order to sustain public support of the South Vietnamese government's war effort we had to maintain price stability in the South, and that this should be done by supplying goods on the market in Saigon and the other cities to offset speculative and real shortfalls in supply. Because

many areas were interdicted and production was inhibited by the war effort, AID had to pump in everything under the sun including rice.

We largely ignored the damaging medium-term effect of those imports on the economy and on the people. We tried overly ambitiously to preclude price escalations. In much of the developing world, particularly in Latin America, it was commonplace to have hyperinflation. But we couldn't tolerate a high take of inflation in Vietnam. We just pumped in more goods.

Now putting in those goods was not just having its impact on production in Vietnam, but also creating a whole class of venal operators who got rich on import whole business. This produced very quickly investigative reports and congressional hearings of which I spent sometimes 10 days out of every month testifying.

Literally one time I was up there I think twelve days in one month. It just went on and on endlessly. Both the Senate and the House operations committees had hearings about corruption in Vietnam, and of course the corruption was the fault of the AID managers, who were supinely accepting the guidance of the political managers about how to fight a war.

BENNETT: That brings up a whole set of management problems. I remember one that always bothered me when I was there. We were carrying on two programs at the same time. One was the conventional AID program and the other was what was called rural operations, a program towards the hearts and minds of the peasants. One story illustrates the point. I think it was Matt Drysdale who was the chief agricultural officer. Any way, he came back from a field trip and said that they had been wandering about the country and came across a program we had started to introduce cocoa production. The farmers were really ticked off because they couldn't sell the stuff and eventually began to throw cocoa pods at this group.

It struck me that this is where we got ourselves into trouble. There are two parts to this. Many program elements didn't seem relevant, and didn't mesh with the other things we were doing. It was a very diffuse effort. Later on when we did the rice program to introduce high yield rice varieties, that seemed to work quite well.

Q: Let me ask a question. I have just been reading a critique of Vietnam policy. One point mentioned was the concept that "things aren't working here and so we took over." Certainly on the military side we pushed the army to one side which helped ruin whatever moral they had. Moving them to one side while the Americans fought. How about the AID side?

POATS: No, not on the AID side, at least not in conventional AID functions. Even our heavy financial support of the economy was done through the central bank and through the various technical ministries.

The area in which there is some ground for that accusation against AID is in that twilight area between the CIA and AID, the CORDs or rural development schemes. In those operations you had very eager provincial advisors who were appointed and worked for AID but were borrowed from the State Department or the CIA or from the military services.

BENNETT: Like Tony Lake and Diehard Holbrooke -- a whole bunch of them.

POATS: They were all eager to succeed in their provinces. Like the military counterparts, they pressed for more US action. Not all of them but that was a common tendency. At certain stages later in the war when you simply couldn't count on certain province chiefs to deliver, they would bring in US civil affairs troops. Or sometimes they would get the Vietnamese army to do work that really should have been done by the civil government.

Well, that was very hard to distinguish anyway at that point. Because at that point all the province chiefs were military. But I would say the strictly AID technical efforts, producing a better rice, developing rural credit or educational programs, even on a crash basis still had to run through what had to pass for civil government. Isn't that true?

BENNETT: I think so. In some cases when they did it, it was the CORD's guy. kicking their butts to get them moving.

Q: When I was there 1969 to 1970, we had a program dealing with bringing third country nationals in. We had trouble getting them documented. It ended up in my office, the consular office. We took over the documentation of this. There was tremendous erosion and moving in.

POATS: You mention third country nationals. We had a lot of them, maybe 2,000 Filipino medical workers. They were literally performing medical services as Vietnamese.

BENNETT: I remember Vietnamese that I knew began talking to me in late 1964 about how we were taking over. They argued that every American military guy we brought in, two Vietnamese would simply quit making any effort. The total effort would go down. I can remember coming back to Washington, in '65, and arguing that by taking over the war we had, had this effect, so that it was going to be very difficult to win. In fact I really felt that we probably wouldn't. But I never really understood how much they were talking about in terms of level of American commitment as early as '64 and '65. We, in Saigon at my level, were thinking of tens of thousands, not hundreds of thousands.

The senior U.S. General, William Westmoreland was a litmus test of this. When he first came in '64, he traveled around a lot, visiting Vietnamese units, and then all of a sudden he just stopped paying any attention to them at all. This was anecdotal, an impression that I got. But it bothered me then and certainly got across to the Vietnamese.

Ken Kugel's (in AID's Vietnam Bureau) response was "Well, we've got so much fire power, we'll blow 'em out of the water, blow 'em out of existence."

POATS: Of course, it was very hard to argue against that at the time. After all, we'd won some wars before. Nobody could understand how that rag tag bunch could resist the might of the US army which was rolling up this little peninsula.

BENNETT: John Arthur who had been a colonel but was working in AID, thought the hamlet program might work. The idea was to create a local hamlet government with a hamlet militia which when attacked could be supported by the army. That second step never happened. We never got that kind of quick reaction force, even when the Americans arrived. We were never able to take something and hold it.

POATS: All of those schemes, strategic hamlet scheme, all created disillusionments, where promises were made that simply could not be fulfilled. Security promises essentially.

Q: Did you see a problem where we made promises? Is there a problem that when we get involved with something we're not very familiar with, we tend to exaggerate what we can do and we bring people in and there is a lot of movement but not much gets accomplished?

POATS: External efforts are useful when they support strong local leadership. When you don't have that, you don't have wise leadership or counsel there, nothing makes any sense. We kept building on quicksand. We never had a government composed both of technicians and political leaders in Vietnam that one could count upon to make the right decisions which we could then simply support. We were always pushing our own ideas and they would either grudgingly go along or enthusiastically go along but almost never initiate. That was my impression. I think that was true of almost everything except in the days of Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who did indeed have some ideas. A very determined man, but he went down with Diem.

BENNETT: I often sensed that we were trying to do too many different things at any given point. Trying to do land reform, promote new crops, like cocoa, etc. There were just so many things going on. Even when I got there as the Deputy Director of the AID mission in 1973, it seemed to me that we were still trying too many darn things

POATS: Otto Passman (Congressman) used to say there's not a project invented anywhere in the world that you aren't trying in Vietnam.

BENNETT: How did you feel about that?

POATS: It's true. And this in a country that had very little administrative capacity.

BENNETT: Why didn't we focus it a little more?

POATS: Usually these things are out of some kind of parochial enthusiasm. Everybody was there to try and win the war in his way and everybody thought the universe centered on his thing. We're going to win the war through land reform; we're going to win it with health, you're going to win it with education; win it with political action in the countryside. Everybody had the solution. And who is to say that one of these solutions might not have a certain degree of verisimilitude. So try it out. Money was no object. But what we didn't take into account was the real resource constraint was acute. The main constraint was people.

BENNETT: On the Vietnamese side you mean?

Q: Until what point were you directly involved?

POATS: Directly involved until 1967 and then I turned the Vietnam Bureau over to Jim Grant and I became the Deputy Administrator and then quickly got busy with other things.

Q: Towards the end, were you getting reflections of disillusionment or was hope springing eternal with each new thing up to '75. How about towards the end and the concern of getting our people out of there?

POATS: Well, I wasn't involved at the end. I can't speak with any confidence about my memory past 1967-1968. I receded from the story. Certainly before that, no doubt about it, hope was springing eternal.

When Nixon came in, there was a thorough reappraisal by Kissinger and the whole crew here. I stayed on for a year after that as Deputy Administrator and Acting Administrator for four months before John Hannah took over. Certainly the tone in the State Department and White House was 'let's find a way to end this thing but not end it in humiliation, not end it in any way that would give encouragement to a repetition elsewhere.' There was not a lot of public pressure on the Nixon Administration the first year to end it quickly, although the American people were certainly tired and illusions were fading by 1969.

BENNETT: That was one of the things that really shook me. With Tet in 1968, the immediate reaction on the American side was really one of despair. Both Westy (General Westmoreland) and Don McDonald (the AID Mission Director), when he came back, were really shaken.

POATS: I was really baffled by the reaction of the press. I couldn't understand it. I think those of us close to Vietnam didn't understand the strange American response to Tet.

BENNETT: A lot of your problem, as Deputy Administrator, was trying to keep your Congressional support at some level of public acceptance. That had to be a running battle from sometime in 1964 on.

POATS: Yes, for a long time it was possible to use the old reliable of fanatical communist forces seeking to impose dominion over a part of the free world. That began to become tattered as government after government, corruption story after corruption story demonstrated that we weren't making it.

It was difficult to criticize the military and the people who were giving their lives in Vietnam but it wasn't at all difficult to criticize the people throwing away money. I got awfully tired defending that side of the war effort. Secretary Rusk had to take an awful lot of this, of course, and I had to go up with him and slip him notes.

Q: What was your evaluation of Rusk?

POATS: A splendid man who had a single mind on the issue of containment, and who saw, despite his expertise in the Far East (after all he was assistant secretary for the Far East before) the challenge in the jungles exactly as he would see it in Berlin. It was all part of the global contest with the Soviet monolith. He was behind his time in that.

BENNETT: I don't know, I think that was fairly widely shared throughout the U.S. Government.

POATS: He did not provide sensitive leadership in this issue. After all he was in his office eight years. I think that was a mistake. I think had there been a change in leadership in the State Department during that period, Johnson might have been led in a different direction.

But Rusk and Mac Bundy were so of a mind on this issue, once Bundy had been out there and gotten bloodied himself. You know he was up at Pleiku when they mortared it.

BENNETT: I remember that. It led to my family and all the other families being taken out, and greatly changed the character of the U.S. involvement -- it became much more military.

POATS: Anyway there was too much of a cohesion of thought there between Rusk and Bundy and of course Walter Rostow who was also an activist. So Johnson was not given many options.

BENNETT: Of course the next one was Bob Komer. At any level, we generally thought he never told Johnson the truth on those issues at all.

POATS: Bob, like McNamara, could always see victory just around the corner.

Q: Mr. Poats has left and I am continuing the interview with John Bennett.

Give us once again your periods of time in or dealing with Vietnam.

BENNETT: The first time I was out there was from February '63 to June of '65. In that period I was an economic officer in the embassy. After Lodge came, they made me economic counselor, which was unusual because I was much too low ranked for that. But I think it was a matter that I got along well with some of Lodge's staff. I stayed in that job until some time in 1965 when Roy Wehrle became the senior economic person and Jim Killen became the new AID Director and reorganized the whole mission.

I left Saigon in June of '65. My family had already gone in January. I went back to Washington and began working in the Asia Bureau, spending half my time worrying about the economic programs in Vietnam and then I switched over to the Vietnam Bureau full time. In those four years, I was actually spending two to three months a year in Vietnam on TDY's doing whatever there had to be done.

One of my discoveries from this period was that communications between Saigon and Washington broke down very quickly. I would go out and get my viewpoints adjusted, so I could see what they were worrying about. Then I'd come back and in a month, it would all get away from me again. It would all be different. We would be fighting about things that we shouldn't have been fighting about. So then one of them would have to come back to Washington, and we would get it squared away again.

We had a series of running issues in this period. The first one obviously was who should succeed Diem, and the kinds of sets of programs that we were going to carry on with them. There were tremendous bureaucratic rivalries.

Q: This is in the embassy?

BENNETT: I should say the U.S. mission. For example you had MAC/V, and the military attachés. Lodge got rid of the attachés because they became a pain in the neck for the military. They began a fight over the evaluation of what was happening. That was proving to be very disruptive.

The military got to be so large in Vietnam, too, that it became overwhelming. I can remember in '64 I was one of several embassy officers that had to go over for a MAC/V meeting. The first thing was the senior general didn't show up for two hours, so we all sat around and waited. The room finally ended up with thirteen generals, six colonels, and a couple of captains to carry the bags for the others, and us civilians. It was a joke.

Q: What was the atmosphere in the mission before Diem was overthrown?

BENNETT: In February when I got there, people were questioning what was happening. Ap Bac had occurred in the fall just before that, and that raised, at least in the press, a serious question about the military effort that the Vietnamese were making and whether our military aid was being effective. And whether all the other programs we had were being effective.

We had provincial representatives all over the country and many of them were reporting that things were going to hell. Others were saying that everything was fine. We ended up fighting ourselves about the correct evaluation and the appropriate set of actions. Pretty soon we had real dirty rivalry going on. Just take the fact that Nolting felt he was systematically undermined back in Washington. And take General Harkins -- I heard him tell stories that we knew weren't true to the ambassador. I don't know how you handle that. He obviously felt very strongly committed to whatever he was saying.

There were lots of other rivalries. I mentioned the two AID programs -- we had the provincial program and the conventional program, and there was a lot of rivalry there. There was a feeling on the part of the provincial reps that the other guys were not cooperating and providing full support. On the other hand, the agriculturalists felt the provincial reps didn't understand how important their professional standards were. You had real disagreements over that. It became a pretty poisonous atmosphere. .

Q: How did you as an economic officer fit into this?

BENNETT: The economic questions became submerged in the larger political and security issues. And I think that was right. Of course you had that running concern throughout -- the question of which objective had priority. And that gave some of the AID people, who were let's say professional agriculturalists, real problems. They didn't want to see it done wrong. That led them into conflict with the other guys, who said "get the goodies out there." Get the Vietnamese to do their thing, to do it right.

Q: What was the reaction to the overthrow of Diem and his assassination?

BENNETT: Leading up to his overthrow, I was asked to look into what things could be stopped which would put pressure on the Vietnamese government, on Diem, to change his behavior. We worked on that. It's not so easy to turn off an aid program. The stuff is in the ships, it becomes expensive, what do you do with it? That sort of thing. In the end it became a strong psychological element that the US had withdrawn its support of Diem.

Now the overthrow. I can go through it day by day but the final day came as a complete surprise to me. I had people in for lunch and suddenly we heard machine guns, small arms firing and bombing outside. We sent everybody home. We hunkered down for a long night of artillery firing. It was pretty scary. I was a warden and I had a radio and was in radio-communication with the embassy and then I was able to talk to my neighbors and tell them what to do. I didn't know that Diem had been killed until sometime in the morning. We all stayed home. We were under house arrest so to speak. It was too dangerous to go out on the street.

The fact that Diem was killed, that came as a shock to many of us. Even though we didn't like him, none of us knew him personally, but we didn't like what was going on. We wanted him out of office. But his death was a shock.

Then there was tremendous optimism about what Big Minh was going to be able to do. Then he gets put out in a coup a month later in December. I can remember going with Lodge and some other embassy officers to call on Nguyen Khanh, the next leader. We were going to be his cadre in the president's office. We had one meeting with him and that was the end of it.

This was the beginning of two years of rotating governments and totally ineffective communications between the Americans and the Vietnamese. This is our reason why we ultimately felt we had to take over the military effort and everything else.

Q: Was this discouraging to you?

BENNETT: Oh, yeah. I felt totally discouraged. '63 was a grim year. After Diem fell, there was a lot of optimism for about a month. Then the military situation became clear, and we had lost a lot of ground in the countryside and then we began the succession of turnovers in the Vietnamese government. It produced a high level of paralysis.

Q: Were you catching the field reports from people you knew?

BENNETT: The field reporting even before Diem, was quite good. There was plenty of evidence that things were not going well and that the people who were saying everything was all right were wrong. It was anecdotal evidence about a particular province, a particular village and particular district. The point was not that there was one report but that there was an overwhelming amount of information indicating things were not going well.

Q: Did you ever sit in on meetings with Lodge and any of the others? When these things came up, how were they handled?

BENNETT: As a matter of fact, we had weekly meetings, called the mission intelligence support committee or something like that. We had people from the military, from AID, people from the embassy, and I sat in on them. We produced a weekly report. I was astonished always at the frankness with which many of these guys from the military, who publicly were very optimistic, how frank and how pessimistic much of the reporting was.

Q: Isn't it enervating being double-faced. Having to report optimistically on something on which you're getting very pessimistic reports.

BENNETT: You become triple-faced. There is a public face. Government can't afford to lie to the public and I think we were doing it. I didn't have to, but as an institution we were doing it. Then what we sent back to Washington was often couched in terms that would show a particular agency in a good light. The military reporting was much more optimistic than what I was hearing from the intelligence officers themselves. Then there were a bunch of people cast as a critical minority in the system who were trying to get a change in policy. They felt that the classified official reporting back to Washington was much too optimistic and had to be changed.

Q: How about the press?

BENNETT: I think it played two roles in Vietnam. When I first got there, I felt the press was doing a great service as it was reporting what we were hearing from the “subversives” in the mission. It put pressure on Washington to do something. Unfortunately it ended up that we took over the war instead of insisting on a higher level of performance from the Vietnamese. Later on, when I went back in ‘73, I felt that the press was still carrying on the same war with the U.S. government, essentially arguing that the situation was much worse than it was and that we were just a bunch of stumblebums. Probably my perception changed in part because I was being criticized, but to some degree it was true. I had the feeling that some of the reporters were really trying to get their Pulitzer by carrying on in the David Halberstam and Malcolm Browne tradition. The fact remains that the U.S. government told stories to itself and to the congress and the public from the very beginning. We should have told it like it was, warts and all.

Q: When you left the first time in ‘65, what did you feel about what was going to happen?

BENNETT: Just days before I went, another turnover occurred in the government. While I knew the new guy, I wasn’t very optimistic. Boy, was I glad to get out of there. I went to Hong Kong and slept for twenty-four hours.

Q: When you got back you were dealing with the economic side of it weren’t you?

BENNETT: Yes.

Q: Was there any concern, I was there in ‘60 and I was told there was a reason but I never really understood it for all the Hondas, and the fact that the PX was loaded with tape recorders and I saw the Thai troops march in and buy things. I had been a soldier in the Korean War and you were lucky if you got displays of prophylactics. That was about all they sold in the PX. Then to see this display of wealth was disturbing in a time of war.

BENNETT: It was a strange war. The period that I was commuting from Washington, ‘65 to ‘69, the PX system had really gotten large. We had convoys going three miles from downtown Saigon to the PX and they would rip off half of the convoy. The trucks would simply disappear. Stuff got stolen off the docks, stuff got systematically stolen out of the PX itself. They had an inventory system in which they counted what they put onto the shelves. We didn’t know what was sold. We were never able to do anything about it. The military somewhere outside of Vietnam ran the PX system. The commander of Vietnam had no control over it.

Q: It was all part of a whole. Was this a good or bad idea?

BENNETT: Well, they thought it was a good idea because you were providing the soldiers with the amenities. What you were really doing was providing amenities to the

staffers. You weren't really providing them to the soldiers roaming around the mountains and the woods and being shot at. They had access to them occasionally but not often.

The great harm it did was to create an enormous black-market, which involved a lot of our soldiers, it involved the Koreans, the Thais, the Vietnamese. It was part of the whole process of corruption that went on. You can take some corruption but the level of it there was just gross.

Q: Was this a deliberate policy?

BENNETT: No, some people thought it was irrelevant, the others weren't able to stop it.

Q: I had heard the theory that it was designed to sop up excess currency, to prevent inflation.

BENNETT: That argument was made, but it didn't really sop it up. You paid for your prostitutes, your female companionship, with goods that you bought with dollars. In that sense you were supplying local demand, but ..

Q: Let's go to when you came back. When was that?

BENNETT: Summer of '73.

Q: What was the situation then? How did you feel?

BENNETT: We'd had the truce. The North had withdrawn some of its troops, and we had withdrawn all of ours except the advisors. Pentagon east still stood, but it was a shell and we were depending much more heavily on the AID program.

I can remember that when I got off of the plane, I went directly to a meeting with the Minister of Finance at his home. They were about to impose a value added tax. Everybody took this very seriously. It was an attempt by the Vietnamese government, with U.S. advice and support, to increase the tax take in order to finance more of the war themselves. To get back some of the vast amount of AID that had been provided all of those years.

I was working hard from then on, right up until the end. It seemed for at least a year things were going reasonably well. Vietnamese seemed to be doing some of the things that had to be done. It was hard but it was working. But then the North stepped up the military pressure. And it got worse and worse. There is a province up on the Cambodian border, Phuoc Long I think. When that capital there fell, that was the beginning of the end -- it was the fall of '74. When some more fell, we knew things were going to hell.

Q: Who was the ambassador then?

BENNETT: Graham Martin

Q: Could you describe him and his method of operation?

BENNETT: Graham is “something else.” In some ways he was one of the most unpleasant people I’ve ever met. I can remember him taking the skin off the MAC/V commander in a mission council meeting. He seemed to take pleasure in it. I got increasingly angry and unhappy with him. A public display of his ability to be superior. It was totally uncalled for.

On the other hand, he hung on when I think not many people would have done so. He fought very hard to get public support. He really spent a lot of time with congressional visitors. I can remember him handling Bella Abzug beautifully. He was very smooth at it. He didn’t change her mind but he also made it harder for her to push her agenda.

We lost public support particularly with the newspapers back in the U.S. We lost it with what he thought was halfhearted support from Kissinger. We lost it really in the Congress.

Would a higher level of aid have made any difference? The answer is probably not. But on the other hand, those of us who were out there felt it was worth making the effort because without extra money, it was certainly not going to work. Like Dickens’ Mr. Micawber, we thought something would turn up. I

Q: What was your impression of the new Vietnamese government?

BENNETT: Well, it was a new generation. When I first went there, the Vietnamese all spoke French. When I got back they all spoke English. Many of them had had some American training. There was a much higher level of competence, but maybe this was because we were inside more, we knew what was going on. At least I knew better what was going on.

The real problem was morale on the Vietnamese side. They stuck with it. The ones I worked with, ministers and the next level down stuck with it for a long time. It was only around New Year’s of ‘75 that they began to lose hope.

We used to worry about what was happening at the next level of the Vietnamese administration. The working level. I suspect that it had begun to deteriorate badly much earlier. They were still not very effective.

Q: What sort of reports were you getting from the consulates we had put there?

BENNETT: Again, it was a continuation of the old reporting system. I spent a lot of time traveling, talking to the AID people in each of the provinces, making sure that some of the things we were getting criticized for back in Washington like the care of refugees, were working reasonably well. As a matter of fact, my reaction was that they were working reasonably well. But there were some interesting differences in the reporting.

Some of the consulates were much more optimistic than others. I guess that reflected the level of military activity in their particular regions. I don't think we were under any great illusions but it still seemed that we should give it one more try.

Q: How did the last days play out for you? I'm talking both on your job as far as AID and all that. One is just personal getting out but the other when you saw the effort no longer really made much sense.

BENNETT: Phuoc Long, Quang Tri, and Pleiku fell. Then Hue and Da Nang. We were suddenly faced with an enormous problem of getting food to those refugees, to the military and civilians in great columns coming down the roads. We were flying helicopters up there and dropping bread. Officers came south on ships and were wanting to get off at Vung Tau and walk up to Saigon.

The Vietnamese government didn't want them in the capital for fear of a revolt. So we put them on an island, Phu Quoc off the West Coast. There was nothing there, so we had to fly in pipe, had to drill wells for water, and had to get food and shelter down there. In some cases we had boats, not docked, but sitting in the water for days. They had been taken over by the soldiers on board. The soldiers were refusing to surrender their guns. Some feared court-martial for desertion; others had robbed, raped, and killed civilian refugees on the boats. We were literally unable to give them water or food until they handed over their guns.

Q: By the time Da Nang fell didn't you feel

BENNETT: I didn't know about the big picture. I just had a job to do. My job was to see that the refugees were cared for and that unneeded U.S. and Vietnamese employees got out of the country. There was a guy named Cliff Frink who was absolutely vital in continuing to supply Cambodia. We went through a series of shenanigans. We would hire tug captains at high wages to pull barges up the Mekong with rice for Cambodia. The North Vietnamese began shooting at them. So we put other barges loaded with garbage or cotton bales to protect the tug and barges with the rice. That worked for a couple of weeks. Then they found ways to sink the barges and that cut it off. Arranging this was a daily problem for weeks.

Q: So you weren't looking at the big picture at all.

BENNETT: No. There was no point looking at the big picture. We were just playing out the hand. The cards had already been dealt and all we could hope for was a slip by the other side. I was beginning the process of getting my people out of Vietnam, thinning down the ranks, trying to be sure that their effects got shipped. I didn't know how long I was going to stay until noon of the last day. My wife went at about noon that day. But we weren't sure that we were all going to leave. Martin thought that we might make some sort of deal where we could keep a small embassy in Saigon. I didn't want to make a judgment on this. I would probably have stayed if that had happened. That went with my job -- I was the acting AID Director the last three months.

Q: This was not just a holding operation. You didn't know whether the thing would be continuing or else there might be a stand. In retrospect it all seems so clean but when you are in it... Martin has been faulted so much for hanging on much longer than he should have.

BENNETT: My reaction to that is that if we had pulled out any earlier, we would have had an incredible riot in Saigon -- a total breakdown in authority. As it is, I don't know whether Ambassador Martin foresaw it happening the way it did or not. The North Vietnamese divisions had surrounded the city but weren't in it. They bombed the airport late Monday afternoon. We had been taking out masses of people for weeks. Flying them out to the Philippines or wherever we could deposit them. I had been getting people out. The AID mission even chartered a couple of aircraft to get our people out and anybody else who needed a lift.

Q: How about the Vietnamese staff?

BENNETT: Well, we had been taking them out as well. The problem for the Vietnamese staff was that many of them had family who couldn't go. I remember one woman who was preparing to go. Her husband just took off and left her. She decided that she had to stay in order to take care of her husband's sick sister. A lot of the people who would have been eligible to go couldn't.

Q: A decision had been made which had been agreed upon by the ambassador and all that Vietnamese associated with the Americans should get out.

BENNETT: Yes, It wasn't easy though. For example, we took great care that they had enough money, in dollars. We would put them on buses and take them out to Tan Son Nhut, the airport. Then we found the guards at the gate would steal all their money. So we took the money out separately in an American car.

Q: When you're making that decision to do that, that means it's over; doesn't it in a way? Evacuating local employees. The ambassador had gone along with that. It doesn't sound in a way that there were any illusions.

BENNETT: The question is whether or not he should have done it sooner. If we had done it sooner my personal conviction is that we would have gotten fewer out. We certainly would have gotten different people out. Although, I think more people got out the way we did it, because we had martial law we could move around the city. We got all of our Americans out. And a whale of a lot of Vietnamese as well. The USIA director got heavily criticized for not getting his Vietnamese employees out. That's what I had spent weeks doing. Making sure that each days group got out. There wasn't a hell of a lot else to do. The one thing I didn't do was burn a whole lot of low level classified material in the AID building. We somehow never got told when to do it, until it was too late.

Q: How did you go out?

BENNETT: On Monday afternoon they bombed the airport. I was running a fever and had come home and sat down. I was taking an aspirin and a little libation. The next thing I knew all hell broke loose. Ten minutes of unremitting gunfire. Everybody in the city thought that this was it. My reaction was, hey, they're in the city and here we go. It turned out not to be the case. The soldiers panicked and were firing in the air.

What really worried me was my wife who was driving back from the airport when the bombing occurred. She had just put some kids who had been left by the American parent, married to a Vietnamese, with Vietnamese relatives. She'd taken them out and put them on an airplane. She was really concerned that they had been killed, but it didn't happen.

The next thing I knew, I got this phone call to come to a meeting at midnight at the embassy. I said I'm not going, I'm sick. Then I thought better of it and so I called up Martin. I talked to him for an hour about all things that had happened that day. He was in a reflective mood. He'd called the meeting, but he wasn't going to be there himself. But by that time I was fired up, so I went.

We talked about whom we were going to take out the next day. Then I went home to bed. At about 2:30 AM the Vietnamese artillery started shelling the city. You don't sleep when that's going on. The next thing I know, at 5:30 in the morning, I get a call from the embassy. "Meeting in the ambassador's office." So down I go with my wife and I never went back.

I spent that day burning Embassy files, and trying to round up my AID people. At first not all of them had to go, so I had to identify which ones would and get them picked up. Then we learned all of them had to go so then I had to contact the rest by telephone and get them picked up. We had a number of small helicopters destroyed by the artillery the night before. They were the kind that could land on roofs, so their loss meant we had to move people around the city in cars and buses. We had a ship but we couldn't get to it because North Vietnamese troops were between us and the ship. So that didn't work out. But we put others on a barge and towed it out to sea with a tug.

There was one crisis after another. I can tell you that at one point I was so tired, I didn't think I was going to make it. But we kept soldiering on. At eight PM I was told to go and so I went upstairs to get on the helicopter. The Marine captain who was in charge was standing there cursing and saying, "Where the hell are all these people. We're waiting up here and they're down stairs having a party." I decided that he might be right and went downstairs. People were milling around, doing nothing. I began telling them to go upstairs and get on the helicopters. Well I was effective enough that by the time I'd made it to the ground floor there was a line running all the way to the roof. I had to get at the end of it. But I got out at midnight.

Q: Did you go out to a carrier?

BENNETT: To a helicopter carrier. My wife was on another ship, the Denver, a landing ship. I was so tired. When we got on we had to stand in line and register and then they searched us for weapons and had us turn in government property -- e.g., some people had brought electric typewriters. I got bunked with a young lieutenant who was on duty at the time. It was right underneath the flight deck. Every time a plane landed, it hit hard -- boy that really wakes you up. A couple of days later I got on a copter and joined my wife.

Q: What was the atmosphere?

BENNETT: A whole lot of backbiting and excuses. Frank Snepp, who wrote Decent Interval, for example was seething with anger and would barely talk. As far as I could tell, because we had left some people we shouldn't have. The confusion, and the lack of direction and clear lines of responsibility, were part of the problem still. I felt I did all right. I got all my people out. That was my responsibility. Nobody was telling me to do it. I just went ahead and did it. I even got four of them over the wall and into the embassy at seven or eight in the evening. By pure fluke. I had been working in Joe Bennett's (the Political Counselor) office, at the switchboard and saw the light for his number and took the call. They had been waiting for a bus all day at the AID Headquarters. I told them if they could get to the Embassy in fifteen minutes we could get them in. The Embassy was surrounded by crowds of Vietnamese who wanted to get out on the helicopters, so we had to figure out a way to identify them. I told them to take the cover off the embassy phone book and wave it. And we got them over. An American on top had to identify them and lean down and pull them up. ·

Q: Those who didn't get everybody out, what was the problem?

BENNETT: The people in the Korean Embassy stayed there till it was too late and they couldn't move. We could have gotten them out earlier through the American embassy. There were other people who worked for the CIA whose lives were in real danger. They should have been picked up and taken out, but apparently, they all weren't.

Q: You said it was your decision. Was anybody telling you?

BENNETT: The AID Mission was told how many could go out on a particular day. I would simply make sure to fill my quota.

Q: Were you and others jumping the gun?

BENNETT: There is a certain degree of lack of control over this. A lot of Americans had friends whom they helped get out. These were not officials. If you could get them out to the airport, the planes would take them. This did produce trouble. A friend of mine picked up an ex-minister and took him out to Tan Son Nhut, and dumped him on the street. The Vietnamese police picked him up. The next thing I knew Graham Martin was calling. I had to pick up the Vietnamese after he got out of jail. He was really shaking. He was white. We got him out. There was a lot of freelancing. We had a lot of people coming back in. Mission employees who'd been there in past years, came back to get

their friends out. Then we had to get those people out again. There was a lack of control over what was happening.

Q: It's sort of a discouraging story.

BENNETT: You win some, you lose some. I wouldn't have missed doing it, but I sure wouldn't want to do it again. There are a lot of lessons to be learned. I wonder if we have.

Q: Well, thank you very much John.

End of interview