 Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University initiating an Oral History interview with John Sylvester, Jr. of the Foreign Service. Today’s date is the nineteenth of July 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock and I’m speaking with John by telephone. He is in North Carolina. Good morning, John.

John Sylvester: Good morning.

LC: I wonder if we could just begin with some basic biographical data. First, it would be helpful if we had on the record where you were born and when.

JS: I was born in Newport, Rhode Island. My father was a naval officer from a Navy family and he was stationed there at that time. I was born August 17, 1930.

LC: What about your mother, first, what was her maiden name?

JS: She was Ruth Yarnell. She was the daughter of Adm. Harry E. Yarnell, who was the Commander-in-Chief of the Asiatic Fleet from 1936 to ’39. My mother was a graduate of Vassar, a very attractive, a very bright woman.

LC: Tell me a little bit about her family if you will. First of all, obviously her father was an accomplished naval officer, but where was the family from and was he also from back into earlier generations, a military family?

JS: Well, we have a family history of the Far East, but oddly, it goes up the maternal channel. I have four admirals in direct ascendancy, but each [of my] forefathers married captain’s daughters and thereafter became admirals.

LC: I see.
JS: My great grandfather, my great, great grandfather was first in East Asia in 1867, I think, right after the Civil War, when he had duty on a one of our ships based out of China.

LC: His name would’ve been—?

JS: Um, that was Adm. [Edward] Simpson. His son-in-law was Adm. Charles Thomas and then his son-in-law was my grandfather, Adm. Harry Yarnell, who was a farm boy from Iowa who went to the Naval Academy almost by accident when he met a friend who was going down to take the exam for the Naval Academy. My grandfather went along and then had a career of fifty years in the Navy.

LC: This is obviously an extraordinary lineage John. Can you remember or have you been told or studied anything additional about Admiral Simpson in the 1860s? Did he go to Japan for example?

JS: I think he did. I’m not dead sure. He was a graduate of the first class of the Naval Academy. He was strongly interested in engineering and had made a tour of all the great nations of Europe on behalf of the Navy to see what their progress was in engineering. His son-in-law, Admiral Thomas, was out there during the Boxer Rebellion and so was my grandfather, as a much more junior officer. They were in Nagasaki and went over to the Vladivostok, were in China of course at that time.

LC: John, did you grow up hearing these stories and being aware of all this in addition, of course, to your father’s own achievements in the Navy?

JS: Yeah, very much so, Ms. Calkins. I was very close to my maternal grandmother and grandfather. When my father went off, came back from China in 1939, we were out there for three years. We lived in Newport, where he was with the Naval Torpedo Station at that time. Then he went off to the war in the South Pacific first on the *USS Columbia* as exec in the battles near Guadalcanal and later in the battles of Leyte Gulf. But my grandfather had retired from the Navy in ’39. He [was] call[ed] back during the war for some miscellaneous duties, helping the Chinese mission in Washington and serving with Admiral Kimmel’s defense staff and doing a very controversial, apparently landmark study on naval aviation during the war. But he was basically retired and lived down the street from us in Newport, Rhode Island, and his house had a wide assembly of Asian antiques.
LC: I’m sure.
JS: Based on all our families’ time in East Asia.
LC: I’m sure. What’s happened to the antiques?
JS: Well, both me and my brother are interested in them and we have quite a share of them.
LC: Oh, wonderful.
JS: With what we accumulated ourselves over the years.
LC: (Laughing) You have a house full then I imagine.
JS: All too much, all too much.
LC: (Laughing) What was your—your mother’s maiden name was Yarnell then.
JS: Yes, Ruth Yarnell.
LC: Okay. She attended Vassar. Do you know what time period or when she would’ve graduated?
JS: Yes, she graduated in ’28. She met my father during the last year at Vassar. He was very tall by that time, six-foot-four, very handsome man. Rather shy in some ways, but he’d been first in his class at the Naval Academy, was a brilliant scientist in his own right. They fell in love and married in ’29 and I came along in 1930.
LC: Now, what did your mother study at Vassar? I’m going to ask you about your father’s work in a moment.
JS: Well, I think she was just a general kind of liberal arts program, which a proper girl at that time took.
LC: Absolutely. Was she in sororities or any clubs that you might know about?
JS: She was in the Daisy Chain, which was considered the prettier, more popular girls at Vassar. (Laughing) I don’t think she was a first rate student, but she was a very bright woman.
LC: What was her mother like, do you know?
JS: Well, my grandmother was, who I loved dearly, was a highly prejudiced, highly opinionated, strong-willed woman.
LC: Really?
JS: Very conservative, very—but in her own right, she was a great grandmother.
LC: Now had she spent time in the Far East as well with all the family?
JS: Yeah. She’d been out as a young girl in Japan and China, Japan I guess, when her father was out there. Her mother and she traveled out at the turn of the century. I have gone through some of her letters and the photographs and so forth of that period. She was in Nagasaki for instance. She’d also had an unusual experience. Her father, Admiral Thomas, earlier in his career had been made captain of a coast survey ship, which was sent up to survey the waters of Alaska in the 1880s. He got special permission, then took his wife and daughter along on the ship. So she was up in Alaska. In fact, her father named an island after her, Emily Island.

LC: That’s extraordinary. (Laughing)
JS: Up to the inland waterway of—
LC: That’s quite incredible. You know, in the 1880s, there were just beginning to be organized scientific expeditions up into Alaska, both for ethnography purposes. There was an interest in the people living there, but, as you know it, also for sort of, more strategic purposes for the United States to map out its acquisition I guess.
JS: Yeah.
LC: That this trip sounds as if it might have been part of that latter mission.
JS: Yeah, I think it was.
LC: Do you know the name of the ship at all?
JS: Oh, gosh, I’ve got it somewhere, but I forget it offhand. [Coast survey steamer Patterson 1887-89]
LC: Okay, that’s fine. What a remarkable trip that must’ve been. John, let me ask you a little bit about your father. You mentioned that he was able to graduate first in his class at the Naval Academy, no small accomplishment, what year would that have been?
JS: 1926.
LC: Okay. Did he ever talk to you about the Academy?
JS: Not much. He was not a very talkative person, but I’ve gone through his scrapbooks and all the rest. I think he very much enjoyed it. He fitted in well with the climate of the academy. Besides doing well academically, he was captain of Navy crew and the crew did well in those years. So, I think he looked back on the experience with pride and enjoyment.
LC: You mentioned that he was something of a scientist. What interests did he have in that regard?

JS: Well, for instance, he always enjoyed mathematics and for the fun of it, did mathematical games with high calculus. He was too early for the computer revolution, but he had a Hewlett Packard little hand computer that was early, very early in the game and really enjoyed working with it in his final years.

LC: Now his retirement would’ve come when just so I can kind of look at that?

JS: Oh, gosh. I guess it was in 1960, the late ‘60s he retired. He was Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Logistics and was living in the second oldest house in Washington D.C., which was a farmhouse that was then incorporated into the naval gun factory in southeastern Washington.

LC: So is it actually in the naval yard area?

JS: Yeah, in the naval yard.

LC: Okay. He was a resident in the house. Was it owned by him?

JS: No. It was owned by the Navy of course.

LC: Okay. Okay.

JS: It was part of that establishment, but it was a charming old house right next to the Marine barracks on the parade ground there. I stayed with him over one of my home leaves from Japan and the Marine honor guard was out on the parade ground practicing their drills with the rifles and the marching.

LC: What an—now would he have yet been in office during the Vietnam Era, during the Vietnam buildup?

JS: Well, probably very early in the game, yes.

LC: Okay. So his retirement may have been then in the mid ‘60s at some point.

JS: Yeah, probably about ’64 I would guess you’d say.

LC: What, if you recall, John, additional postings did he have between the time that you’ve told us about in the ‘30s when you were a child and his last station there in D.C.?

JS: Well, he had been commander of the amphibious fleet in the Pacific, based out of San Diego. He earlier had been head of a project, to develop a nuclear depth charge, which was never used, but was tested. He had been Chief of Staff for the second
fleet out of Norfolk. Let’s see. When my mother died, he was sent up, given a special
assignment to the War College at Newport so he could be with her in her final days.

LC: Okay. So she had—did she have a progressive illness then?
JS: Yeah. She died of cancer when I was I guess sixteen, 1946.
LC: John, do you have siblings?
JS: I have one brother who was a graduate of the Naval Academy, a pilot, entered
the Foreign Service, is a China specialist, worked both in Taipei, Beijing in the Embassy,
finished as council general in Shanghai, ending just during the Tiananmen disturbances.
Also served in Europe and also served in Vietnam like myself.

LC: He went to the Academy, but obviously you did not.
JS: No, I had bad eyes. So I enlisted in the Army after graduating from college.
Went as a private in the infantry to Korea. I had a bit of combat experience at the very
tail end of the war in east central Korea.

LC: Well, John, let me ask you first about your decision to go to Williams. How
did that come about?
JS: Well, I was a graduate of Phillips Academy Andover.
LC: Okay.
JS: I really, like all kids, I really didn’t know what to do and kind of got the idea
of maybe a smaller college would be better. Family friends suggested Williams, which
turned out to be of course a fine education.

LC: Tell me about attending Andover. What was the climate like when you were
there? Are there classmates of yours that you particularly recall?
JS: Well, Andover was some ways was like a college. It was big, somewhat cold,
very high quality education. During my time, it was almost completely white males, the
spirit of the time.

LC: Sure. What years were you there John?
JS: I was there ’45 to ’48. I graduated in ’48.

LC: Okay.
JS: I think the course that had the most impact on me was taught by Professor
Fritz Allis, who taught a superb course on American History. It was very much a college
level course. So it gave—I wasn’t particularly happy there partly because of the insecurities of my teenage period.

LC: Sure.

JS: But it gave me a superb education. I had some good friends there.

LC: Did you play sports there at all?

JS: Yeah, I played some. Not very well or not very much, it was an English type education. It did emphasize sports.

LC: Sure, absolutely.

JS: When I got to college, I moved into lacrosse and hockey, which both of which I thoroughly enjoyed.

LC: What was the atmosphere? You mentioned that it was, you know, obviously an all male institution. Probably most of the young men there were from relatively privileged backgrounds.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Were there scholarship kids there though too?

JS: Yeah, there were scholarships. I was a scholarship kid.

LC: Okay.

JS: I worked in the washing dishes for two years there, two out of three. We’d end up, the morning shift rushing off to class, still smelling of garbage, but I didn’t mind it. I kind of liked the work.

LC: Were you tuned into post war international affairs? Were you, for example, aware of the Berlin airlift, the Fulton Missouri Speech by Churchill, were you kind of tuned into that stuff when you were at Phillips or no?

JS: Yeah, very much so. I was, partly because of my family background, I was very interested in world affairs even as a fairly young man. My mother was quite liberal. She was a subscriber to PM newspaper.

LC: Was she?

JS: My father I think was basically fairly conservative, but moderate. I was really quite strongly interested and I joined the debating team at Andover, which gave me a very good base. I’ve never been particularly bothered by public speaking.

LC: Did you travel with the debate team at all?
JS: Just a little bit locally.

LC: Now who would’ve been the competition?

JS: We were basically with Phillips Academy Exeter, Phillips Exeter Academy and sometimes with freshman teams from colleges like Harvard, Tufts and so forth. Some of it was just internal.

LC: Was there a coach?

JS: Yeah. We had a coach, although I don’t remember too much in the way of coaching. It was mainly just getting up and doing it.

LC: (Laughing) What position or did you have to swing? Were you first neg or affirmative?

JS: You were given an issue and then argued it from one side or the other.

LC: You had to prep both sides then.

JS: Yeah. Often, I think we did—we were assigned sides arbitrarily and then like lawyers, did our best.

LC: Yeah. Yeah. You mentioned then going on to Williams in that a family friend had suggested that as a possibility. Were there other schools that you were looking at?

JS: I think I applied to [Princeton] and I may have applied to Bowdoin in Maine, but Williams came through. So I marched off there.

LC: Did you have an idea of what you’d like to study or did you kind of wander into history?

JS: For many years, I think I’d had kind of a distant idea of joining the Foreign Service, though I really had no idea what it did. Maybe it was the Foreign Legion, I wasn’t quite sure. But because of my interest in history and world affairs, I kind of gravitated to that fairly early in the game at Williams.

LC: Did you have a good experience at Williams generally?

JS: Oh, yeah. I think it was excellent as a whole. It was a fraternity society and I didn’t make a fraternity on the first rush and felt kind of rejected, but then I was picked up a half year later by one, Chi Psi, and they were good guys in there. It was basically a very good experience.
LC: How important was it for you to have that fraternity affiliation? Was it pretty much crucial?

JS: Well, it’s important there because if you didn’t have it, you were rejected, like largely out of society. It was basically a very unfair system at that time. I knew a couple of guys who never made it in and they were good guys, but they were just not fraternity types and it was hard on them. Williams finally did away with it, which was all to the good.

LC: When did that happen? Do you know?

JS: Long after I left. I think about fifteen years after I left or so.

LC: Tell me about your experience with the curriculum. Did you get to study both American and as it were world history or Asian history? Was there any—?

JS: There was no Asian history. Asia was kind of outside the viewpoint of liberal arts colleges at that time. So it was basically European oriented, American oriented. It was very well taught. I had—there were two professors who were the main influence on me. One was a man named Charlie Keller, who was a fine teacher on America and a good editor, a fairly strict editor, but basically an encouraging guy. Then my faculty advisor for my honors thesis was a man named by Dr. Robert Waite, who had worked on the Frei Corps Movement in post World War I Germany to the rise of Nazism and later wrote a book on Hitler, *The Psychological Study of Hitler*.

LC: Very interesting.

JS: He was a very inspiring lecturer and a good guy. He was my advisor on my thesis on communism in the Spanish Civil War, which I did as the undergraduate honor’s thesis.

LC: Were you particularly interested in communism generally?

JS: Yes. I was basically kind of liberal I’d say, but I saw communism, even as a college student, in terms I think that were the framework of the march of World War II and that you had to oppose the totalitarian, aggressive totalitarian movement and it was best to do it early and well. That’s in essence why I did my thesis on communism in the Spanish Civil War, which I saw was a test case for the democracies, which basically the democracies failed. We failed the first major challenge. Oddly enough, I was later to see many parallels between the Spanish Civil War and the war in Vietnam. They were both
civil wars. They were both wars in which the great powers of the time were on either side. They were both wars with shades of grayness, not all virtue was on one side. They were also wars, which unfortunately I felt we flunked in both cases because we did not persist in trying to defend the Republic of Vietnam. Again, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes won in the long run.

LC: Have you explored any of these ideas in writing John later as an academic? Have you worked any of those—?

JS: Not really because I wasn’t the true academic after I left and I think also—

LC: Well, that could be seen as a good thing.

JS: Yeah, sort of. Also, there was such an exhaustion with the Vietnam War, such a turnoff, really nobody seemed interested.

LC: Well, as I’m sure you recognize now, the wheel has turned again.

JS: Yeah, exactly. It has changed. The wheel has changed.

LC: John, let me ask you a little bit more about your time at Williams. You mentioned earlier that you did play some sports while you were there. Was that more of a kind of a social investment on your part to have, you know, a wider circle of friends or was it something that you were interested in pursuing because you had a good time with it?

JS: Well, I love sports. I’m not a good athlete, but I love sports. I’ve always done quite a bit. I still do a great deal actually at this advanced age.

LC: Really? Good. Good, like what?

JS: Well, mainly golf, but I always walk and some hiking. I’d love to do others, but if I can find somebody to do it with like squash or something.

LC: Well, your doctors must be very pleased with you for all of that.

JS: Yeah. Never give up.

LC: That’s right. That’s right, very much so. I’d like to ask you a little bit more about the communist sort of, the influence of communism. Of course, while you were a student, 1950, ’51, and then in ’52, is really the zenith of McCarthy’s influence in this country.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Was that also something to which you were paying attention?
JS: Yeah.
LC: I suppose it would’ve been hard not to.
JS: Yeah. I was, of course, strongly against the McCarthy phenomena, but it was the Eisenhower period and there was kind of a quietism on the campuses, which is hard for later generations to realize, I think. The campuses were basically very passive politically and Williams was an example of that. We had very bright kids who were being well educated, but there was no sort of real student movement or no sort of agitation about McCarthyism or communism or anything at the campus.

LC: What about Civil Rights?
JS: Not even about Civil Rights, and it was still below the threshold.

LC: Were there African American students at Williams?
JS: There was only one, who was a fellow lacrosse player, a very nice guy. He later became a doctor, but it was again, like Philips Academy Andover. It was totally white male, I’d say upper middle class group of kids.

LC: Now socially, what kinds of things would you guys get up to? I know you were in the fraternity, but how—was there a sort of companion school that most of the guys went to find their dates at or was there that kind of a relationship?

JS: Yeah. Williams is fairly isolated and I was too poor to have a car. So my dating record wasn’t very good unfortunately at Williams. But Smith [and] Bennington, which had some very attractive bright girls, Holyoke were mainly the main partners.

LC: Right. They’re all clustered right there.
JS: Yeah. For years, I had kind of an assumption that I’d marry a Smith girl, that was just faded, didn’t work out there.

LC: Didn’t work out, right. (Laughing) John, let me ask you a little bit about your graduation time. You said earlier that you had a kind of inkling or a sort of, you know, back of the mind thinking about the possibility of entering the foreign service, but you decided to in fact, enlist in the US Army.

JS: Yeah.
LC: Did you go in as an officer? How did that happen?
JS: No. I went in as enlisted man. I was regular Army. I enlisted for Officer Candidate School and after I—there were a bunch of us who did out of the Philadelphia
Office, where I happened to be. All of us one day were told that the Army had too many
officers and we were all not going to go to OCS (officer candidate school) and we would
go overseas for duty at that time.

LC: Where did you do your basic training?

JS: I did my basic training in Indiantown Gap, sixteen weeks of regular infantry
training, which was good. We shot all the weapons, which was good fun. We did a lot of
hiking up and down the ridges of Indiantown Gap, which was very good preparation for
Korea. Then afterwards, I did one month as a prison chaser, carrying a shotgun and
details from the prison stockade there. Then I went to a leadership school for training for
NCOs, and then I went off to East Asia.

LC: What did your father make of the fact that you had entered the Army?

JS: Well, I had bad eyes so I couldn’t go to the Navy as an officer. He was
supportive. I think he respected my decision.

LC: Okay. What about your brother? Was he older or younger by the way?

JS: He’s younger, three and a half years. We’re very close.

LC: Okay.

JS: We share an awful lot together and we still very much enjoy each other’s
company. He went off to the Naval Academy.

LC: Right.

JS: He, I think had been—the death of my mother, I think, I had been very hard
on him and he was kind of formless. He was very bright, did well at Andover with a
minimum of studying and didn’t know what he wanted to do and just by kind of inertia,
went to the Naval Academy. He was lucky to get out because he was not that respectful
of the discipline. He kind of coasted through it, but then went to pilot training and
worked very hard on that and became an excellent pilot.

LC: What did he fly?

JS: He flew; I think it’s called the F-3, The Demon, which was an underpowered,
early jet that had a lot of problems. He in fact had to bail out once when his plane fuel
lines broke.

JS: He waited on the runway for the word from Kennedy to attack Cuba, which
didn’t come. He was in the Lebanon Operation, where they over flew Lebanon as a
display of force, but did not see any actual combat as a Navy pilot.

LC: Well, we’ll have to see whether we can’t draft him into the Oral History
Project as well.

JS: Yeah. He had Vietnam experience. He was in, I think one year in the Delta
in Ba Xuyen and Chuoung Thien, which was a rather bad area. He was a JUSPAO (Joint
United States Public Affairs Office) representative there.

LC: Oh, okay.

JS: Information, activities, ran the drama troupe, which was kind of an interesting
experience.

LC: Okay, now we absolutely have to see whether we can get him to participate.
He sounds like a very interesting, very interesting fellow.

JS: Yeah. He had gone to the Chinese Language School in Taipei. He spoke
Chinese as a child. He was under the influence of our Amah, forgot it completely of
course and then relearned it as an adult. Then after his year in the Delta, went up to the
embassy’s political section, working mainly with the Chinese community.

LC: Oh, wow.

JS: In Saigon.

LC: Okay, well, I’m going to make it my personal mission to see if we can’t
include him.

JS: Yeah, he’d be good. He’s a very articulate guy.

LC: Oh, I’m sure. I’m sure he is. John, let me ask you about your deployment
over to Korea. First of all, what unit were you assigned to?

JS: Well, I arrived at Camp Drake, the repo depot in just north of Tokyo and was
assigned to the 1st Calvary Division, which at that point, had been pulled out of Korea,
was up in Hokkaido. But my friends had all been assigned to Korea. So I asked the
personnel clerk if I could go to Korea instead and he said, “Yeah.”

LC: Sure.

JS: He couldn’t find many who wanted to do that. So I went off and went to the
3rd Battalion of the 5th Regimental Combat Team, which was an independent regiment,
originally a Hawaiian unit. It had a very good combat record in Korea. I would, first, just as an ordinary rifleman, I was just an ordinary rifleman with the, I think it was K Company. Then later, transferred over to the I&R, The Intelligence and Recon squad, at the battalion level in the 3rd Battalion. We were first on the eastern area in reserve, then moved to the Iron Triangle near Chorwon in central Korea and built some bunkers close to the frontline. It was the first time I was under fire, just once there.

LC: Do you remember that incident?
JS: Yeah. We were up on a ridgeline, just a short ways behind the frontline and some mortar rounds came in. One of my friends who was using a slit trench for a latrine at that time—
LC: Sure.
JS: Had to dive into the latrine (laughing) for safety reasons. We also—the first explosion I saw was one single round that arrived and then an artillery lieutenant came popping up the hill saying, “Had anybody seen a short round?” Then we transferred over to, more towards the eastern front and after a little stretch in the valley in reserve, we moved up to the frontline. I spent the last, about two and a half, three weeks on the line, which was in a place called Oxreider Skyline Drive, and we replaced a Korean unit right, facing the Chinese units across the little valley. It was quite a bit of artillery activity. I actually got hit in combat by enemy fire, but not wounded because a piece of spent shrapnel bounced off my leg. I was on line the last day of the war, which was a very interesting experience.

LC: Yeah, tell me about that John. What was that like? How much information did you have about the impending cease fire?
JS: Well, we knew something about it. I think partly ‘cause occasional issues of The Stars and Stripes drifted up and we knew something was going on. But this one morning, which was what, July 23, I guess of 1953.
LC: Sounds right.
JS: We were called back by the officers in groups and told that the war would end at ten o’clock that night. We said, “Oh,” and went back. It was a very ordinary day when stray artillery fire in both directions, us kind of hunkering down in our bunkers. I was in the battalion command bunker. About 7:30 that evening, I had the urge to go to
the latrine. I said, “No, I think I’ll wait until the war’s over”, because it was way out in
the open. At eight o’clock sharp, the Chinese opened up by far the worst bombardment
we had. They just dumped all their remaining ammunition on us. I think some of our
guys had done earlier, the same. So, it was not without—not being retaliation. It went on
for about an hour and forty-five minutes, this horrendous barrage. My former assistant
platoon sergeant, Sergeant Cross, was hit and died the next day, apparently the last
fatality of the war.

LC: I was going to ask whether you took casualties.
JS: Yeah.
LC: I’m sure you must have with that kind of firepower coming at you. You said
that you were in the command bunker.
JS: Yeah. At about 9:45, it started to taper off and at 9:55, there was just an
occasional explosion. At ten o’clock, it was dead silence and the war was over.
LC: What was the mood?
JS: Well, it’s hard to describe. We were just kind of—I’d say, “Oh.” It’s just the
way it is. It wasn’t a vast sense of relief. It wasn’t a surprise. It was kind of, “Whoops,
this is what it is.”
LC: No parties, no—
JS: No partying, just kind of went about it. The next day we started to tear down
the bunkers and three days later we moved off the line. I spent about what, about seven
months thereafter in Korea after the war.
LC: Was that the point at which you were in INR?
JS: Well, it was called I&R.
LC: I&R, I’m sorry.
JS: Intelligence and Recon. It was just five guys who were assigned to the
battalion headquarters and we actually didn’t do much recon. We just kind of hunkered
down into the bunker at the top as kind of miscellaneous troops.
LC: Were you reading intelligence analyses or writing them or those kinds of
things?
JS: No, no, we were just, you know, just low ranking enlisted men right on the
front.
LC: Just kind of available in case something happens.
JS: You were kind of available.
LC: Okay. Which, John, in your mind now thinking back, which of the two assignments, which of the two flavors of that conflict before the cease-fire afterwards did you think you did the best work?
JS: Well, I was just an ordinary enlisted man.
LC: Right. Right.
JS: I made Sergeant finally. I just did my duty. I don’t think I did much that was of any importance, but I did my duty.
LC: Were you, for lack of a better word, bored after the—?
JS: No, I wouldn’t say that. I was interested in Korea and the landscape. We had a certain freedom in the I&R squad. So after the war was over, we used to kind of romp around on so called patrols. We’d go through this deserted area, which was north of the so-called farm line where farmers were not permitted to be.
LC: Right.
JS: Some of our patrols, we actually went out with shotguns and we’d shoot ducks and have them, cook them over a little fire for lunch. It was a very educational experience. It gave me a lot of respect for democracy ‘cause I saw very capable people came out of all sorts of backgrounds, you know. As a good New England raised boy, I had a slight prejudice against southerners, but some of my friends were good southern boys, very capable guys. There were some capable blacks, my first real experience working with American blacks.
LC: Can you tell me about that?
JS: Well, at one point, I remember my corporal and the four people in direct line above me were all American blacks. That was a brand new experience for a guy that had almost no contact at all with blacks before.
LC: Absolutely. Was there tension there that you remember or was it fine?
JS: No, it was just kind of accepted as ordinary. It was a start of desegregation in America and the Army to its credit was really the leader in this.
LC: That’s right. Yes. Yes.
JS: So you’ve got blacks in positions of authority in the Army that they couldn’t
get in civil life. It was a harnessing of a whole new pool of talent for the Army.
LC: Were you aware of any problems that that engendered not necessarily for
yourself, but for other enlisted men who were reporting to—these would be white
enlisted men, reporting to African Americans who had a problem with it?
JS: Well, I never saw any real problems in it. Occasionally, you’d run into guys
who came out of the south who were very prejudiced against blacks.
LC: Sure.
JS: But it didn’t seem to be a problem oddly enough. I never saw any examples
of ill discipline because of that during my own Army experience.
LC: Was your enlistment, did it come with an end date?
JS: Yeah. It was a two year enlistment. After my year in Korea, I left I think in
what, March of ’55, ’54, and went back to Fort Meade and did a couple of months there
with nothing much to do and then was finally discharged.
LC: Do you again, casting your mind back, remember the spring of 1954? Were
you paying attention to, for example, the French investment, coming a part really in
Indochina, at least in northern Indochina at Dien Bien Phu?
JS: Yeah, I was interested in it. In fact, I once gave—I volunteered to give a
lecture on Indochina to the other soldiers.
LC: Really? How did that go?
JS: Well, I think they all looked at me with blank stares.
LC: (Laughing) They had their own thousand yard stare.
JS: Yeah. They were in college. When I was in the 5th Regimental Combat
Team, after the Korean War ended, there was a rumor that kind of swept the regiment
that we were going to be redeployed to Indochina, which of course never happened.
LC: Do you know when that rumor would’ve come through? Can you place it?
JS: That was probably after the war ended in ’53 in probably the fall.
LC: Do you remember much about that rumor coming through?
JS: Well, no, I just kind of—just kind of a rumor, where it started, why it was
started. I guess people just kind of supposed that we might be going because of the talk
in the newspapers, which we followed in part because of *The Stars and Stripes* we were able to read.

LC: John, thinking about it, do you have a theory or observations to make on why the United States did not commit troops in late ’53 or even into the spring of ’54 to assist the French? After all, we had done so in Korea to assist the South Koreans.

JS: Well, I think it’s partly just Eisenhower’s basic caution. Partly based on the fact the war in Korea had been not a popular war in the United States and going into a war to help the French colonialists in Indochina, despite the strong anti-communist feelings that were prevalent at that time, that was not going to be a popular war either. I think for reasonable political reasons, they decided not to do it.

LC: So the domestic political considerations sort of bore over the more strategic question of the importance of Indochina that’s—

JS: Yeah.

LC: Okay. When you came out of the Army, that would’ve been I guess in the summer, is that right, of ’54, something like that?

JS: Yeah. I came out in I think May of ’54.

LC: Okay. What was your plan at that point John?

JS: Well, I was kind of formless, but I had this idea of joining the Foreign Service, whatever it did.

LC: (Laughing) Still not clear exactly on that.

JS: No, it’s still not completely clear. So I’d heard that Georgetown University had a program to get in and that was in Washington where my father was at that time. I had the GI (Government Issue) Bill. So I applied and got into Georgetown and went for one year. I had mixed feelings about it. There were some very good classes, but it wasn’t up to the standards of Williams.

LC: Is that right?

JS: But, they did have a very good program at the time on preparing for the Foreign Service exam. It was kind of practice exams and things like that. I took that. But it turned out—I’d taken the exam for practice even before I went to Georgetown. It turned out I passed it the first time around, the written part. It wasn’t really necessary in the end after all.
LC: Now how well did you do on the written section of the exam?
JS: I did pretty well. It wasn’t top marks I’m sure, but it was well enough to pass with credit.
LC: Now, at what point then did you have the oral interview?
JS: Well, that was in the spring of early, late spring of ‘55, after my year at Georgetown.
LC: How’d that go?
JS: Well, it was a group, including one guy who was from the security side. They asked all sorts of questions and I guess I handled myself okay because I passed.
LC: Do you remember any of the questions or the room, where did this happen, anything about it?
JS: Well, the only question I remember, they asked me about a former lady communist from Pittsburgh. I think I answered that question with a blank stare.
LC: What were they trying to get at? Do you know?
JS: I think this was just my knowledge of the communism generally.
LC: Oh, I see.
JS: Despite that one zero, I think I did okay.
LC: That one was below the radar for you.
JS: It was below the radar.
LC: Okay. (Laughing)
JS: Hey, let me transfer to another phone. I’m on—
LC: John, where did you live when you were going to Georgetown?
JS: Well, I lived with my father who had a house in northwest Washington. It wasn’t the best arrangement, but he took good care of me.
LC: Whereabouts was that in northwest?
JS: Yuma Street, which is just off of Massachusetts.
LC: What was your dad doing at this time? What assignment was he with. Do you know?
JS: Let’s see. I started to say—I can’t think right off hand what his assignment was—oh, he was working on the development of the nuclear depth charge at that time.
LC: I wondered if that might be true. The mid-‘50s, there were all kinds of—
JS: Yeah, all sorts of projects.

LC: Different projects involving nuclear, yeah. As you noted earlier that there was a testing phase, but there was no deployment of that device as far as we know.

JS: Right.

LC: Okay. So, did you go back and forth then each day, down to Georgetown for the university?

JS: Yes. Yes.

LC: Do you remember others in the class? What was the composition of the class, any women, any African Americans?

JS: No. No. It was all white males of course. One boy was half Filipino, a good guy. Several of the people went into the Foreign Service from it. A lot of them did not.

LC: Right.

JS: But otherwise, one friend of mine was a brilliant young man that ran into problems with the Jesuits because he asked too many questions in class. (Laughing)

LC: I see. Uh-huh.

JS: And so forth, but they were a good group.

LC: John, did you have a sort of a social life beyond school or were you quite dedicated? It sounds as if academically, it wasn’t as challenging as what you had earlier?

JS: No. It wasn’t.

LC: Were you going around to parties and so forth down on M Street or any of that?

JS: Not very—not by—it was hardly a wild life, but I had a very good girlfriend at that time who was—she the daughter of an American Naval Officer and a Belgium countess who had been raised in Istanbul. She spoke Turkish fluently and was working for the Agency at that time. She was a very good girl.

LC: She sounds like an interesting person.

JS: Yeah. I was very fond of her.

LC: Did she continue with the agency as far as you know?

JS: Well, she finally married a British diplomat.

LC: Oh, okay. That—did that draw an end to things then with the Agency as far as one knows?
JS: I don’t know. I think she got clearance of course.

LC: What were you thinking John, in terms of how a career with the Foreign Service would work? Were you getting a more realistic appraisal of postings and the sort of the organization of Foreign Service life?

JS: Yeah. I think I enjoyed getting a pretty reasonable understanding of it. Although, probably as pretty innocent on some parts of it, but you’re really there when you get into it of course.

LC: Right. The clarity comes with the exposure.

JS: Yeah, the clarity.

LC: (Laughing) Well, you graduated, taking a degree in fact in 1955.

JS: Yeah. I got a second degree in Bachelors of Science in Foreign Service, which was not particularly useful, but one more thing on the bio.

LC: Right. Were you interested in focusing on the Far East at that point?

JS: Well, it was kind of funny. I didn’t really know what I wanted to do. I was kind of—partly because of my thesis, I was interested in Europe. We were all assembled as brand new officers by a personnel type after I got in the service and said, “Put down your choices for work, what parts of the world you want to go to.” He said, “Of course, most people want to go to Europe. So, the chances of getting that are slim.”

LC: Right.

JS: So being the bright guy I am, I said, “Well, I’ll take my second choice, which is East Asia.” Everybody who put down Europe as their first choice went to Europe.

LC: (Laughing) Too clever by half then.

JS: Yeah. Then they got us together and announced where our assignments were going to be. They finally got down to Sylvester and the guy said, “You’re going to Pusan,” where we had a conflict. I was really in the dumps because I came home that night. I’d come out of Pusan only a year before through the repo depot there and it was a dismal place. My father said, “Buck up and it would probably be better than you expect.”

I went back the next day to report in to personnel to check with them and they said, “Oh, Sylvester, you’ve been reassigned already. You’re going to Hong Kong.” So I studied Chinese for about a month and half during the introductory course at the Foreign Service Institute. Went into personnel again one day and they said, “Sylvester, you’ve been
reassigned. You’re going to Okinawa.” I said, “Oh, my goodness.” I finally went to
Yokohama. In a sense, it was a good education because it made me very skeptical of the
[personnel] procedures ever there after.

LC: Yes. Yes, I would think. You probably had very little confidence in any
posting papers you received thereafter.

JS: Yes, exactly. (Both laughing)

LC: Tell me about the Chinese language study when you were thinking that you
would go to Hong Kong. How did you do with it first of all?

JS: Well, I could only do, I think, about an hour a day because I was going
through the basic introductory course at the Foreign Service. Unfortunately, once I quit,
it all slipped away because later on, of course, I went intensively into Japanese.

LC: Sure. Sure. Did you do okay with the characters though, I mean initially as
you came into it or was it more of a speaking course?

JS: It was more speaking at that small stage, but I was later to get fascinated with
the characters.

LC: Yes. I can understand that. Tell me about the Foreign Service course
generally. How many people in the course that you were in?

JS: Well, there were twenty of us. It was subsequently labeled the first junior
officer course because it was the first time that after the McCarthy period that they
assembled officers enough to have an introductory course.

LC: Now tell me a little bit about that. Why was that?

JS: Well, during the McCarthy years, the department was somewhat starved for
funds.

LC: Sure.

JS: I guess took a very thin intake of new officers.

LC: For a number of years?

JS: For a number of years. This was the first real group that they got. One of our
speakers was John Foster Dulles who came in and talked to us one day.

LC: What do you remember about that, John?

JS: Well, he looked like his photographs.

LC: Really?
JS: Sounded like the descriptions of him, but it was interesting being in the presence of a great man.

LC: Was he inspiring at all?

JS: I wouldn’t say he was inspiring, but it’s just impressive to see somebody of that rank actually talking to you.

LC: Right, because of course, he’s in the papers all the time.

JS: Yeah. Exactly.

LC: You had a very good sense of who he was.

JS: Yeah.

LC: What was your impression of him?

JS: Well—

LC: Just your observation, of course, you were probably sitting in a lecture room or something.

JS: Yeah. He struck me as exactly like a couple of other very senior people that I met during my career. He just like—you hear him, he has kind of his New England, what, Brahmin, somewhat uptight, bright conservative man.

LC: Was he smooth? I mean—

JS: I wouldn’t say he was smooth. He was—well, he was obviously a self-confident, strongly opinioned man. That’s about all I remember.

LC: Were there other luminaries, maybe not on that level, but who came along?

JS: No. No. We had other speakers, but they tended to be mid-level people of various sorts.

LC: Okay. Were they all from the Foreign Service or did you have academics come in or anything like that?

JS: I don’t remember to be honest. Not so much for that course. Later, some Foreign Service training was very heavily academic.

LC: Tell me about the other bods in the, other people in the class, sorry, John.

JS: Well, again, mostly like my college prep school classmates, white male.

Who were they? Do you remember any of them?

JS: Well, again, mostly like my college prep school classmates, white male.

There were no women. We had one Chinese American who didn’t stay long in the service, I’m not sure why. We had one guy who went on to great success in the Foreign
Service, Richard Murphy. He was a specialist on the Muslim world. One other guy I think made ambassador.

LC: Were there people who you saw in subsequent years and with whom your own path crossed?

JS: Not that much surprisingly.

LC: That’s interesting.

JS: I ran into a number of them over the years of course, because the Foreign Service is not that big of a community. But we didn’t intersect that much, which is a little surprising to me. I thought we would’ve.

LC: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. After the sort of juggling around with determining where you would be assigned, you did get the assignment to Yokohama.

JS: Yes.

LC: Can you tell me about how you felt about the assignment to Japan? Did you relish the idea?

JS: Yes. I was happy with it. I had this general interest in East Asia based on my childhood in China.

LC: Sure.

JS: I went off, at the start of a career with, you know, some basic enthusiasm.

LC: How did you get to Japan in 1955?

JS: It was one of more easy flights to the Far East. The one longer—I took a northwest turbojet.

LC: Really?

JS: But at that point, the government officials were allowed to go first class. Later we went steerage and I had a bunk, kind of a Pullman bunk on this plane. I think I picked it up in Seattle. I went out to see my stepsister in Victoria first, and then we flew up to Anchorage and then stopped in Cold Bay on the peninsula going out to Aleutians, which lived up to its name. It was cold and bitter and dark when we stopped there, and then flew onto Haneda, outside of Tokyo.

LC: What time of year was this?

JS: This was in the fall.

LC: Okay. You arrived in Tokyo?
JS: Tokyo, and then went immediately of course to Yokohama and stayed at the Grand Hotel, which was this pre-war hotel, with some elegance and a fair number of cockroaches. MacArthur had stayed there during his first night in Japan in ’45. The Consulate was in a building just down the street, which was on the harbor, facing the harbor. The Consulate General was a pre-war building built as a miniature White House, a rather dignified, nice building.

LC: What do you mean by miniature White House?
JS: It was exactly in the same architectural form as our White House.
LC: Okay. That’s strange.
JS: Yeah. It was strange in a way.
LC: Was it built in the ’30s then?
JS: It was built in the ’30s.
LC: For the purpose of what?
JS: For the American Consulate General of Yokohama.
LC: Okay. So it was purpose built by the American government, not acquired later?
JS: No.
LC: How interesting. There’s a message being sent there. I’m not sure what it was.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Hmm. Which section were you with?
JS: Well, I was sent as a vice consul and it was a rotational assignment in some sense. So I started as the citizenship officer, handling cases, ordinary passport work and the cases of American Nisei who’d come back during or after the war and were trying to regain their citizenship. Then I became the shipping officer and dealing with odd things like ship captains who needed their papers validated and miscellaneous things like the marriage of American citizens there. Some were very interesting and somewhat unpleasant cases like an American who specialized in defrauding missionaries.
LC: Nice.
JS: He finally got shipped back to the states. Then I finally did administrative work for the Consulate General, ended with a short stint as a visa officer.
LC: Let me ask you a little bit about those immigration issues. At this time, and I could be mistaken, but I wonder whether the regulations governing the numbers of Japanese allowed to legally immigrate—I think the legislation governing that was the McCarran-Walter Act, is that right?

JS: Yeah.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about that legislation? I don't know whether you remember anything about it or the quotas. How easy was it for Japanese nationals to get legal immigration to the United States?

JS: I don’t remember so clearly of that because I only dealt with visas for a short time, but there were a fair number. Mainly though, I think Japanese women who married American service people.

LC: So coming in under, for example, the War Brides Act—

JS: Yes. Exactly.

LC: And the Fiancées Act. Okay. Did you see quite a number of women marrying American service personnel?

JS: Yeah. It was ironic of course, I married a Japanese woman later. I was struck by several things. One was that among our service people who married Japanese, it was almost the same proportion up the ranks, including one admiral who took a Japanese wife.

LC: Hmm. That is interesting. Yes.

JS: There were some that were, how would you say a little strange in that we had some American maritime seamen who were on these tankers that ran between Yokohama and the Persian Gulf. These guys would get drunk and decide to marry one of the Japanese bar girls. I remember once I went up to the counter, just kind of looking at the papers before looking at the couple and I was taking the oath of witness to marriage them. I raised my right hand and said, “You,”—and the woman was so ugly, I stopped in mid-sentence. It was very embarrassing.

LC: (Laughing) How did you recover?

JS: I recovered of course. I went on with my duties.

LC: It was bringing out the diplomatic skills that you weren’t sure you even had probably at that point. (Laughing)
JS: Yeah.

LC: Were there any—well, first of all, let me ask about the personnel complement in the consulate office. How many people?

JS: We had about six or seven officers. The Consulate General was a very nice man, very fine man who was a lawyer who’d come in through the so called Wristonization Program in the Foreign Service.

LC: Can you tell a little bit about that program?

JS: Well, the intent was to so-called democratize the Foreign Service. Before the war, the diplomats had been the elite and the consular officers, the administrative officers were all considered second-class citizens. In the post-war period, a committee headed by a prominent academic, Dr. Wriston, looked at the service and said that all should be made Foreign Service officers. The consular and the diplomat of course, were combined. So even the administrative officer then was called a Foreign Service officer and some of them were actually rotated into jobs as political officers and so forth. The Consul General, Lionel Summers, a very nice guy, a competent man, had been one of this program, who had been brought in from the Civil Service into the Foreign Service.

LC: Did any tensions accompany that restructuring, fundamental restructuring really, of the Foreign Service?

JS: Well, there were probably some, but not that I noticed at my lowly rank.

LC: Right. You were just in there, it being your first assignment.

JS: Yeah, just being a new innocent officer.

LC: Right. Right. All this was happening up where the air was thin somewhere.

JS: Right, exactly.

LC: Let me ask a little bit also about the post occupation climate. Of course, at this point, you were a couple of years removed from the end of the occupation of Japan, but what in general was the tenor of relationships between American diplomats and say, Japanese civilians generally or if you can categorize in special groups?

JS: Well, it was I’d say friendly and ordinary in a sense. The Japanese had, as you know, turned their backs on the wartime spirit and had their noses to the grindstone on the postwar recovery. They’d accepted the fact the occupation was there. I don’t
think they liked it. For instance, MacArthur in my experience was hardly ever mentioned after he left Japan.

LC: Really?

JS: But relations were good. The Consulate General, there were, except for me, starting the language. There were no Japanese speakers among us. So it was all kind of a non-Asian specialist dealing with local officials who were quite courteous and friendly towards us, but we were not that relevant to the local government.

LC: I don’t know if you had involvement with any of these programs, but there are some special areas that the United States, through the State Department representatives who were in Japan were working on during this time period. Again, these may not have been relevant for your work, but I wonder if you knew anything about them. For example, scientific exchanges with Japan during this period or business exchanges?

JS: Well, I didn’t know that much about them except that we certainly were doing them.

LC: Probably most of that was happening through the embassy I’m sure.

JS: Yeah. Exactly.

LC: I wonder, another area that the United States was certainly working in was advising the development of the self-defense forces and the police forces in Japan. Did any of that come across your desk?

JS: It did later. I was very close to the self-defense forces when I was consul in North Japan in Sapporo and was very interested in them.

LC: Okay. Well, we’ll come along to that then.

JS: Right.

LC: Go head and say whatever you had in your mind though.

JS: Well, later on, I was to feel that they were very respectable. They abandoned most of the Imperial Army nonsense and were just trying to be a professional, straightforward, politically acceptable military.

LC: This would’ve been in the early ‘60s when you were—

JS: Yup.

LC: Okay, when you were in Hokkaido.
JS: Right.

LC: Okay. Well, I’ll make a note that we’ll come back along and ask about that later. Were there particular—well, first, I want to ask, where did you live when you were in Yokohama?

JS: Well, I had a little brand-new house up on one of the interior bluffs. It was odd because my landlady was a French woman who married in World War I, a Japanese baron, Baron Dan, who was a pilot in the French Air Force.

LC: How interesting. Wow.

JS: She’d come to Japan. After the war, the pilot, the baron had died before the war. The French Consulate in Yokohama was in a very nice little area of the first bluff going up. It’d been destroyed during the war. So the French government had let her build a little house there and she lived there. I’d go every month to pay my rent. The only language we had in common was Japanese.

LC: Really? How good was your Japanese at this point?

JS: Well, not very good at that point, but we’d communicate.

LC: How did you find out about her background?

JS: Well, we talked and she was friendly of course because I was paying the rent.

(Laughing)

LC: Right. Sure. (Laughing)

JS: I was interested in her background.

LC: Right. When you mentioned the baron, how do you spell his name?

JS: D-A-N.

LC: Okay. Where was he from? Was he from Hokkaido?

JS: No. This was in Yokohama.

LC: I’m sorry.

JS: I think he was part of the Japanese aristocracy.

LC: In Yokohama. Okay. Okay. Any idea how he came to be cooperating with the French?

JS: I think he volunteered as a foreign pilot and joined their forces, but I’m not very clear on that.

LC: It’s an interesting story.
JS: Yeah. It is interesting. I wish I knew more about it.

LC: I’m sure someone with the aid of this interview will probably pick it up and run with it. It’s very interesting. Any other details that you recall about it?

JS: No. She had a couple of sons, which were of course, mixed blood and I met them once.

LC: They were living there in Yokohama?

JS: No. They were in Tokyo and I think one of them was a musician, but that’s about all I remember.

LC: Interesting. Was she still alive when you left your posting there?

JS: Yeah. I’m not sure when she passed on.

LC: Well, it’s an intriguing encounter.

JS: It was also odd because my second landlord in Japan was a white Russian in Tokyo and again, the only common language we had was Japanese.

LC: What can you tell me about this person?

JS: Well, his name was Seminoff, interesting man. He had come out of Siberia to Manchuria and come over to Japan not long after the revolution and lived in Japan. He was very Russian. He took me and my later to be my bride up to the Russian Cathedral in Tokyo and went to a very Russian Orthodox religious ceremony at the cathedral with the bearded priest swinging the censors with the perfume smoke going over and the chanting in the background. It was very Russian. He also had a daughter, Maria Seminoff who again, I think we mainly spoke in Japanese, though she knew a fair amount of English. She’d been—I had some contact with the Soviet Embassy after the war, which this is a Russian in Japan, and then married an American, marriage of convenience I think, but could not get a visa because of the record of her ties with the Soviet Embassy.

LC: When you say marriage of convenience, what do you mean exactly?

JS: Excuse me? I think it was not a love marriage, but just she married an older American of some sort.

LC: I see.

JS: But she finally came to the United States long after my [time] and settled in Pittsburgh as I remember correctly.

LC: But there were some problem around her background.
JS: Yeah, because she’d gone to the Soviet Embassy a few times.
LC: How big was the white Russian community in Tokyo at the time we’re
talking about?
JS: Not large, but there were a number around. One was a man named
Ackseminoff I think it was, who became a very prominent well off physician there.
They’d had a hard time during the war of course as white people.
LC: I’m sure.
JS: But had survived the war there.
LC: The Cathedral had survived as well.
JS: Yes, exactly. It had.
LC: That’s very interesting. Where is it located or was it located?
JS: It was in kind of north central Tokyo. It’s an older, well before World War
II, building.
LC: Did it have damage from the war that you could see?
JS: I don’t know.
LC: Let me ask a little more about the diplomatic community in Yokohama.
How many other countries had Consulates or Consulate Generals down there?
JS: There were a fair number at that time. The Brits had one down the street, a
very handsome pre-war building. I knew one of the British diplomats, a good guy.
LC: Who was that? Do you remember?
JS: His name slips me right now.
LC: That’s okay.
JS: But I met him years later when he was a deputy at the embassy and he had me
for lunch. He became a good Japan hand.
LC: Was this early on in his career as well?
JS: Yeah, he was a starting officer in his career. They had some Latin American
consulates there. One of them was I think the Panamanian who imported and turned over
a car every six months making good use of diplomatic privileges.
LC: (Laughing) He had figured out that end of things anyway.
JS: Yeah. His last car was supposedly stolen, but he didn’t seem disappointed
about it for some reason.
LC: That’s odd.
JS: I think the deal had been consecrated already.
LC: Right, some back story to that, which we’re not aware. Were there Soviet
diplomats around at all?
JS: No, not in Yokohama.
LC: Okay. Obviously, this would be below embassy level because there weren’t
diplomatic relations, but I just wondered if there were personnel, but not any in
Yokohama as far as one knows.
JS: Not Yokohama.
LC: Okay. What security procedures were in place at this little White House?
Did you have guards?
JS: No. We had some Japanese guards, but they were hardly a daunting force
and security at that point was not a major issue.
LC: So no real concerns for diplomats well being?
JS: No.
LC: Okay. Obviously—
JS: More innocent, calmer world.
LC: Sure. Obviously you were living as it were on the economy.
JS: Right.
LC: Okay. Were the rest of the personnel doing the same thing essentially,
weren’t living in private quarters?
JS: No. They were mainly in government owned houses, out and about in the
community.
LC: Okay. Was it useful to be living out, sort of outside the Foreign Service nest
as it were? Were you able to get a better sense of what was happening in Japan?
JS: Yeah, I think very much so. I was fortunate later on because of budgetary
reasons, almost everybody was moved in Tokyo into the embassy compounds, including
the language students, but I always had houses out in the community. I was a bachelor. I
had girlfriends who were always local. I had Japanese friends who visited. And because
I was just in an ordinary house, it was easy for them to visit.
LC: Right.
JS: They didn’t have to go through any kind of wandering into an alien situation. So I thought it was much more conducive to having real contact with Japanese.

LC: You mentioned earlier that some of the cases that you handled with regard to citizenship and passport issues had to do with American Nisei. Can you tell me a little about that situation?

JS: Well, it was a very sad situation. As part of the war, a number of Nisei were shipped back to Japan. I forget how they got back there, but even during the wartime, they were sent back.

LC: Now these were people with whom there were specific security issues or—?

JS: Yeah. Exactly. They were considered as being not sufficiently loyal.

LC: Even to be put in—

JS: Even to be put into camps.

LC: Camps, right.

JS: Some of them I think just had simple anger at how they were treated, opted to go back. Then in difficult post war years in Japan because of their own heritage, a number of them wanted to come back to the United States and finally we begin to allow that. So we would submit what essentially were their petitions with some comment from the consular officer.

LC: Did you have to do interviews, John, or how would you evaluate cases?

JS: We did interviews, but it was kind of a sketchy one. It’s basically just recording some facts.

LC: Where were the decisions made then?

JS: They were made in Washington.

LC: Would that be by consular officials in a consular section?

JS: Well, basically by officials of the—part of the department of state that ran consular affairs.

LC: Okay.

JS: They were quite conservative, but I think there was recognition that a number of these people deserved to have the opportunity to return after. The wheels of administration round slowly, and a number of them didn’t come, quite a few of them did come back to the United States.
LC: Would you maintain kind of a case file on individuals like this, such that you could if they wrote you a letter or called to check on status, you could give them a report? Was that the case?

JS: Yeah.

LC: Okay. I’m just wondering if you can ballpark the number that you might’ve dealt with during your time in Yokohama?

JS: It was probably about 150 or so.

LC: No kidding. Wow. You saw some resolutions in their favor over that time period?

JS: Yeah. There were a few odd incidents. For instance, there was a slight gap in our laws in the ‘20s. So one Japanese came in who had been born in the States, returned to Japan as a very young man and had actually been a fighter pilot during the war. But because of this tiny gap in the laws, he had no problem. He had to be issued an American passport right away.

LC: Did you come across anomalies like that?

JS: There were a few anomalies like that, but that was I think an odd one.

LC: For sure. Yes. It sounds as if it was. Did you have a sense during your time in Yokohama how long that posting would last?

JS: Well, it was due for two years. It was two years.

LC: Okay. Coming towards the end of that time, were you clear on what would happen next with you or did it unfold in a kind of magic way and you were just let know what would happen?

JS: I was still very interested in Korea. I went over to Korea a couple of times while I was in Yokohama.

LC: I see. Uh-huh.

JS: A good friend of mine, he was a very interesting guy named Vincent Brandt. He later became an academic on Korea [and left] the Foreign Service. I went with him back to Korea and stayed with a senior Korean bank official’s house, a very good guy.

LC: Was this all in Seoul?

JS: In Seoul. So I applied for Korean language training. The department replied no. They sent me to Japanese language training. That of course was probably a good
decision on their part because I’d studied part time for two years in Yokohama and was
moderately advanced and it was put to good use. So I went, after home leave, I went to
the Foreign Service Institute School for Japanese in Tokyo.

LC: That language training that you had done in Yokohama, had you arranged
that off your own bat?

JS: No, the government paid for it. I had a very nice Japanese teacher, [Suzuki],
who was a gay, but who was a good guy. He was a good teacher and I did pretty well on
it partly because I used it so much out of work.

LC: So this wasn’t a matter of great disappointment to you when you weren’t
able to get the training—?

JS: No. I was quite accepting of it.

LC: Okay. Now the Foreign Service had a language institute in Tokyo?

JS: Yes.

LC: Tell me about the setup there. Again, you may have found your own
housing? Is this when you had the—?

JS: Yes. I found a little house in Meguro, which was owned by the Russian,
Seminoff. It was a Japanese style house with the western room. Very cold in winter,
tatami mats, which I slept on the floor with Japanese futon. I had a Japanese maid who
cooked for me and lived a pretty Japanese style life in many ways. My father visited me
once while I was out there and I had him sleep on the Japanese mats. I don’t think he
found that comfortable.

LC: He didn’t do so well with that.

JS: He didn’t do so well with that, but I was well used to it.

LC: What was the occasion of your dad’s visit? Was he out there on business?

JS: Yes. He was out there on a Navy official visit down to Taiwan and so forth.

LC: How was he feeling about your work with the Foreign Service? Did he think
that was a good—?

JS: Oh, yeah. He was very supportive of it.

LC: Did you take him out and about and show him as much—?

JS: We went to one of the famous Gardens in Yokohama. He was always very
interested in gardens and I think he enjoyed that.
LC: Let me ask about the actual course that you took. What did an average day of language instruction look like?

JS: Well, it was about six hours of classes and the teachers were all young Japanese, many of them women. Many of the women were very attractive young women. They were good, very bright, good enthusiastic teachers. Fortunately, because I entered the school at a relatively advanced level, I was always in a one on one situation with a teacher.

LC: I see, yeah.

JS: Which can be exhausting, but it was also very good language training. Because I used it so much out of class, I made very good study progress.

LC: Were you learning primarily an oral curriculum?

JS: It was both oral and written. I learned all the Kanji, the characters. I could read editorials fairly well when I left school. Because I was interested in the written language, I continued private study thereafter. The course was devised by Dr. Eleanor Jordan out at Yale, who was one of the great teachers and pioneers in East Asian teaching. It was a very—for the time, a very efficient language teaching. We used for instance, tapes of Japanese soap operas. One was a semi-comic one called Chakkai Fujin, Ukkari Fujin. The teacher would run the tape and you’d listen to it and then you’d go back and listen to it again and then stop the tape whenever you didn’t understand it. The teacher would explain it. Then you’d run it again until you really got it. It was a marvelous way of learning the real spoken language.

LC: Right, because you’re catching idioms and humor.

JS: Yeah, catching idioms and inflections and the pauses and all the things, which are part of the real language.

LC: But very intensive, as you say, you’re doing this with a teacher sitting right there focusing on you.

JS: Right.

LC: Wow. This program lasted for how long?

JS: Two years.

LC: What an incredible opportunity.
JS: There were a lot of benefits from it. They had programs of sending us out on school trips, usually by yourself or with a teacher, a couple were grouped. So I traveled to the far corners of Japan, sometimes on my own.

LC: Were these designed trips? Were there particular objectives in mind either in terms of the curriculum or in terms of the actual travel? “You must see this. You must see this”, that kind of thing?

JS: They were basically just to give you a chance to use your language in real situations.

LC: What kinds of places did you go?

JS: Well, for instance, I went off to the Noto-Hanto, the peninsula on the Japan seaside, which at that time, was one of the back areas in Japan, very seldom frequented by foreigners. I was traveling up there myself. This is kind of a funny trip because at the time, I had a big boil on my nose.

LC: Ouch.

JS: I looked exactly like the arch typical demon of Japan with this big red nose.

LC: (Laughing) Right.

JS: People were staring at me, one, because I was a foreigner, but just particularly with a foreigner with this great big red nose. I was very self conscious about it. But I went up to, for instance, a town of Wajima, which was a lacquer making town, fishing town, and they had nearby some marvelous old Samurai houses and things.

LC: Oh, wow. Wow.

JS: So you really got a flavor of Japan going on these very provincial railroad cars with all the fisherwomen with her baskets and fish and things like that.

LC: What kind of era would the rail stock have been from, the cars themselves?

JS: Well, they were basically post war somewhat austere.

LC: Do you remember anything else about the different travels that you went on?

JS: I didn’t. I was not much of a camera bug, though I did take some. I went once with one of my teachers who was a very good photographer and he took some excellent photographs of which I have. We went down to Kurashiki, south of Osaka, which has these marvelous tile buildings, kind of a living museum even in that point.
LC: Amazing. Absolutely amazing.
JS: It was good fun.
LC: Yeah.
JS: It was a fascinating way to see Japan and it made you a very thorough Japan
hand by the time you finished with the course.
LC: I should think. Yes. Yes. I should think. Were you also—did you have any
other sort of curricular content aside from this kind of cultural familiarization and the
language training? Were there other things that you were meant to be studying as well or
were you kind of on your own?
JS: Well, you were expected to try to read on Japan, and I read very extensively
on it. The requirement—it was not a requirement; it was just kind of expected of you I
think.
LC: Right. Right.
JS: I met my future wife during that stretch and she was an actress with the
Bungakuza, one of the very top Japanese drama troops. She had a load of friends. So I
was very much into the Japanese community.
LC: How did you meet her?
JS: Well, she was a friend of a friend, a normal way you meet a woman. She was
divorced. She had a young marriage to a Japanese actor. Her husband, he was a good
guy, but very much of a womanizer. He was part Russian actually, oddly enough. That
broke up.
LC: Just to include her in the record, could you give us her name?
JS: Yeah, her family name was Kurata, Kurata Mayumi, M-A-Y-U-M-I. Her
father was a movie director, quite prominent before World War II. He went down during
the war as a gunzoku, a civilian attached to the military, and founded the Indonesian
movie industry. He had a fine time in Indonesia. He had a local mistress, lots of
Indonesian friends who took care of him at the end of the war. Like a lot of Japanese
intellectuals, he was basically leftist inclined.
LC: Sure.
JS: But he escaped the attentions of the Kempeitai.
LC: Did he—yes, go head.
JS: And was able to do this. He came back after the war.

LC: Okay.

JS: And did a number of movies, but my wife said that his problem was that he was very much artistic inclined rather than budgetary inclined and his movies were too expensive and too artsy for the industry. So he finally got kind of edged out and did some work as a scenario writer and things like that, but he was a very good man.

LC: What about her mother?

JS: Her mother was from a better family. They were farm background, but her family was Honda, a rather common name from Kushu near Beppu. She was, I’d say, a shrewd, cheerful, outgoing woman of limited education, but a very, very nice woman, good woman.

LC: At what point did you meet them John?

JS: Well, I met them not long after I started dating my beloved wife.

LC: Okay. What kind of a relationship did you have with them? Obviously, it would’ve been eased by the fact that you could speak Japanese.

JS: Yeah. Well, I had a good relationship, but her father only half jokingly I say, he’d like anybody who’d be willing to take his daughter. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Oh, that’s nice.

JS: Because she was kind of a—she was a strong-willed woman.

LC: Oh, okay.

JS: With a divorce, her chances of remarriage in Japan were very limited.

LC: Yeah, so there’s some cultural baggage there behind that remark.

JS: Yeah, yeah.

LC: But she did not have any children?

JS: She had a daughter.

LC: Oh, okay. I’m sorry.

JS: From her former marriage who was adopted by her mother and father and raised by them, Kurata On, is a strange name, O-N. Paul, her former husband’s family had children with the water radical in it, and so On Chan, the character is the on of onsen for hot water, which has a good meaning in Japan.

LC: Yes.
JS: But nobody could read it. So when she got to school, they read the name off the list and they come to this character and say, “Uh, uh, how do you say it? How do you pronounce it?” It’s just an unusual name. The only other one in Japan with that name is a male, which is found—anyway, I have good relations with her and I talked with her actually on the phone yesterday.

LC: Oh, okay. I was going to say, even to this time, and you do.
JS: Yes.
LC: She’s still living in Japan then I take it?
JS: Yeah. She never married, like a lot of young Japanese women.
LC: Yes.
JS: Japanese men basically are rather boring. She’s an attractive girl too.
LC: What did she end up doing for her living?
JS: Well, not much. She’s a very bright girl, but after college, she worked for companies for a number of years and then basically quit and manages apartments, which were built on the same property as her house.
LC: Oh, I see.
JS: Small, very small Japanese.
LC: Now, turning back to the institute for a moment, were there non Foreign Service personnel taking the language training?
JS: Yeah. We had a couple from other agencies. We had a Canadian diplomat and a New Zealand diplomat among us, was a very nice guy.
LC: Were those guys people that you ended up being, you know, essentially friends with?
JS: Yeah. We were all quite friendly with each other. Excuse me one second Ms. Calkins.
LC: Sure. John, was it a set and known thing that the language training would last the two year period that was normal for a post?
JS: Yes. It was at that stage because of the difficulty of Japanese [for] people who were in for two years.
LC: Yes.
JS: Some people did very well. Oddly enough, for some reason, the bachelors did better than the married folk.

LC: Hmm, that’s interesting. That’s an interesting observation. (Both laughing)

Your next posting came through at what stage?

JS: Well, I was assigned after that to the economic section of the embassy in Tokyo.

LC: So you stayed in Tokyo then.

JS: Right.

LC: But was it a different part of the city?

JS: I moved to the house of my friend, Vincent Brandt, who’d been in the embassy and had the job before me. It was a Japanese style house in Kojimachi, not far from the embassy.

LC: Can—go ahead.

JS: It was a very nice little house with a pre-war Japanese garden. It was owned by a family that had a house right next door.

LC: That sounds nice. Was it spacious in any way or was it very small, I was wondering?

JS: It was small, but the grounds were oddly enough fairly spacious for Tokyo.

LC: Interesting. Did you care for the garden?

JS: I had a Japanese gardener who came and attended. It got me interested in Japanese gardening though, and later on I worked on ones of my own.

LC: Let me ask about the assignment at the economic session. First of all, this was really the first economic specific work that you had done, is that right?

JS: Right. I was not well versed on economics and always felt a slight inferiority complex as a result.

LC: What kind of work were you tasked with?

JS: Well, basically east-west trade issues with communist COCOM (Coordinating Committee on Multilateral Export Controls), the trying to block sales to the Soviet Union. I was very junior and pretty raw in that sort of work. The two senior officers of the economic section were excellent men. Phillip Trezise, who was a very capable man, later to work for the Brookings Institute.
LC: How do you spell his last name John?
JS: T-R-E-Z-I-S-E, Phillip Trezise. A very capable economist and pretty much a Japan hand too, worked later in the White House and so forth.
LC: Now for someone who didn’t understand the COCOM list, can you just explain that a little bit?
JS: Well, it was the intent to deny the Soviet Union and other communist states strategic materials and products. The big issue when I was involved with it was wide diameter pipe for new oil lines and we were trying to pressure the Japanese not to sell it to the Russians.
LC: Was there something distinctive about the piping that we’re talking about either in terms of its composition or the machining of it or anything particular like that?
JS: Not particularly that. I guess the idea was that it would increase the ability of the Soviet military to operate in East Europe by building a better oil delivery systems.
LC: How successful were you in persuading the Japanese that this material needed to not get through to the Soviet Union?
JS: The Japanese were generally pretty good on the COCOM issues from our point of view, but I think on this one, they kind of said, “What the hell? This isn’t that strategic.”
LC: Okay. Okay.
JS: As I remember it.
LC: There were products that moved onto and then off of the list to over time.
JS: Right.
LC: So the management of this was fairly complicated I’m sure.
JS: Yeah. I really didn’t understand it that well to be honest, but I did my duty.
LC: Were you also charged with developing contacts in the business community in Tokyo?
JS: I had some, yes. I went out to both the officials and sometimes the business people and talked to them on the issues. It was not central to the economic sections interests in Japan I think, but it was one of the many functions.
LC: What issues were central? Obviously controlling the transfer of certain technologies and products was one. What other things?
JS: Well, for the section or my little purpose?

LC: Well, um, either actually or both.

JS: Well, I think the main sections were the trade issues. At that point, the stress was more on helping Japan recover economically so it could be a bigger and more important ally to the United States. So, the later trade issues where we worried about Japanese competition in automobiles and things like that, were much less prominent in that stage.

LC: Right. This was too early yet for that.

JS: Too early yet.

LC: Was the United States utilizing a number of different tools in order to help sort of hop up the Japanese cultural recovery, like a private investment, you know, government incentives for different kinds of projects and so forth?

JS: Not so much that because the Japanese were doing a strong enough job on their own on most of this. But I’d say we were just generally supportive of the Japanese government and the Conservative, Liberal Democratic Party at that time. They were friendly to Americans. They were good allies. The embassy was arguing that they should be supported politically and so forth. The Ambassador at that time was Douglas MacArthur II, a rather imperious man who was, I think, modeled himself on his famous uncle.

LC: Tell me a little bit about your impressions of him.

JS: Well, I got to see him fairly up close partly because I was, well, I was part of his staff.

LC: Sure.

JS: Somewhat insulated from him. I had kind of a mixed view of him. He in some ways was quite effective because of his name, because this fact that his wife was the daughter of Vice President Barkley. He had an ability to affect events in Washington, which was beyond that of a normal professional ambassador, his self confidence. So at that stage, which was not long after the end of the formal military occupation of Japan, part of the Ambassador’s mission was to kind of reclaim the supremacy of the civilian role in dealing with Japan and to keep the military properly in their place. MacArthur
was particularly good at this because of his stature and his name, political influence. In that way, I think he is quite effective, the military lapsed into the proper role.

LC: (Laughing) Yeah, the supine position.

JS: On the other hand, I don’t think he had much feel for Japan. He was a Europeanist. I remember a friend of mine who was his assistant said that on a State Department sheet, which said, “Which languages are important for your job?” MacArthur had put down French and German, the two languages he knew.

LC: Right. (Laughing)

JS: He was not a good listener. He was a good talker, but not a good listener.

LC: How frequently did you see him?

JS: Well, a fair amount, but of course, always in a very subordinate status. I was not that under his immediate eye.

LC: Sure.

JS: But I knew his daughter and as a bachelor, I got invited sometimes to fill in a table at his residence. So I saw a little more of him. It might have been the case considering my rank.

LC: What was his daughter’s name?

JS: Oh, I forget now. She was a nice girl.

LC: Of what sort of age was she?

JS: Well, she was my age. I took her out on a couple of dates. So I never dated her intensively by any means.

LC: Right. Right. But you were sort of the square as needed for diplomatic functions?

JS: Well, I occasionally filled in the table there and I went to quite a few receptions, of course, as a regular embassy officer.

LC: How important were these social functions that you’re talking about to the sort of business of the embassy? I mean, I know that they’re very common events. I just wonder at that time whether there was anything special about the flavor of US Embassy receptions in Tokyo.

JS: Well, it’s a very necessary part of the business because people want to meet the ambassador, have the contact. You’ve got to see them and meet them and talk to
them. Then the receptions like that are a key part of a normal diplomacy. I think it
changed somewhat when Ambassador Reischauer replaced MacArthur. Reischauer, a
third of Japan hand, a fine man, did an excellent job.

LC: Were you still there?
JS: I was still there, but at that point, I think, I guess moved up to Sapporo as
consul.

LC: Yeah. Reischauer might have come in, what, ’64, something like that?
JS: When the Kennedys came in.
JS: Jim Thompson who was a young assistant, young man in the Kennedy
Administration, dealing somewhat with the ambassadorial appointments had studied
under Reischauer to some extent at Harvard, kept putting his name at the top of the list.
So they finally picked him.

LC: Well, you know, thinking back on sort of 20th Century, well, certainly post-
war US relations with Japan, the Reischauer years are seen as quite important then his
expertise as crucial to that.
JS: Yeah.
LC: He’s certainly thought of as having been an effective ambassador. Is that
your conception?
JS: Yeah, well, that was certainly my impression. I think he was a little weaker
in dealing with Washington because he didn’t have MacArthur’s savvy and push in
Washington, but he was not un-influential by any means. He was well accepted by the
Kennedy White House.

LC: Yeah. The Harvard connection helps.
JS: The Harvard connection. He was a fine man with an excellent understanding
of Japan and a good sense. So, he did, I thought, a very good job in Japan, brought great
credit to the United States.

LC: You moved from the embassy to Sapporo in 1962?
JS: 19—yeah, I arrived in ’63, had two years up there in North Japan.

LC: Okay. What was your title up there?
JS: I was the Consul, the principle officer of our Consular post, which was a small one and traditionally had gone to a Japanese language-speaking officer.
LC: Okay.
JS: We used to joke, it was only a joke, that there were two factions among the Japan specialists. The Fukuoka faction and the Sapporo faction, because both of those positions were usually Japan, almost always Japan specialists and the training ground for the Japan officers in the Department of State.
LC: John, at this point, your career within the Foreign Service is being, you know, is obviously very heavily weighted now toward Japan.
JS: Right.
LC: You’re certainly considered a Japan hand. Did you have any concerns about the sort of longer stretch and how that would play out for you?
JS: Well, I think some lingering concerns. You worry in part about being overspecialized, but Japan was important. It was fascinating. It demanded expertise. It was almost a career within a career. So, it was probably a very good specialization to take.
LC: It’s one of these very interesting, I think, tensions within the Foreign Service, that you know, having a specialization particularly in a strategically important country with the language background and all is extremely important and highly valued, but there’s also this kind of undercurrent sense that one needs to have a broader, you know, sort of, if you will, education in the world and have some experience outside of one’s primary area.
JS: Yeah, you’re dead on with that. Kissinger, of course, spoke to that, saying that he thought officers in the Foreign Service were too narrow.
LC: Yes, and brought in an initiative I guess in the early ‘70s too.
JS: Yup.
LC: To address that.
JS: Well, it is a question. You need the expertise and the time on it in a place like Japan or China, as you know.
LC: Sure.
JS: On the other hand, it’s all good to have some knowledge through direct experience in Europe or the Middle East or so forth.

LC: Right. It’s a very interesting tension.

JS: Yeah it is.

LC: Who actually, John, makes the decisions about postings, such that they’re trying to balance these? Who’s actually, you know, the Dalong who’s manipulating the puppet to achieve the kind of balance the Foreign Service looks for?

JS: Well, it’s about a half and a half, I think, Ms. Calkins. The Foreign Service respects people’s wishes to a fair extent. So if you want to go someplace, there’s a fair chance that you can go that direction. On the other hand, the needs of the service are such so the personnel types or the diplomatic exigencies of an Iraq crisis will whip you off to a place that you’d never expected to go to.

LC: Right. Is the personnel function a specialized one within the Foreign Service?

JS: Yes and no. They’re both I think. It is a hard function because the service is somewhat odd by its very nature and people gripe continuously and sometimes quite correctly about personnel policies.

LC: Right. I spent a little time in Washington.

JS: Oh, so you know it.

LC: I did hear some of that. (Laughing)

JS: (Laughing) Yeah.

LC: This would’ve been a long time ago. I’m sure it’s not like that anymore.

JS: Oh, no. It’s paradise now.

LC: (Laughing) Tell me about your own work at Sapporo as the consul. What did that consist of? What did it look like?

JS: Oh, it was a marvelous job. You were fully in the Japanese community. You had a more important position than your age or real value should warrant. I’ve dealt with most senior officials there from the governor on down even though I was a stripling in the early ’30s.

LC: Yeah.
JS: You were independent. My boss was a far distance away. You were allowed
to romp around. I went all over Hokkaido, talked to all sorts of people. I had two very
fine officers working for me. It was an interesting crew. There was a fine ski slope
within twenty-five minutes of my office. So I could zip out there in the winter when the
work was slow. It was just a marvelous job.

LC: Were you married at this time John?

JS: I’d married at the tail end of it.

LC: Oh, okay.

JS: My beloved wife, I had worried a long time about whether to marry her or not
because my wife was very Japanese, spoke no English. I wasn’t sure if she could be
transplanted. I finally made the decision, which turned out to be perfectly correct.

LC: Yeah.

JS: Because she adapted with very little problems in the United States.

LC: Were there any concerns expressed to you by the Foreign Service or others
about marrying a Japanese woman?

JS: Well, there’s some basic problems with it. I think it does inhibit your career
to some extent, but not much anymore.

LC: In what way would it?

JS: Well—

LC: I mean, for some people that’s just unimaginable.

JS: Yeah, exactly. You know, you just, you’re married to a foreigner as an
American representative. On the other hand, when I married, the ambassador was
Reischauer who had a Japanese wife.

LC: Absolutely. Yes. So, if there were concerns, they weren’t—it wasn’t
vocalized?

JS: No. I think the large part had passed by that point.

LC: Okay. Okay. Nobody grabbed you by the scruff of the neck and said, “Not
a good idea.”

JS: No. No. Although, I had to submit my resignation when I submitted my
request to marry a foreigner.

LC: Why was that?
JS: That was the regulations at the time. It certainly makes you think seriously about it. In my case, it was not picked up, as I think by that point was the general practice.

LC: So this was kind of a pro forma exercise following a certain internal.
JS: It was a little more than pro forma because they certainly could say you were out.

LC: Did she have to go through any kind of background check or anything?
JS: Yes. She had to go through a full background check. She was interviewed by the Deputy Chief of Mission, which turned out to be painless because it was John Emerson, who was a very fine Japan specialist officer. She kind of enjoyed the interview.

LC: Did she?
JS: He was an artistic man himself. So he was kind of interested in her background and went quite well.

LC: You’ve described her also as being fairly strong willed.
JS: Oh, yeah. She was outgoing and strong willed.
LC: That certainly I’m sure—
JS: Self confident.
LC: Aided her.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Very interesting. Were there others in your experience either that you knew about who had served earlier or in subsequent years, who, because they had to submit this resignation actually had it accepted?
JS: I don’t remember any of it at my time that it happened to. I think a couple drifted out of the service, but not because they were necessarily pushed out, but because of their wives, they thought they should move on to other things.
LC: Pursue something else.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Do you have any idea when that regulation was ditched?
JS: I think within five or seven years probably after I—it was getting outmoded by that point.
LC: I was going to say, it’s pretty archaic.
JS: Yeah. It was archaic by that point.

LC: Where did you live while you were a consul? Did you live on the property?
JS: Yeah, in the house itself. It was an old, semi-western style house in Sapporo. Rather charming, rather decrepit, nice garden, well located. The offices were half of it. The house was the other half. It was very nice on the whole. There was some problems, you know, like when we had demonstrators that were at my house as well as my office.

LC: John, tell me about the demonstrators. What was that in connection with?
JS: Well, it was standard. The leftist would occasionally come in to protest something in consonance with their general activities against the US-Japan security treaty or some other specific event. Mostly it was pro forma, but I did remember I had one very obstreperous communist youth group visit me. We had the police downstairs in case they had trouble.

LC: At this point, this would be in the early 1960s. How much of a worry or preoccupation was the communist movement in Japan?
JS: Well, a fairly significant one, partly because during the votes in the general elections, the left had always seemed to make some progress.
LC: Yes.
JS: So there was a feeling that at some point, the Socialist Party, which was not communist, but was not sympathetic to a bunch of our cause, was going to win and take over the government. So there was this kind of running permanent worry, which in the long run, of course, did not pan out.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember of the assassination of the President in 1963?
JS: Yeah. I was actually down in Tokyo, because Secretary Rusk and the party of the American cabinet was due in the next day for the annual US-Japan Ministerial Level Conference. I was one of the interpreters for the cabinet during the meeting mostly. I was awoken that morning by a phone call from my vice consul saying the president had been killed. The plane turned around over the Pacific and went back to Washington.

LC: That’s right.
JS: I hastened back to Sapporo where we had a memorial service for President Kennedy. Many Japanese, of course, came in to express their sorrow.

LC: John, how was that managed? Was there some kind of a visitors register in the consultant building?

JS: Yes. Exactly.

LC: Okay. What, if any, sort of ceremonial or, you know, rituals beyond that, did the consul observe, a consulate I should say?

JS: Well, we went into a kind of official morning for a month. They restricted our activities in course for that. We also had a memorial church service, the Episcopal Priest, who was in a semi-missionary capacity there, was a friend of mine. He gave a ceremony, which we helped manage for the President.

LC: Was this an American then?

JS: Yes.

LC: Okay. Where was he from?

JS: He was from, I think from New York State.

LC: Do you remember his name at all?

JS: Bill—or, dear.

LC: (Laughing) That’s okay. I just wondered if it was something you at hand we could include in here.

JS: Yeah. He was a good guy, very good guy. He worked part of his time at Hokkaido University, teaching English and other things. His wife was, I think also doing the same. They were interesting, intelligent people.

LC: How did the change of administration affect the business of the American diplomatic community in Japan, if at all?

JS: Well, I’d say very little. We followed the events in Washington, the difference in style of course with Johnson and Kennedy, but it didn’t have any real impact on our dealing with Japan I think.

LC: Did it bother you particularly personally at all, you know, some—?

JS: With Kennedy—I mean, Johnson coming in?

LC: Well, the assassination actually?
JS: Oh, yeah. You know, I thought it was a very sad event of course, for our
country.

LC: Did you have much familiarity with Johnson’s record, either as vice
president or in the Senate? Did you have a sense of who he was?

JS: Yeah. I had a fair sense because I followed the papers well, closely.

LC: Sure.

JS: As you say, it was a very significant change in style in Washington. Later on,
when I was in Washington after the Sapporo assignment, I guess we’ll come to this, I was
assigned to the White House on detail.

LC: Right.

JS: And got some personal experience in seeing how Johnson worked in the
White House, all the issues they were facing.

LC: Yeah, absolutely. Perhaps we’ll take that up at our next session. Let’s take a
break here for today.

LC: Tell me about the work of the desk itself.

JS: Well, it handles the specific work on Japan in the department, a liaison with
the embassy, all the matters that a normal office in the department has to handle on Japan.
It was a very good staff. Richard Petree who was a Japan specialist officer I knew, a fine
man and a very good officer. I think we had six officers including myself. All of whom,
oddly enough, had been in the military and all who’d had combat experience. One was a
good friend, William Givens, who was a West Point graduate. He’d come into the
department I’ve known in Japan. I’ve known, I guess all the officers before in passing. It
was a very good crew.

LC: Did some of those guys rotate out while you were in the office?

JS: Well, I had about one year on the desk. I was, I guess, the first one plucked
out because I was sent over to the White House as—to work for Robert Komer, for at this
time, my assignment. I spent about three months over there working on Vietnam.

LC: Now, John, that’s an extremely interesting transition and I wonder if you can
recall any details about how you came to be kind of plucked out of the Foreign Service
pool of officers, even those with East Asian experience to go over to the White House.
JS: The White House, Johnson perhaps under all presidents as a measure to keep
down its budget, partially for political reasons, tends to draw on the other departments of
the government, the Department of Defense, the state and so forth to pick up its costs and
at personnel. Komer’s deputy was Ambassador William Leonhart, who I’d known when
he was Deputy Chief of Mission in Tokyo. He needed a staff assistant, kind of a lowly
guy to shuffle his papers, et cetera. So, he drew on the department and he interviewed a
couple of guys and I was picked for the assignment.

LC: John, what had your relationship been with then DCM Leonhart (Deputy
Chief of Mission)?
JS: Well, he’d been the number two person in the embassy in Tokyo under
MacArthur when I was there. Leonhart was a very bright guy, Jewish from a humble
background in West Virginia, a quick study type. Not an East Asian type. Not an easy
person. He was, I think, transmitted a lot of Ambassador Douglas MacArthur’s pressures
onto the juniors under him. But he was good to me. I think he was in kind of a difficult
position in this small White House office under Komer. Komer himself was abrasive.
(Laughing) Leonhart was somewhat abrasive too, but Leonhart was, I think, somewhat
under the gun in the job.

LC: What was Komer’s position at this point when you were working under him?
JS: He was the special assistant to the President dealing with matters Vietnamese
Pacification, Vietnamese economy and so forth. He was a career Central Intelligence
Agency man, basically a Middle Eastern type if I remember correctly.

LC: I think that’s right.
JS: Had been picked out because of his drive for this job, trying to harness the
widespread American government to focus on the needs of Vietnam on this civil side.

LC: When did you actually go over to the White House John?
JS: Well, this must’ve been the spring or late spring of ’66.

LC: If you recall, can you just give maybe a pencil sketch outline of the Vietnam
situation at the time that you went over to work for Komer and Leonhart? I mean, what
do you remember as being the sort of key areas of the American appreciation of Vietnam
at the time you walked over there?

JS: I was a little hazy on it because I was not a Vietnam type before that.
LC: Sure. Right.
JS: But I think it was emerging from the awful period of the generals’ contesting for power when Thieu beginning to consolidate it, if that’s correct. The situation in Vietnam was obviously going badly, that things had not worked through just the advisory presence in Vietnam. We’d come in in major force under Westmoreland who tried in essence do the job for the Vietnamese. There was this parallel effort to try to pull the civil society of the economy, the Pacification effort together. It was a huge job in its own right, parallel to the straight military effort.

LC: This is sort of where you came in.
JS: Yeah. I was just a flunky of course.
LC: Right. Right, just a flunky. Tell me, what did flunkies do who work for Leonhart and Komer?
JS: I screened the huge amounts of paper that came in, to try to pick what Leonhart should really read. The only really substantive thing I did I thought was I would go over several times a week to the USAID (United States Agency for International Development) meeting on Vietnam and take notes on it for Komer and then drew a memo when I came back. That was interesting and educational and perhaps of real use.

LC: What were you finding out about the AID effort at this point? How big was it?
JS: Well, they were trying to grapple with this huge task that they picked up. I think the only perhaps real contribution I made was in one of my memos, I suggested that the USAID East Asia Bureau be split between Vietnam and all the rest of East Asia. That they’d have a separate one on Vietnam and actually Komer pushed that through. I don’t know whether I was the inspiration for that or not, but it was one substantive thing that was done.

LC: Now John, for somebody who didn’t have much of an idea of how the bureaucracies of state department and AID function, what difference would an organizational or administrative change like that make?
JS: Well, it allowed a real concentration on Vietnam, rather than having the senior person of the bureau have to be concerned with what’s going on elsewhere in East Asia.

LC: So, allowing some focus.

JS: Yeah, more focus, more concentrated effort on Vietnam.

LC: This may not be something that one can recall sort of off hand in terms of dollars, but what was the distribution of effort for AID between Vietnam and the rest of the Asian investments that it had?

JS: I think Vietnam was beginning to swamp the rest of the effort, but I don’t know the actual percentages.

LC: Where were these meetings held?

JS: In the Department of State in the USAID offices.

LC: Was there any diceness or difficulty for you as a Foreign Service officer on temporary assignment for the White House to be going back to the State Department and reporting on State Department activities for the White House?

JS: There was a little, I think, in the sense that they correctly saw me as a Komer spy on their operations, but, you know, I was just in the audience and I’d take my notes and go back.

LC: Right.

JS: But I think they were conscious that Komer was eavesdropping on what they were doing.

LC: That perhaps suggests that there was some tension there between State Department personnel and AID personnel and what the Komer effort was doing, maybe not so much about Komer himself, although that possibility. Can you kind of sketch that out too? Was there tension there?

JS: I think there’s a basic tension, probably in any similar situation when somebody comes into the White House and then tries to discipline the other great agencies of government. They knew Komer had the president’s ear, that he could put pressures on them to do things in different ways. That always makes people bureaucratically nervous, for good reason.
LC: John, looking at it from the other side of the coin, was there any broader
tension between the State Department, AID people and the agency people that obviously,
you know, had Komer’s back in some way just because of long affiliation?
JS: I can’t really comment on that.
LC: Okay, okay. Tell me, you were in this position, this somewhat awkward
position for just three months or so?
JS: I think it was about four months over there. It was a fairly bright staff. It was
a small staff. I think there were about eight officers. They included Richard Holbrook,
who was going on to a great position.
LC: Yeah. Now he was—
JS: Charles Cooper, who was a brilliant economist, Richard Morsteen who was
also a very capable good guy and Robert Montague, a very bright Army colonel, then
colonel who came out of Vietnam to join Komer’s staff.
LC: Because Richard Holbrooke has had, you know, an extremely interesting
stellar career one could say, can you tell me what your impressions of him were at that
point when you knew him?
JS: Well, I knew him quite well at that point. He was still fairly junior, but he
was a hard, obviously extremely ambitious capable guy who’d come out of Vietnam. I
think he’d been the staff assistant to the deputy ambassador and had previous experience
in the countryside. So he came with a good Vietnam background. He was very capable
at thrusting himself ahead, which is I think one of his hallmarks of his career.
LC: How did he go about doing that? Do you remember any incidents where you
thought, a ha, this guy is climbing on his way somewhere?
JS: Yeah. One was—one day I was partially filling in for him and he was off
having lunch with Joe Alsop. That struck me.
LC: Not a lot of junior people—
JS: Not a lot of junior people do that.
LC: For sure. (Laughing) What about Bob Montague? Can you give sort of a
sketch of him, as you knew him?
JS: Well, Bob was I thought a very brilliant officer. He’d been key in planning in
Saigon, a very decent man. He came with this wealth of Vietnam experience, one of the
guys who’d stayed with the problem. I remember one comment he made. I kind of questioned the, what I thought, was the over Americanization of our effort there. I said, “Well, the problem was that the earlier thing when we basically worked through an advisory effort just was failing and they had to do something different.” Bob brought this good sense and world of knowledge on Vietnam to the Komer operation.

LC: It sounds John like you were learning something from these guys too.
JS: Oh, yeah. I was innocent on Vietnam, though I was an Asian hand, but I was very curious about it. So it was a good education for me.

LC: How did this temporary appointment wind down? How did it come about that you went back to Foggy Bottom?
JS: Well, the Johnson White House, like all White House’s is extremely political. There was a Democratic Party tied young lawyer in Washington who wanted to get involved. They wanted to make space for him, so I was moved out and he was moved in.

LC: Um, can you say who that was?
JS: I forget his name. He was a very capable guy and I had lunch with him a couple of times after he took the job. I think he’s probably still prominent, but the name slips me right now.

LC: Was he someone with experience of any kind in Asia?
JS: No. No.

LC: Okay. So he was—
JS: He was just a political—
LC: This was a domestic, political issue.
JS: Yeah.

LC: Okay. Now, did you return to the office of Japanese Affairs?
JS: I returned to the office of Thailand Affairs.
LC: Okay.
JS: I was peripherally involved with Vietnam because Ambassador Graham Martin was then in Bangkok, and later of course to be our ambassador in Vietnam. Martin for good reason was concerned about the implications for our relations with Thailand by the quickly expanding American military presence there in support of the war in Vietnam. So he was trying to keep it under reasonable control, not let the military
just balloon it purely for military purposes. So we had to clear the deployments of additional military units to Thailand and I did that working with a very capable colonel over in the Pentagon.

LC: How long were you in this position?
JS: I was there about one year. The most interesting assignment I had during that stretch was I was an escort officer for the king and queen of Thailand when they made a state visit to the United States in the spring I guess it was of ’67. I traveled with them as they made their tour of the United States.

LC: Tell me about that. That sounds like an extremely interesting opportunity. Did you go? Did you escort them or were part of the retinue that went all around the country or did you see them only in the DC area?
JS: No, it was around the country. Larry Pickering, my capable boss on the Thai desk wanted somebody along to have a sense of how the king was reacting to his visit. It was quite a retinue.

LC: I’ll bet. (Laughing)
JS: The royalty in Thailand is real royalty.
LC: Yes.
JS: The Thai crawl into the king’s presence and he has all the retinue of ladies and waiting for the queen and high counselors and so forth along with him. He also had the Thai ambassador to the United States, Anand Panyarachan, who went on later to be prime minister, a very capable man and the then ambassador in Washington, Sukhít Ninamhimnedá, who was a very fine old scholarly gentleman. We went to Hollywood to stay at the President of IBM (International Business Machines Corporation), Mr. Watson’s estate at an island in Maine to a grand lunch with the Rockefellers in New York and so on. (Laughing) I was tagging along on all of this with the chance to talk to the king and the queen, who was a beautiful woman. I was quite impressed with the king. I thought he was a very sincere, very intelligent man who had the interests of the Thai people very much at heart.

LC: He was how old at that point, the king?
JS: Oh, gosh, he must’ve been in his early fifties or late forties at that point.
LC: Okay. What about the queen? What was your impression of her?
JS: Well, she was a striking woman, looked somewhat like the famous bust of the Queen Nefertiti of Egypt. I think she was probably Sito-Thai in background. I think she’s a slightly controversial figure in Thailand, but the queen and king looked like a very affectionate couple. She certainly carried her role with dignity.

LC: Did they, to your mind as you think back on it, enjoy the visit? Did they have a good time or was this more of the kind of posturing you certainly won’t expect from a state visit?

JS: Well, they were on duty, but it went well. I think they considered it successful and probably as a king or queen, an enjoyable visit. They were well treated in Washington of course as key allies of the United States.

LC: How useful was it from the State Department view point that you were along on this trip?

JS: Well, I think I was of minor use, but I certainly enjoyed it. (Laughing)

LC: I was going to say, you lived the high life, who cares.

JS: Yeah, I lived the high life, lunch with the Rockefellers, et cetera, seeing movie actors in Hollywood.

LC: Who did you see? Did you see anyone whose name might—?

JS: I think George Hamilton was the only one I really remember who was a rather handsome, well-tanned man.

LC: Yeah, he was very tan even then, huh?

JS: Yeah, even then.

LC: (Laughing) The Rockefellers, was this lunch at the Tarrytown Estate or—?

JS: Yes it was, and in the stables, which of course were very well appointed stables.

LC: I’m sure.

JS: Jay Rockefeller was along. I talked to him a bit because he had a Japan background. He’d been a student at International Christian University. I think they had stayed with Japanese who had trouble finding the Japanese futon long enough for him.

LC: He’s of course the senator now.

JS: Yeah.
LC: What did you make of him at that point? Was he another ambitious young man?

JS: Well, he just struck me as a quite capable guy who’s probably going to go all around the world. (Laughing)

LC: Yeah. He had a good start.

JS: He had a good start.

LC: That helps a little bit. (Laughing)

JS: A strong foundation.

LC: Yeah. Absolutely. The work that you did back at the office in terms of approving or checking off on the deployments of additional military units, can you talk a little bit about that work? These are military units, US units being deployed to Thailand.

JS: Well, let’s see. We would be notified that they wanted to send x units. You know, perhaps an ammunition supply unit or something. We would then send it out without supposedly the Pentagon knowing, though they understood it, to the ambassador saying, “Is this okay?” The embassy would reply saying yes or no. Then we would go back to the Pentagon and say yes or no.

LC: How much impact did a “no” have?

JS: Well, I think it really would inhibit or hold it or make it into a bigger issue between the two government departments. But I think it provided a psychological control in any event on the military that they just couldn’t haphazardly send in whatever they wanted into Thailand.

LC: Was there any kind of informal, I’m sure, number that the ambassador sort of had in mind, beyond which he really didn’t want to go in terms of the numbers of US service personnel in Thailand?

JS: I assume there was, but that was his decision of course.

LC: Now did you have any kind of a view on what was happening at the embassy in terms of their discussions with Thai officials on these issues?

JS: Well, it was fairly tricky at times. Thamat Khoman was the Foreign Minister and he was a strong willed, capable man who I think had his mixed feelings about the American, growing American presence in his country. So the ambassador did have to tread carefully dealing with them. Martin himself was of course an extremely strong
willed man. But he was also fairly, I think, attuned in how to work with the Thai, doing
it quietly, respecting their opinions, but pushing hard when he had to.

LC: Did Ambassador Martin come to Washington while you were—?
JS: Yeah. He was with the king and queen. I got to know him on that trip. I
think like everybody has certain mixed feelings about him, but he was—I had also a quite
bit of respect for Martin.

LC: What was the respect founded on, his savvy, his ability to speak for the
country for the United States government in a very forceful way or was there more to it?
JS: Yeah. Exactly. As you say Laura, he was a man of great personal force,
decisive, capable in working within government. He could be arbitrary, not always a
good listener, but he was an intelligent man who I think very much cared for the issue of
the whole Vietnam War, strongly anticommunist out of the New Deal.

LC: Yes. Yes absolutely. John, what, and again, this would be probably based
on just an impression if you have one, what weight did Ambassador Martin have with
White House people at this point?
JS: I think relatively high. I’m not aware of any dissatisfaction that they had with
him at that time. I think he was well placed at that time in that position.

LC: Okay. Did he have access to the President, do you know?
JS: I assume he did in the sense that he was a senior ambassador, but I’m not
knowledgeable to the extent he actually met the President, talked with him.

LC: Well, John, speaking of that, did you see the president?
JS: I only had one encounter, Laura. One day, Komer took his whole staff,
including me over to meet the president. We met in the Fish Room at the White House.
Johnson lived up to every story I’d ever heard about him. He came in, he greeted each
one of us the pressed our flesh, stared us in the eye and then sat down with a discussion
with Komer. It was a very funny meeting because he’d given Komer permission to take a
week off to go to France for vacation, but Johnson hated to have his staff go away for any
reason. So he kind of rode Komer during the meeting and he finally turned to us and he
said, “I want you all to go home tonight, take a good long vacation and come back
refreshed tomorrow morning.”

LC: (Laughing) Is that all, huh?
JS: But you could see how intense Vietnam was on the President’s mind. They were discussing things like the price of pork in Saigon and how the progress was coming on clearing the Saigon port, and matters like that. So, it was a good illustration of how intense was Johnson’s focus at that point on Vietnam.

LC: The level of detail as you point out.

JS: Yes, the level of detail.

LC: With which he concerned himself.

JS: Right.

LC: John, as you know that has in fact emerged as a point of criticism of the president that he got bogged down in and took too much control over detail. Does that sound right to you or do you think perhaps he was playing it just about right?

JS: Well, that one little meeting seemed to indicate that, though beyond that I can’t comment.

LC: Okay. You mentioned also that while at the Office of Thai Affairs and working on these deployment issues that you obviously had to liaise with Pentagon people. Can you tell me a little bit about that end of your work?

JS: Well, I dealt just mainly with this one colonel who was a, at then, an attaché in Jakarta for a number of years. He was very knowledgeable on Indonesia and the Indonesian military and had a good sense of how things worked in East Asia. So, I thought he was an extremely capable officer. My own dealings with him were very satisfactory.

LC: Do you recall his name at all?

JS: Not at the moment. I could look it up probably.

LC: Okay. But he was an Indonesia expert.

JS: Yeah. I think he went out of the military. He later worked as the representative of the Indonesian oil company, Petrominas, in Washington after his retirement.

LC: Okay. Your stay at the Office of Thai Affairs lasted about how long?

JS: About one year.

LC: Okay.
JS: Then my involvement in Vietnam intensely came about because one day an officer I knew, Al Francis, a very hard charging, very capable guy who’d been on the Thai Desk, came back on a visit. He was an advisor in Central Vietnam at that time. He sat and talked to Larry Pickering, my boss, about his experiences in Vietnam. At the end of it, I thought, gee whiz, that’s what I want to do. So that night, I talked to my wife to see what she would say and then went back the, I think the next day or so to the personnel people and volunteered for a service in Vietnam and was lapped up of course.

LC: I’m sure. What can you tell me about what your wife said when you brought this idea to her?

JS: Well, she said, “Fine. We’ll do it.”

LC: Really? Would this have involved as far as the two of you could tell at that time, her relocation to Vietnam with you?

JS: Yeah. Yeah. She knew that would happen.

LC: Okay. She was ready to go?

JS: Yeah. She was ready to go.

LC: Wow.

JS: She’s a game girl.

LC: I guess so. Yeah, Vietnam in 1967, yeah, she was pretty game.

JS: Yeah. She ended up two years in—a year and a half in Bangkok when I was in the field in Vietnam. Then she came over with my young son under special permission for the next two years when I was in the embassy.

LC: To Saigon.

JS: To Saigon.

LC: What was the situation in terms of Foreign Service personnel going to Vietnam? Can you kind of sketch that out? Was there a shortage of people? Were there needs because of the escalation exceeding the number of available people with training and so forth?

JS: Kind of like Iraq now. There was more or less a draft for Vietnam, but I think a lot of officers volunteered. A lot of them were new officers who’d just come in and were kind of summarily assigned to Vietnam. But the Department of State certainly fulfilled its duties in supplying a good quality, large number of officers for Vietnam.
LC: Did you have to clear, just procedurally your intention to volunteer, go to Vietnam with say Larry Pickering or a deputy assistant secretary?
JS: Yeah. Of course I told him I’d do it and Larry understood and said yes.
LC: Did it go higher than that? Did you have to talk with a deputy assistant secretary or anything like that?
JS: No. No. It was just between Larry and the personnel people.
LC: Okay. So with no apparent obstacles to your new plan, how did things go? How did you proceed?
JS: Well, then I left the desk and went into the Foreign Service Institute, which at that point, was located in the garage in Arlington Towers across the river from the department and took one year of language training there. That was of course extremely useful. One year wasn’t enough really to get you high up in the language, but I emerged with the Foreign Service rating system on language with a two plus speaking in the language and worked hard on it while I was in Vietnam. Of course did a lot of reading and preparation. It was an interesting period, in some ways, somewhat depressing because while we were at the institute, this somewhat dismal circumstances of this redone garage, there were some major anti-Vietnam demonstrations in Washington. I went down and wandered through them. That was an interesting send off.
LC: Tell me about that, John. Would this have been in the spring of 1968?
JS: Yeah. Exactly, Laura. There were—
LC: What did you see?
JS: Well, just people shouting against our involvement in large numbers. And yet, we were going off to Vietnam with that as our send off.
LC: How did that feel for you?
JS: Well, I was not at all discouraged about because being a professional officer, it’s kind of interesting to be involved with things that are major issues. It makes it more challenging, more exciting. Another thing though that was I think somewhat discouraging was there was major problems in Washington when Martin Luther King was assassinated. We kind of gathered outside the Foreign Service Institute, Vietnam Center and watched the black clouds of smoke over parts of Washington from the arson and disturbances. Then finally another thing that was of course disturbing, we had a big
Tet party at the Foreign Service Institute. The Vietnamese had prepared food and we were all gathered together there, but the news of course was the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. The Vietnamese were worried for a very good reason about their relatives and about their country.

LC: What was the mood like?
JS: Well, it was somber I’d say, but we marched ahead.

LC: Sure. John, were you watching media coverage of events in South Vietnam?
JS: Yeah. I followed the media. In the aftermaths of Tet of course, it was, again, not an encouraging period.

LC: As a student during this period, as a language student during this period, were you able to or did you have access to any information from within the State Department about what was going on or were you pretty much out there like anyone else watching the news, reading the papers and that was it?
JS: The latter pretty much out there.
LC: Okay.
JS: But we of course got some feedback from official sources too.

LC: As you think back on it, were you pretty much convinced that the allied forces, American troops and ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) troops had done a pretty good job in holding off this set of large, you know, I mean large set of attacks across the country? Did you feel like the troops had done a pretty good job in holding off the VC (Viet Cong)?

JS: I didn’t understand it enough at that point, but later on, that was my conclusion that on the whole, the American forces and the ARVN had done a quite creditable job of blunting the communist offensive at Tet.

LC: Right. Another important development of course during that spring was President Johnson’s decision not to run again and that of course threw open the democratic nomination and one of the contenders of course was Robert Kennedy. I wonder if you recall when he was shot.
JS: Yeah, again, just one more thing that indicated the trauma for our country at that time.
LC: Yeah, an extremely difficult period with these things just coming one right after the other. Really every month, there was some terribly bad—

JS: Well, Chicago disturbances during the Democratic Convention and so forth.

LC: Were you in the D.C. area when Kennedy was shot?

JS: I forget exactly the timing Laura to be honest.

LC: Oh, okay. I just wondered if any of that stood out in your mind at this time.

JS: Well, it did because Kennedy had once come to Tokyo when I was there. We all gathered at the embassy to hear him.

LC: Really?

JS: So, you know, I’d seen him and heard him personally. That made an impression.

LC: What was your impression of him? Do you remember the occasion? Was it he was on a tour or something?

JS: Well, another hard driving Kennedy man.

LC: (Laughing) Yes, sir. What did he talk about, any recollections of that?

JS: Not clearly.

LC: That he was speaking to the embassy staff?

JS: He was speaking to the embassy. I think he touched on the Kennedy interest in working with youth, which I think we were all a little jaundiced about it as a subject.

LC: Why was that?

JS: Well, it was a Kennedy preoccupation and I think many of us felt that this would fade with time, which it did of course.

LC: Also rather far I suppose from the concerns of the embassy.

JS: Yeah, from the realities of which you were doing.

LC: Right, the concerns of the embassy certainly weren’t focused in that direction.

JS: Right.

LC: You mentioned the, in fact, riots in Washington D.C. when Dr. King was killed. Did you have occasion to cross the river and actually go into the city?
JS: Not into the parts that were affected, but when you see the smoke on the 
horizon rising above the great city of Washington, you certainly know that things are not 
good.

LC: Who else was in your language training class? How big was it?
JS: Well, there were quite a few through there. It was a major effort in preparing 
people for Vietnam and was a very useful effort because you certainly arrived on the 
ground in Vietnam with a much better understanding and ability to operate between both 
the language, the chance to talk with so many Vietnamese at the Center, plus the lectures 
and reading, which you were able to do while you were there.

LC: So in addition to, just to clarify, in addition to the sort of more mechanical 
process of actually acquiring some language capability, you were also involved in a 
broader, sort of cultural acclimation process too.
JS: Right.
LC: Okay. Who were the instructors?
JS: Well, many of the language instructors were of course almost exclusively 
Vietnamese and they were a bright lot. Many of them were very attractive girls. One of 
the few attractions of this kind of dismal place at Arlington Towers was you’d be going 
down the hall to your class and there’d be a very good looking girl kind of leaning 
against the door looking mildly like a hooker, but they were—it gave you a good 
impression of I think of the capabilities of Vietnamese as you were taught by these, most 
of them reasonably young Vietnamese in Washington.

LC: You mentioned that they had some concerns for family members during that 
very, you know, unstable Tet period in ’68. Did they talk to you about that? Not just 
you, but the students?
JS: I think we certainly understood their concerns. I don’t remember actually 
talking in depth with Vietnamese.
LC: But you must’ve felt there was some, you know, perhaps some simpatico 
there everyone worried about what was happening.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Okay. John, were there non Foreign Service personnel in the training 
classes?
JS: Yes, there were USAID. There were—a number of the military were there taking—colonels who were going out as in the province, senior or deputy senior advisors. Again, I think the people who did best at the language were the young single people who were going out. I found it a more difficult process than learning Japanese, partly because I was just older, partly because I was not very good with the musical tones, which were so key in Vietnamese language. Again, the classes were larger and didn’t have the individual attention of the Japanese school. So, it was not an easy process learning another very difficult East Asian language, but it certainly was valuable.

LC: Your time with the language training was coming to an end during that summer of 1968. Can you tell me what you knew about your upcoming posting? When did you find out you’d actually be going to Vietnam? Obviously that was a precursor, that was an understood condition, but when did you find out where you would go and what you would be doing?

JS: Well, I knew I would be going to the countryside because that’s where we were intended for. I didn’t know my specific assignment till I got to Saigon. My brother had served in the Delta and I’d visited down there when he was in Vietnam with him. For some reason, I had the idea I wanted to go to the Delta.

LC: You had already been to the Delta?

JS: Yeah. I’d been down just on a quick trip to Ba Xuyen in the Delta where my brother had been.

LC: Roughly when was that John?

JS: Well, I went out on a trip to Thailand and stopped off in Vietnam on the way in ’67.

LC: Oh, okay.

JS: My brother had been one year as I mentioned before in Ba Xuyen and Chuong Thien as the JUSPAO advisor.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JS: But he was, when I visited, he was at the embassy and we just took an Air American flight down to Soc Trang in Ba Xuyen for a quick one-day visit there. But it put in my mind that, for family tradition, maybe I ought to go to the Delta.

LC: Tell me about your arrival in Saigon. How’d you get there?
JS: We went out as a group, the guys in my immediate class of about fifteen or twenty I think. We spent a couple of days in Taiwan looking at economic development there, which was supposedly relevant to what we were going to do in the field.

LC: You sound skeptical.

JS: Well, no. I think it was useful.

LC: Okay.

JS: Then arrived in Saigon. We stayed at a little hotel close to the USAID Headquarters. The first night I was there, or the second day I guess, there was a grenade incident when somebody chucked a grenade in the entrance to USAID, one of the few terror incidents in Saigon. So that was kind of an interesting introduction to Vietnam.

LC: Yeah. I bet that sort of put a real face on what perhaps had been more abstract before that.

JS: Yeah. I went over with a friend of mine, Hawthorn Mills to meet with John Vann in III Corps. He was then the senior advisor for the [CORDS]—over there. But I instead asked to go to the Delta and was assigned down to Chau Doc on the Cambodian border up the Bassac River.

LC: Right. Let me ask—

JS: I spent my first six months there.

LC: Okay. Let me ask you a couple of questions there. What impression did you form of John Vann? Can you go over the circumstances of the meeting? Was this in Nha Trang or where did you actually meet him?

JS: This was over at III Corps Headquarters at [Bien Hoa]. I just met him in passing at that time, though I got to know him fairly well later on and had a very high opinion of Vann.

LC: You reported to him later, is that right?

JS: Yeah. I reported to him later.

LC: Okay. But this was just kind of a flying trip?

JS: This was just a flying trip. My friend, Hawthorn Mills was being interviewed for a job there, which he took.

LC: Okay.

JS: I basically just shook Vann’s hand at that point.
LC: You were pretty much directed towards the Delta.
JS: Yeah. I was directed towards the Delta.
LC: Okay. How did you get out to Chau Doc?
JS: I took the normal Air America flight and arrived and took the position of the New Life Development Officer on the staff. A title I’ve always treasured.
LC: (Laughing) What, for someone who’s not familiar with the reference, what was a New Life Officer supposed to do?
JS: Well, I’m not quite sure. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) So we’re all rather unfamiliar with this.
JS: A scramble of the civilian side of this joint civil military advisory team, just to digress for a second. When the advisory effort first started in Vietnam, each agency, including of course mainly the military had representatives in each of the provinces. You had a representative of USAID, a representative of JUSPAO and so forth. The advisors somewhat contended with each other because they were not unified. So the province chief, Vietnamese colonel who was the province chief, would often get conflicting advice from the Americans, who might squabble among themselves. So one major thing that Komer did in cooperation with the embassy I think was to force an integration of the military and the civilians province advisory level. The civilians I think at the beginning were very fearful. This is just putting them under military control, but in the end, it amounted to much more to I think the civilians getting much more weight in the effort. As I think you know Laura, that half the provinces, the senior advisor was a civilian, other half an American Army colonel and then the deputy would be the opposite.
LC: Yes.
JS: It worked out very well. In Chau Doc, the senior was a civilian, a man from JUSPAO, Jim [Tull], and it slips me, a good guy, but it seemed to work well there.
LC: Now, just to clarify, if I’m correct, this is within the CORDS (Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support) construct.
JS: Roger.
LC: Okay. Chau Doc province was how well organized with the CORDS structure by the time you got there? You’ve mentioned that there was a PSA, a Provincial Senior Advisor.
JS: Right.
LC: How many personnel in the CORDS structure, any idea?
JS: Well, I’d say about eight civilians and maybe what, thirty or forty military all together. I think we had two district teams, one in Tri Ton and one in Chau Phu.
LC: You were sort of where within this—?
JS: Well, I was kind of one of the civilian advisors.
LC: Okay.
JS: Semi, the senior below the PSA, but a couple of the other guys were more specialists. We had a chicken specialist who was very usefully helping the local farmers get a more commercial chicken operation going. I think we had a police advisor, had a guy who worked on public affairs type things and so forth.
LC: Well, as you’ve mentioned the police advisors, you know this is an interest of mine. Can you talk a little bit about that program or what you remember about it?
JS: Well, I was much more intimately involved with it when I became a province senior advisor myself in Binh Long later on.
LC: Okay. Okay.
JS: It was a certainly a necessary effort. The police were very much a part of the whole government structure in the pacification effort. They needed an influx of support and backing and particularly building up the police field force who were a rather flexible means of combating the communist infrastructure.
LC: We can come back to that topic when we talk a little bit about Binh Long if you’re all right with that.
JS: Right.
LC: Okay. Tell me about the security situation in the Chau Doc area when you were there.
JS: Well, it was a rich rice-growing province with a heavy Hoa Hao, the Buddhist, the odd Buddhist sect, you know, kind of like the Mormons are in Christianity.
LC: Sure.
JS: The province itself varied from being extremely peaceful to being pretty rough. The rough area was in the Seven Mountains to the western edge of the province, which was a traditional area for odd religious sects and bandits. In a sense, the VC
continued that tradition by using it as a kind of hideout and redoubt. The eastern part of the province was very heavily Hoa Hao and was like neighboring An Xuyen to the south. It was almost completely peaceful.

LC: The Hoa Hao in general were non-antagonistic towards the United States personnel?

JS: Yeah. No, they were not always—earlier on the problems with Ba Cut and some of the other Hoa Hao semi bandit leaders. They were a little leery of the central government, but they were basically concerned with having a peaceful private existence of their own.

LC: Ba Cut and all that back from the ‘50’s—

JS: Yeah.

LC: But that—

JS: That had gone well past by that point.

LC: But to your mind, was there still some residual, I don’t know, a feeling of malcontent amongst the Hoa Hao with regard to the Saigon government, still a little edgy there?

JS: There was some edginess, but the government I think handled it relatively well. The province chiefs were solicitous of the Hoa Hao. So there was no major problems at all when I was there.

LC: Okay. In another interview that I’ve done, I spoke with a naval officer, a young naval officer who was assigned up on the Vinh Te Canal.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Just about at the same time.

JS: Oh, really.

LC: Yeah. That you were there. He described the situation there as one of just continuous threat. I wonder if you knew, and speaking of the canal now and of the small craft that US Navy was putting out onto the canals to do patrolling, do you remember anything about the particular problems of canals in the area?

JS: Yeah. I saw a fair amount of the brown water Navy while I was in the Delta and was in a sense rather skeptical of its use. I certainly understand why Senator Kerry was turned as he did against the war because what they were doing was hazardous but
only marginally useful I thought. Sometimes even counterproductive because these Swift 
boats and the other craft would go along in the canals. They were prime targets for any 
sort of ambush from the river banks and sometimes the VC would intentionally get them 
to respond with fire into a friendly village for the effect that that would have in turning 
people against the government and the Americans. So it seemed to me that the Navy was 
trying to stretch its role in Vietnam in a place that was only of marginal use. Again, I felt 
was symptomatic of the problems with the over Americanization of the war. It was very 
hazardous for the Navy people on places like the Vinh Te Canal, where they went 
towards the west in to areas where the VC could operate fairly easily.

LC: You know, of course the justification was that they would be interrupting 
supply lines of material moving down the canals and into the, you know, more eastern 
parts of the Delta. Did that seem to be less effective than it was sort of trumpeted to be or 
at least forecast to be?

JS: Well, it was certainly of use, but again, in the balance of things, I’m still 
skeptical it should’ve been done.

LC: As you point out I think, John, the Navy had relatively little experience 
dealing in this kind of an environment.

JS: Yeah.

LC: This wasn’t big gun ships we’re talking about, but rather inland waterways.

JS: Right.

LC: Were there—how strong was the complement of Special Forces personnel in 
Chau Doc province? Do you remember?

JS: We had some significant camps, particularly on the western side of the 
province. Again, they went their own ways, so they were kind of divorced from the 
advisory effort.

LC: Okay. So you didn’t really have much of a relationship?

JS: Much to do though. I visited them a couple of times. They were recruiting. 
Well, they were working with the so-called CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) 
unit who in that part of Vietnam were ethnic Cambodians, a large part of the population 
in the Delta. It was a good worthwhile effort. These were effective units on our side 
during that part of the war.
LC: But most of their activities were outside the purview of CORDS?
JS: Yeah. They were not directly involved with pacification, but they were
certainly part of the wider force to back it.
LC: Let me ask you a little bit about the contours of the pacification program.
You mentioned some special investments that were being made in trying to enhance the
commercial output of individual sectors like chicken farming, but can you give an overall
view of what pacification effort, at least in Chau Doc looked like?
JS: Well, it was a general effort to somehow help the Vietnamese people and the
local economy.
LC: Yes.
JS: And turn people towards our side. The pacification program always was this
bifurcated effort to work with the military and yet at the same time, to work, to help the
people. I think we were of use, so perhaps it couldn’t be overstressed. The local
economy in some ways was fairly strong in its own right and we were just helping it. We
dispensed a fair amount of straight food aid, which I think began with highly marginal
bulgar wheat and things like that the Vietnamese didn’t particularly like.
LC: Right. Right.
JS: But some of the effort was clearly of use like the gentleman who helped the
commercialization of the chicken farming.
LC: Was there anything that you could do as, you know, from the position that
you held to try to advocate for more effective programming like, “Don’t dump a bunch of
wheat on this part of the country. This is not what is going to help us.” I mean, could you
say something like that?
JS: Well, not much. The overall contours of the aid effort were I think well
decided by that point. I certainly, while in Chau Doc, I don’t think I made much of an
impact myself.
LC: What kinds of things did you actually do? I’m sure there wasn’t an average
day, but what kind of things do you remember having had a hand in?
JS: Well, some of it was just sitting in the office signing five hundred copies of
documents for dispersal of bulgar wheat in there. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) That stands out in your mind.
JS: (Laughing) That stands out. My signature became a lot more abbreviated.

LC: Right. Right. Has your signature ever recovered?

JS: No. It never has. It’s still entirely unreadable.

LC: Right. (Laughing)

JS: Good Vietnamese style. But I did things, for instance, one day I went out on the back of—we had a couple of very good Filipinos working with us. I was always struck by how good and useful those guys were as part of our advisory group. I went out on the back of his Honda motorbike up towards the northern edge towards Cambodia up the river. It was a chance to see some of the far reaches of this province and see how it worked. I could comment on them to my boss. I went down several times, a number of times to Tri Ton, the more hazardous by far of our two district towns and that area and saw the Revolutionary Development teams in operation, things like that.

LC: What kinds of things were Revolutionary Development teams doing?

JS: Well, one of them, which really impressed me was they had a team working with a school towards the Seven Mountains. These guys I thought were good. They were young Vietnamese in black pajamas that they kind of [collectively] adopted. They were working with the school kids and teaching them songs and helping. We were actually there when suddenly there was an exchange of gunfire nearby. We all kind of hunkered down, but nothing really developed. But I was impressed with what they were doing there. I’m not sure that the overall effort was always impressive by any means, but it was there.

LC: Let me ask you about the other side of the coin. Were there also more intensive efforts to, if you will, identify VC supporters? Was that part of what CORDS overall was doing too in trying to kind of pry them out to get information?

JS: Well, we were involved with it, but part of that was done through the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) programs there and they were kind of outside of our authority. In the three provinces I worked, the CIA guys went their own way in large part. The agency had a very large effort there. Many of its people were contract people rather than career people. We had military officers on the advisory team who worked with them and also of course, the police advisors worked with them. But the agency handled the—what were they called—the—
LC: The Chieu Hoi?
JS: Well, the Chieu Hoi was partly our effort.
LC: Okay.
JS: It was a very useful effort to try to decrease the ranks of the VC. The PRUs, the Provincial Reconnaissance Units, which were under the agency people—
LC: They—
JS: We all willy-nilly got involved with those things.
LC: Yeah. Did you see—well, what did you see in terms of changes in the security situation over the time that you were in this assignment down in Chau Doc?
JS: The main thing that struck me of course was the reaction after the effects of the Tet attack in that the VC had been badly decimated in that attack.
LC: Yes.
JS: In the Delta as elsewhere.
LC: Yes.
JS: Areas that before had been either under their control or threatened by them were lapsing back under almost full government control. There was a real wash back after the Tet attacks. I don’t think this is really appreciated in the United States, but large areas of the Delta went from VC control or insolent to back to almost full government control.
LC: Were you participating in some of the quantification, the numerical exercises that demonstrated some of those changes?
JS: Yes, in the context of the Hamlet Evaluation System.
LC: Yes. Yes, the HES.
JS: That was an extremely good tool.
LC: Was it really?
JS: It was inflated of course. I remember talking to Ambassador Colby on this and he said, you know, “We well understand there’s inflation degrading of this.” But what it did was it was a real tool of influence for the advisors on the Vietnamese provincial officials because it was kind of our grade of them. It was a grade that their seniors would see at Corps in Saigon. So they had to pay a lot more attention to the
advisors and our recommendations than perhaps would’ve been their inclinations
otherwise because this was their school grades that they were getting.

LC: Right. Right. They could see enough of down movement.

JS: Yeah.

LC: How much confidence—you’ve mentioned the issue of sort of grade
inflation, but how much confidence do you think American civilian advisors and others
put into those HES numbers?

JS: Well, I think it was fairly carefully done. It was not a perfunctory effort by
any means.

LC: Right. Right.

JS: The questions were good. It was a well-designed system and the inflation
was not severe. I’d say it was probably a half mark. You know, if a hamlet was rated C,
it might’ve been C- or a D+, but it was generally a very good way to understand the
security conditions in an area.

LC: Okay. Did you do much work with the HES itself?

JS: It was mainly done by the district advisors, but we certainly were involved
with it.

LC: That leads me to ask about the province chief, the South Vietnamese
Province Chief who undoubtedly saw these numbers relatively early on, even maybe
before they were sent to Saigon.

JS: Right.

LC: Who was the province chief? Do you remember in Chau Doc?

JS: Well, I dealt with four province chiefs in my time there. One in Chau Doc,
one in Rach Gia where I later on went to Kien Giang, and then in Binh Long down at An
Loc. I worked with two, very, very closely with two province chiefs. They all varied. I
thought a couple of them were clearly corrupt and clearly fit the clichés that were in the
American press. I thought one was an excellent officer and two of them I thought,
despite their discrepancies, I thought were effective in their own right.

LC: So, like with all other people, it varied.

JS: Yeah. It varied.
LC: Okay. You didn’t see particular systemic features that made you suspicious or made you think that these people don’t want to work with us, or this is a lost cause. Of course, you, no doubt, encountered either at the time or subsequently all of those kind of appraisals being bandied about.

JS: Yeah, it was a mixed bag. Clearly province chiefs owed their appointment at least in part to their political stature, political connections. It was not a completely flawed system by any means and a lot of these guys were pretty able.

LC: Now, John, is it the case that you were in Chau Doc for, I think you mentioned six months, is that right?

JS: Right.

LC: Okay. How did it come about that you moved out of that province?

JS: Well, I was a normally ambitious guy and asked, made clear to my superiors, I’d like more responsibility. So, with the change of personnel generally in the system, I got selected as the deputy province senior advisor in the neighboring province of Kien Giang.

LC: The capital town of which—

JS: Is Rach Gia.

LC: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about the situation in this neighboring province?

JS: It was a large province. Again, like Chau Doc, but a rather rich province. Again, a very diverse province with some areas almost completely pacified and some areas, particularly near the U Minh Forest, being dominated by the communists, as some areas very much in contention. Again, to repeat, there’d been a real wash back of the communist control, particularly on the eastern part of the province. The town of Rach Gia had a fairly significant Chinese minority in it, businessmen working on the great rice trade, fishing. The province had one industrial plant and there was a very large cement factory, Ha Tien Cement Factory towards the Cambodian border.

LC: Now, Rach Gia actually sits on the coast.

JS: Right.

LC: You mentioned the ethnic Chinese there. Any sense of how many Chinese lived in Rach Gia?
JS: Well, I'd say it was probably about fifteen percent of the population or so.

LC: Okay. So that’s quite significant.

JS: Yeah. They had a Chinese school, a very Chinese structure.

LC: What, if anything or if you know, were the particular political problems that attended, having relatively large affluent ethnic Chinese community?

JS: Well, as in Saigon, they were influential, but the Vietnamese as you know have very mixed feelings about Chinese generally, suspicion of them.

LC: Yes.

JS: A certain resentment at their economic role, a desire to keep them under wraps in a sense, but the respect for their economic power and vitality, that was true I think in Rach Gia too.

LC: Um, this may seem a little strange, but there has been some mention in the scholarly literature anyway about the probable affiliations of some ethnic Chinese in South Vietnam with the Chinese Communist Party. Did anything like that ever come across your desk?

JS: Not particularly, though I think there obviously were some Chinese who were affiliated with the communists. It wasn’t a major part of the problem though by any means.

LC: Sure. Sure. Was that something that PRUs would be evaluating rather than CORDS people for the most part?

JS: Well, they were generally focused against the communist infrastructure there, but the infrastructure was of course mainly—

LC: Vietnamese.

JS: Vietnamese by far.

LC: Sure. Absolutely. You said, you mentioned the U Minh Forest, can you tell me a little bit about what you learned about that area and the staying power of the VC in that area even after Tet?

JS: I was struck once by a story my brother had when he was in Ba Xuyen. He was in the province headquarters one day and there was a map behind some filing cases there. He kind of pulled it out and it was left over from the French period.

LC: Wow.
JS: What struck him was that all the immediate areas that were a problem considered under communist control during the French period were still a problem now. LC: No kidding. JS: They were exactly the same areas. They weren’t bigger. I think this was true of Kien Giang also, that the communist had established themselves in certain areas. They were trying to expand, but their base areas were still from long before and the U Minh being a classic one.

LC: Did to your mind or more generally in policy terms, did that kind of continuity of communist strength have policy implications? I mean, what do you do in a situation like that?

JS: Well, you tried to hem them in, which was part of our—and dip away at them, which was I think part of the pacification effort. Again, another thing that struck me was when I was in Chau Doc, there was a little map in *Time* magazine of communist controlled areas that showed big areas of the Delta as pink under communist control, including all the area where I was sitting at the moment. It was much more spotty than I think Americans understood. You’d have, in provinces, you’d have sometimes hamlets that have been traditionally under communist control, very close to hamlets, which were very much not under communist inclinations.

LC: John, when you saw that map, you know, popular media map that greatly oversimplified the situation, did you think that—I mean, what reaction did you have to that? Obviously you’re sitting in the middle of an area that is being said to be communist control and that’s probably a little nerve-racking, but in general terms, the media is simplifying the picture for consumption in the states, does that unsettle you at all?

JS: I was a little jaundiced on our media reporting on Vietnam. I knew many of the correspondents, particularly in my embassy time, but even sometimes meeting them before. I had a high opinion of individual reporters there in the *New York Times*,
*Washington Post* guys and some of the others. I thought they reported well, all usually accurately. But it struck me that in the headlines and the media over-simplifications and probably the TV reporting, there was a kind of a vast oversimplification of it, which is part of analysis, part of reporting.

LC: Yes.
JS: It did, I think often convey a misapprehension of what was happening in Vietnam. I remember one article by a New York Times guy and he said he was flying over Vietnam, you get at fairly low levels for a couple of hours, you see no sign of a war at all. That certainly wasn’t the impression that Americans had of Vietnam. I think they saw war everywhere, fighting everywhere and yet huge tracks of Vietnam were very lightly affected by the war itself.

LC: Was it to your mind problematical that that was not being conveyed that there were areas where even Pacification efforts were minimal because the need wasn’t so strong? Did that to you seem to have some long-term implications? I mean, you already knew that there were large and growing anti-war protests you had seen before you came out to Vietnam. Did you kind of put those things together and think, “Wow, this might not be going quite so well?”

JS: Well, again, I think the press on the whole, the media on the whole is a credit to our country, but wars like that are very complicated. The impressions people pick up often I think are false from what happens there. Overall, probably sensible judgments are made, but still, I think there’s some real—there were many real misapprehensions among the American public of what’s happening in Vietnam.

LC: Yeah. John, you know, it’s really the case isn’t it that non-fighting is not news.

JS: Yeah.

LC: You know, I mean there’s that element too.

JS: Yeah, roger. Bad things are much more newsworthy.

LC: Right. They’re frankly easier to report.

JS: Right, more fun to read.

LC: Right. (Laughing) How had your work changed with your transition to Kien Giang province?

JS: Well, I was much more involved on the military side. My boss, Lt. Col. Billy Stanberry was a very fine ex-Special Forces officer with long experience in Vietnam, and with a very good ability in speaking Vietnamese. He spoke it better than I did and I wasn’t bad. He was a soft-spoken Texan with a southern accent who had a good feel for how to operate in Vietnam and work closely with Vietnamese. So, he was a superb guy.
to work under and with. But, pardon me, because of my higher position as the deputy PSA, I was fairly close to the military side of it also. For instance, Billy was away on leave for stretches and I would be the senior guy dealing with all the issues.

LC: What kind of military deployments or activities were going on that actually involved military troops? Now would this be both US and ARVN?

JS: It was mainly the regional forces.

LC: Okay.

JS: Popular forces.

LC: Sure.

JS: Local province troops.

LC: Okay.

JS: But we had occasional ARVN operations, not much. The ARVN was basically elsewhere and we’d have American of some sorts involved, some, what are they called, the Seals came through once. Excuse me one second, Laura, I’m just going to—

LC: Sure. You mentioned that Colonel Stanberry was former or had had experience with Special Forces. Do you know where he had been?

JS: He’d been up in Central Vietnam operating there.

LC: Did his experiences up there translate well to what he was seeing in the Delta? Did he ever talk to you about that?

JS: Not much, but he was as I said, very good at operating in Vietnam. The province chief was Lt. Col. Nguyen Van Tai, who was an interesting fellow. He was born in Phnom Penh, looked like Prince Sihanouk.

LC: Really?

JS: Spoke very good Cambodian and yet he maintained he was full Vietnamese. He was clearly corrupt, but he was kind of a cheerful, outgoing person who worked well with Stanberry. Billy handled him very well I thought. He wasn’t—Colonel Tai was not popular with his own officers. In fact, after we left, there was an incident where there was a bomb at his headquarters, which Billy’s successor believes was done not by the VC, but by his own officers. (Laughing)

LC: Really? Is it your thinking that he was probably actually Cambodian?

JS: Well, that’s my supposition.
LC: You mentioned that he was corrupt, not well liked to the point of, you know, fragging incident.
JS: Yeah.
LC: I mean, what do you know or did you find out about his nefarious involvements, whatever they might have been? Did you find out anything about that?
JS: In my level, it was just suspicion. The market burned down while we were there.
LC: The market in Rach Gia?
JS: In Rach Gia.
LC: Wow.
JS: The reconstruction took awhile. There was, how would you say, suspicion that substantial amounts of money had to be paid before things were done.
LC: And equipment falling off the back of the truck and maybe things like that.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Okay.
JS: But Tai in some ways good to work with. I liked the guy. He was very chipper and we used to go over to have breakfast with him every Monday morning before the province ceremony. One funny incident, I was—one of those breakfasts, they served what looked like a sparrow with a long beak, which was a little curlew all fried on my plate. I wondered what the hell to do with it. You know, I started to pick little pieces of meat off this tiny bird and I looked over to Colonel Tai, he was laughing at me and he’d eaten the whole bird starting with the feet and was picking the teeth with the curlew’s beak. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) Oh, boy. He was enjoying your discomfort?
JS: Yeah. Yeah. The Vietnamese always enjoy it with the foreigners.
LC: So you went back home probably and had something else to eat I’m going to guess. (Laughing)
JS: I probably did. Yeah, peanut butter sandwich.
LC: Right, exactly, exactly. You mentioned John that there in the flow of things, that at some point, a Seal team or maybe more than one came through. Do you remember what they were about, what they were doing?
JS: Well, there were some areas where the communist infiltrated, infiltration paths probably had some weigh stations on it. The Seals I think went in to try to test one of these out. The province forces tended to stay away from those areas for some reason. We had one sad incident. The Seals stayed with us and one of the Seal guys was trying to de-arm a communist mortar shell when it exploded and killed him and severely wounded a couple of other guys in our team headquarters.

LC: He was actually at the headquarters when this happened?

JS: He was actually at the headquarters when the thing went off.

LC: How did it get there? How did the shell get there?

JS: Well, he just picked it up on the course of the operations, just trying to prepare it as a souvenir.

LC: Oh, really, so in attempting to defuse it.

JS: Yeah. It blew up.

LC: Okay. You know, that really is sad. Did things like that—how did they affect you, John?

JS: You just march on. It’s just part of the incidents in life.

LC: Of course, you could not have been, on any level unaware of, you know, the vulnerability indeed of your own position there and of all of the Americans certainly.

JS: Yeah. It was a somewhat hazardous place. One of, I think Billy’s, the replacement for Billy’s replacement was killed while he was there in an ambush on one of the canals.

LC: So a PSA was actually—

JS: The PSA was killed there. I went out on one patrol with Police Field Forces while I was there into a communist, supposed semi-communist area. So there were hazards.

LC: When you would go out on a visit like that, did you take security with you?

JS: Usually, no. Usually just I carried weapons, partly because I just didn’t want to be defenseless if something happened.

LC: Sure.

JS: But you tried to have a sense of where it was safe to go and where it wasn’t.

LC: Were you getting around by chopper?
JS: Sometimes by chopper, sometimes by jeep. I drove my jeep all the way up to 
the Cambodian border a couple of times.

LC: You’d just drive a jeep yourself?
JS: Yeah.

LC: Would you take somebody along?
JS: Sometimes somebody would be along.

LC: Okay.
JS: But not necessarily security.

LC: Now when you went up to the Cambodian border either when you were 
stationed in Kien Giang or earlier at Chau Doc, what was the attraction? I mean, why 
would you go all the way up to the border?
JS: Well, partly, I always felt in any of my assignments that you had to go out to 
try to understand everything you could about the place.

LC: Sure.
JS: So part of it was just professional curiosity.
LC: Just trying to get, you know, your eye in for the area.
JS: Yeah, what’s going on.
LC: Did you ever actually cross the border? Do you know?
JS: Well, I had one kind of semi-funny incident there. Once I went up to Ha Tien 
to meet the new district senior advisor there and I stopped at the district Kien Luong, 
which was just south of there and picked up the senior advisor at that level to go up to 
meet his counterpart at Ha Tien. We took along a lieutenant who had a reputation of that 
kind of figure in the Little Abner cartoon who always brought problems with him under 
the black cloud.

LC: Sure. Uh-huh.
JS: We got up to Ha Tien and it turned out the senior advisor there was out right 
by the border. There was there a little, one of these kind of karst mountains with caves in 
it, religious site inside, right smack on the border and the communist occupied it. It was 
the only thing that was clearly occupied by them and known to be held by them. Again, a 
weigh station on their travels to the south. The senior advisor had made arrangements
and a Coast Guard cutter, an American Coast Guard cutter was doing a shore bombardment on this hill.

LC: Oh, boy.

JS: The senior advisor was out kind of guiding it on a neighboring hill. So I tooted out with this jeep following me with the other senior advisor and the lieutenant. We drove out towards the border to go up the hill to meet this guy. Well, just as we’re turning off the main road, which led to the border to go up the hill, there was a sudden rainstorm. We kind of hunkered down in the jeep and went up this little road. About a couple of minutes later, I suddenly realized the other jeep was not behind me and they had not seen us turn off in the rainstorm. So they were headed straight for the border, possibly over the border. So I, the sergeant driver and I, we turned around and barreled down the road as fast as we could to try to catch up to them before they went over the border. The border was marked by a single white pole. There was a Cambodian Army position right beyond it. We went along the road. There were all these Cambodian semi-bandits, the KKK, Kampuchea Khmer Krom, who were kind of gathered on the road to watch this show of the shore bombardment on this hill right over beyond the road. They looked with astonishment as these two American Army jeeps barreled towards the border. I caught up with the jeep just exactly at the border pole, you know, thinking my career was about to go down as I had to explain why I had lost two officers to the Cambodians.

LC: Yeah. (Laughing) Yeah. That would not have gone over well.

JS: Then we finally got back to the hill and I watched—the guy let me shoot a .50-caliber machine gun against the hill with no affect of course, but it was the only kind I actually fired at the enemy in Vietnam. We all tooted back after this nice show to Ha Tien in the dusk. We got to the town and there was a barbed wire fence gate that had been erected over the road and our final ignomenity at the end of the day was we had to wait in clouds of mosquitoes as somebody went into find a guy to unlock the gate so we could get back to the district house. Anyways—

LC: That was a memorable afternoon.

JS: Yeah. It was an interesting afternoon in Vietnam.

LC: (Laughing) To clear—
JS: But I did not go over the border. I was careful about that.

LC: Right. You were pretty close though.

JS: I did later when I was in An Loc, but that was a different story.

LC: Okay. I remember from speaking with Tom Barnes that when he was also in Binh Long Province based in An Loc, he also had occasion to go over the border on one or two occasions. So, we’ll talk about that as we go along. How long were you assigned as Deputy PSA?

JS: Well, I spent six months there. John Vann had come down as the Corps senior advisor and he visited several times. I got to talk and know him. I expressed interest to him in becoming a senior advisor somewhere myself. Then he came down once with the new senior advisor in III Corps, Charles Whitehouse, who I had great respect for and got to know very well. He was looking for a new senior advisor in Binh Long and interviewed me and then I was accepted. So after six months in Kien Giang, I tooted off to Binh Long.

LC: Now when would that transition have taken place? Do you remember?

JS: That was the summer of ’69. I was to stay in Binh Long for exactly one year until the summer of ’70.

LC: Let me know a little bit if you can about Chuck Whitehouse.

JS: Well, Whitehouse was a career CIA officer. He was an arch typical example of the agency at that time, which had been staffed to a great extent by people out of the Ivy League colleges. Whitehouse was a true American aristocrat. He came from a wealthy family, railroad money. He’d been born in Newport I think.

LC: Okay.

JS: Like I had. But he came from the real upper crust of society and he had kind of a hoity-toity, almost slightly British accent, but he was a damn good guy. He’d been a Marine pilot in World War II with a good combat record. I forget where he served in the agency, but he was of good experience. He came over to the Department of State, like several other senior CIA guys did at the tail end of their career. In Vietnam, he was picked as the senior advisor and I think he saw John Vann in a sense as a model and was thus between his own native ability and the course he picked, probably one of the most effective senior civilians in Vietnam.
LC: Now his position at this time was an assistant to John Vann in III Corps?
JS: No, he was the new, John Vann’s replacement as the CORDS Senior Advisor at III Corps.
LC: Okay. You said that John Vann and he came down to Kien Giang a couple of different times?
JS: No, just once. I was interviewed that one time.
LC: Oh, okay. Had they come down for the purpose of speaking with you?
JS: I think it was just one of the things on the agenda.
LC: I see. I see.
JS: He was trying to show Whitehouse how CORDS worked in IV Corps.
LC: Perhaps giving some instruction as to how it might, how things might work in III Corps?
JS: Yeah. Roger that.
LC: When did you actually go up to Binh Long province?
JS: It was shortly after that. I think it was June of 1969.
LC: Okay. Did you basically make your base at An Loc?
JS: Yes. I was at An Loc. Binh Long was one of the smaller provinces, relatively thinly settled. It was a rubber plantation province, carved out by the French from the jungle. A lot of the Vietnamese there were workers brought in from North Vietnam originally by the French to service the plantations. There was a significant Montagnard minority that mainly stayed. They were kind of proto Cambodians.
LC: But in general, the province is sparsely populated.
JS: Yeah. We had some VC presence, but the main problem was that it was right close to some of the major North Vietnamese Army bases in Cambodia. I think the 5th, 7th, and 9th North Vietnamese divisions and we lived quite close to Binh Long.
LC: You I’m sure, you know, had some general overviews idea of the situation in the province before you went up there.
JS: Yeah.
LC: How did you get that information? Did you get some briefings or—?
JS: Yeah. I got some briefings, but of course most of it was learned on the ground once I got there.
LC: Who did you take over from?
JS: It was another officer, civilian, USAID man. I forget his name now, he’s a good guy, but—
LC: He had been there I think between Tom Barnes and you.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Okay. Did you know Tom at this point?
JS: I met Tom when he came back to An Loc on a visit.
LC: Okay.
JS: We tooted around the province together.
LC: Okay.
JS: We found a lot of common interests. I’d met him actually—no, that’s not true. I’d met him in passing on a visit to the embassy in Vientiane in 1967 when I went to Thailand, went up to Laos on my own.
LC: Okay.
JS: Just to see it.
LC: Obviously Tom had by this point, had many, many years of experience in Southeast Asia, one of the most experienced guys on the ground.
JS: Yeah, as you know, he’s a very thorough Southeast Asian hand.
LC: Certainly. Certainly. What was the situation in An Loc itself when you got up there?
JS: Well, it was, one of the provinces that, to use the old cliché, was on the frontiers of freedom. It was periodically heavily impacted by the war because of the nearness of the North Vietnamese base areas. We had heavy American units working in that area, which was the contrast of the Delta. Where I’d been, there were no American units, major units laying around. Mainly my area was the 1st Calvary division and the 11th Army Calvary Regiment.
LC: Who were the commanders, if you remember, that you had the most dealings with?
JS: Well, a variety of them. The senior commanders were Gen. Julian Ewell and General Davidson. Ewell was a very controversial figure and a very hard pressing, difficult man, strong on body counts, difficult for his own officers. I got along with him
reasonably well, and saw him later when he was stationed in Parris. General Davidson, I had a very high opinion of. I thought he was a superb officer. General Casey, I think he took over after him. His son is now the senior man in Iraq. I knew quite well, and I had a very opinion of Casey. Most of the senior officers I dealt with, I thought they were very professional, very sensible men.

LC: Did it help at all in your relations with them that you also had a combat background? I mean, did you kind of—?
JS: Well, it gave me some self-confidence at least. You know, I was privy to their ethos.
LC: Yeah.
JS: Coming from a military family, I was both knowledgeable and, in a sense, sympathetic to them.

LC: Had any of these guys known your brother at all?
JS: I met a couple in the course in Vietnam, but the time had passed.
LC: I see. He had been there earlier and then had not returned?
JS: Yeah. Exactly. He’d been there ’66 to—’65 to ’67 I think.
LC: Yeah. In terms of the war, many people sort of feel those are two different wars really.
JS: Yeah. Exactly.

LC: Did you have that feeling too?
JS: Yeah. I think it was quite different. The general feeling I had is that people who were there earlier were much more skeptical of the Vietnamese ability to do it. I was there in a period where generally I thought the Vietnamese were pulling their act together fairly well. Then, of course, at the tail end, it was still different again.

LC: Were there ARVN units in addition to the big military, US military units?
JS: Yeah. We had the 5th ARVN Infantry Division. It was originally a Nung Chinese. You know, the Nung Chinese minority along the North Vietnamese border had come down and they formed the core of the new ARVN division. One of the initial 5th Division commanders was Pham Van Dong. He had the same name as one of the communist leaders.

LC: As the premiere, Pham Van Dong?
JS: No. It wasn’t Pham Van Dong, it was—it’ll come to me, but he had exactly the same name as one of the communist leaders. [It was Pham Van Dong.]

LC: That’s a little difficult.

JS: He was a Nung Chinese himself, a very interesting fellow who had been a pirate at one point. But they had one regiment near An Loc under Colonel Ma Son Nhon, a very hard charging interesting Sino-Viet.

LC: What was his name?

JS: Ma Son Nhon.

LC: How do you spell that John?

JS: M-A, then, S-O-N, N-H-O-N.

LC: He was—?

JS: He was the regimental commander of the unit that was actually stationed quite close to An Loc itself.

LC: Partly Chinese?

JS: Yes. He was partly Chinese I think.

LC: You said he was quite a force.

JS: Yeah. He was a hard charging capable guy I thought. But certainly, he wasn’t easy to deal with, but he was one of the real tiger types.

LC: How often would you see him?

JS: I saw him a fair amount. There was a communist probe on An Loc one night and Ma Son Nhon was there. He and I went out in the jeep and we got into kind of competitive macho, saying, “Well, let’s go further,” trying to prove that we were both braver than the other guy. Fortunately, no communist shot us, but they should’ve.

LC: (Laughing) That was one night when maybe your judgment wasn’t the best.

JS: Yeah. Men are stupid sometimes, as you well know.

LC: (Laughing) No comment. I could say the opposite is also true, but—were there tensions as far as you know between the ARVN commanders and American military commanders? Did you witness anything like that?

JS: Yeah. I think there were some core ones. Well, that goes to another core problem that I felt that in the course of our kind of over Americanization of the war, we had all these American units running around under commanders, usually able guys who
had the job for six months and had to prove that they were ready to be promoted. So, if
there was any fighting to be done, the Americans wanted to do it. My impression was,
they kind of pushed the Vietnamese aside to do most of the work there. The Vietnamese
knew it was going to be a long war, so they weren’t that much adverse to being pushed
aside.

LC: Right.
JS: On the other hand, in the long run, it was not healthy because it didn’t get
them in the shape to continue the war when we kind of bailed out on it.

LC: Sort of left them high and dry as it were without the experience.
JS: Yeah, exactly. Without the requisite experience and self confidence.

LC: You mentioned the NVA probe or communist probe, were there local VC
units in the province or was the ball really being carried by NVAs at this point?

JS: Well, the central ball was NVA, though there was a very small VC
component in the province. They assassinated a couple of village chiefs while I was
there. There was some minor actions. I went out with the province chief and saw some
of the VC dead once after an action. But they were not a major presence in our province.
The main problem was the nearness of the big North Vietnamese units.

LC: Can you tell me about that trip where you went out to, after an action, to a
battle zone? What did you see?

JS: Well, a little VC contingent had come into one of the hamlets there. The
Popular, I think it was actually Popular Self Defense Force, you know, older guys armed
with carbines, in one of their few actions did their job and repelled these guys and
actually killed a couple of them. It may have been Popular Forces, PF rather than PSDF.
But anyway, there were a couple of VC dead left after the action.

LC: You guys went out to—
JS: We just went out to commend the Vietnamese troops who’d done it, defended
themselves well.

LC: Did you actually walk through the area and see the corpses lying there?
JS: Yeah.
LC: What did you actually see, John? Can you tell us?
JS: Well, actually, one of the corpses, it was already into rigor mortis in kind of a squatting position. It was actually a VC woman. Like most people, I haven’t seen that many corpses, so it was, certainly gave an impression.

LC: How many dead VC did you see?
JS: I think there were only two or so, but they may have left some other blood trails. I’m not sure.

LC: What happened after you guys did your sort of walk through? I mean, what would—?
JS: Well, the province chief gave some medals to the soldiers who defended themselves.

LC: Okay. You were there to sort of give the American blessing to those as well?
JS: Well, you travel as an advisor, you often just accompany the province chief as he goes around.

LC: Okay. He’s—
JS: You’re in the background rather than taking the primary role.

LC: He’s conducting his business and you’re kind of along just observing.
JS: Yeah.

JS: Well, the province chief at that point was a very capable officer. Colonel Tran Van Nhut, he was an ex-Marine, had been tarred in a coup thing. He was the aid to a general who was one of the losers in one of the early coup things. Nhut had been sent off as an attaché, military attaché in Manila, which he enjoyed. Then came back and ended up with this job as the province senior advisor. He was back now in the ARVN, but he still wore his Marine beret, which was kind of interesting, the Green Beret of the Vietnamese Marines.

LC: Right.
JS: He was a very good officer. He was open, very positive. I think he was very well regarded by the people there. He was a son of a lumberman, lumber operation owner and had actually been as a young boy up in that area. Nhut was open. He liked
foreigners. He liked Montagnards. He related well to them, which was very unusual among the Vietnamese.

LC: Yes.

JS: He had a beautiful wife, four children, four sons. I saw him after he came to the United States. He’d been the commander during the attack on An Loc after I left and acquitted himself very well. He was promoted to general, was made commander of the 2nd Division, which fell apart under him during the final North Vietnamese attack in ’75. Nhut was able to escape by the hair of his teeth with his family. When I first saw him after I—in ’76 I guess it was, he was working, delivering milk down in Texas. He later became—ran a warehouse, but did very well and all four of his sons got professional degrees. Nhut is still very active in immigrate politics. I think with the so-called Tan Dai Viet, the new Dai Viet party in the United States.

LC: Is he still down here in Texas?

JS: No. He’s in California now.

LC: Okay.

JS: Where so many of the Vietnamese ended up.

LC: Sure.

JS: But he was a very good officer. His predecessor, I should comment on, I think it was Tran Van Phuoc, who is a very different sort of man. He was a major. He was the only major ranking province [chief] and he was not to get promoted. He was a very tough little North Vietnamese, probably quite corrupt, but a hard, somewhat alcoholic man. I got along with him reasonably well, but he didn’t particularly like Americans I don’t think. He finally ended up actually as being elected as a delegate to the National Assembly. Then went to the relocation camps after ’75, spent many years in that, was finally—I gave him a little bit of help and his family finally got him out to Philadelphia.

LC: What year was that? Do you remember?

JS: Oh, very late in the game, I forget, probably the ‘80s.

LC: Okay. I was going to ask. How many family members did he have?

JS: I think his daughter and her family had gotten out. She finally was the one who helped do the paperwork that got him out of Vietnam.
LC: Interesting. Any idea what he’s been doing?
JS: No, not since.
LC: Just sort of lost touch with him.
JS: Yeah. He was an older man by that point.
LC: I see. You mentioned that he was from North Vietnam.
JS: Yeah. He was North Vietnamese, North Vietnamese Catholic.
LC: Okay. Okay. So he would’ve come down then in ’54, ’55, something like that.
JS: Yeah. Right.
LC: Okay. John, let’s take a break.
JS: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with John Sylvester, Jr. Today’s date is the fourth of August 2004. I again am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections building and I’m speaking with John by telephone. He is in North Carolina.

Good morning, John.

John Sylvester: Good morning.

LC: We were speaking last time about your stint as province senior advisor in Binh Long Province. This was during 1969 to ’70. John, tell me a little bit about the civilian team that you had underneath you. What was the composition of the team, what different departments or personnel were reporting to you?

JS: Well, of course, the civilian side of my team was vastly smaller than the military side, about tenth the size. I had one officer who worked on kind of economic development issues and one who worked on basically refugee, one who worked on the public safety, the police type, and another was actually a military officer, but he worked on the information side. Then I had a couple of fine Filipinos who worked on development issues at the province side. I guess, basically myself or the civilian component of the team.

LC: John, can I ask you a little bit about each of those? As I think, this is a matter of, you know, great interest. First of all, with regard to the refugee work, do you remember who was working for you on that issue?

JS: Yeah. It was Jerry Roeback who was a younger guy from Cleveland who was an excellent officer. He was very activist, working on refugee issues, one I trusted very much and did overall a fine job.

LC: What kinds of things would he have worked on? Do you remember any incidents or a particular—?

JS: Well, one major one was when we made the incursion into Cambodia. We had quite a few Cambodian refugees come over into our province from Snoul and from...
Memot, including a number of Montagnard people who lived on the other side of the border.

LC: Sure.

JS: It was a major issue taking care of them in our little province capitol. Jerry worked closely with the Vietnamese administrative officials and basically did a fine job. In fact, we were visited by one of the senior Cambodian ministers during this stretch. He was quite satisfied with how the province had taken care of the Cambodians who’d come over.

LC: Do you remember who that was from the Cambodian government?

JS: I don’t remember. It was a strange incident because the Cambodian team came in on a group of Vietnamese helicopters and they landed on our province soccer field, which was at that point, in the dry season, a very dusty laterite soil. This huge cloud of dust went up as these choppers came in, this whole group of choppers came in. I still don’t see how they [missed] piling into each other. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Was it an entourage then arriving?

JS: Yeah, it was a real entourage. This was the beginning of the Khmer Republic.

LC: Yes.

JS: The province chief spoke good French as well as good English. So he was able to communicate well with them. Colonel Tran Van Nhut was an outgoing, very capable at working with people. I think the Cambodians got a good impression overall.

LC: How many refugees came into the province during the invasion period? Do you have any estimate in your mind?

JS: Yeah. I think it’s two or three hundred probably around there. When they were repatriating them back to Memot, they took them by Army transport planes, a Canadian built plane. I, which I shouldn’t have done, went back with them over to Memot just to see that they got there safely and were taken care of. I think for the refugees, their first flight in an airplane was kind of daunting to them.

LC: I’m sure. Now you say you shouldn’t have gone. Why is that?

JS: Well, Ambassador Colby who was then the, Bill Colby formerly of the Central Intelligence Agency, was then the head of the pacification program in Saigon.
There’d been some press pickup of the fact that some civilians had gone over into Cambodia along with our troops. In fact, I’d been sent myself when the thing first happened to see about the refugee situation. So this had political indications and the ambassador said that civilians should not go over the border. I was so curious about what was going on across the border and felt it was part of my duties to know, that I snuck over about three or four times and finally got reprimanded for it, which was quite correct.

LC: (Laughing) Did you learn much on those trips that you made over?

JS: Yeah. It was very interesting to see the other side. I think the basic point was that the North Vietnamese divisions over there had a zone in Cambodia along the border and they prohibited under penalty of death of any Cambodians coming into that area that they controlled. It was a very secure area for them to plan sand tables and use as their base for operations into Vietnam.

LC: Did you have a sense of how large the area was?

JS: Well, it was tended to be a strip along the border. The French plantation owners in Snoul who we talked to at one point after our forces took control of Snoul. You knew that the North Vietnamese were there. They of course operated very carefully so that they would not be killed going into those immediate areas.

LC: Right. Right. How did you happen to come to speak with those French planters?

JS: The 11th Army Cavalry Regiment had gone into Snoul shortly after the incursion began. The commander I knew quite well, a good guy. He got slightly wounded in the course of the fighting at Snoul. The press described it as the destruction of Snoul, another case where the Americans overreacted, but the press photographs were a certain angle of the central marketplace, which had burned, but Snoul itself was kind of a rambling town and was largely undestroyed actually. I went over the border at the very beginning, before Ambassador Colby’s order with Charles Whitehouse, the CORDS senior man and General Davidson who was the very fine Army corps commander for III Corps. We came into Snoul right after the battle with some of the scenes of the fighting still around. The French plantation owners had been freed from basically house arrest under the North Vietnamese at that point. Planes, private planes out of Phnom Penh,
were coming up to evacuate them. We talked to them there and talked about what had happened during the short period before the Americans came into Cambodia.

LC: Did they give you a sense if you remember John of what conditions had been like for them when they were basically being detained?

JS: Well, I think the North Vietnamese treated them relatively decently. They were not considered enemies by the North Vietnamese. So they just put them essentially under house arrest, but they had also worried what would happen to them in the longer run at first.

LC: I’m sure. Absolutely. So their trajectory was that they were going to get to Phnom Penh?

JS: Yeah. They were being taken out by their company charter planes to Phnom Penh and then back to France. They were basically giving up their rubber operations because of the war then.

LC: Which company was it? Do you remember?

JS: I forget the name of the company. It wasn’t one of the two that were operating in Binh Long itself.

LC: Okay. Okay.

JS: I think it was called the Memot Plantations because Memot was down the pike and I think it was part of the same operation, but I’m not at all sure.

LC: Okay. They were essentially pulling out?

JS: Yeah. They were pulling out because the war had finally come to that.

LC: Any idea whether they returned or tried to return?

JS: I think nowadays the French are in there basically as consultants and buyers of the rubber. I’m not sure that they’ve ever gone back to really reestablish their ownership that controls the plantations.

LC: John, you mentioned Bill Colby and certainly he’s a figure of terrific importance during this period. Did you have actual dialogue with him at any point?

JS: Yeah, I knew him fairly well while he was there and had a very high opinion of Ambassador Colby. I thought he was a very good listener. He really wanted to know what was going on. He was somebody you could talk to and discuss your problems and
wanted to know the real skivvy of what was going on. I thought he was sensible, decisive, a very fine man. I was left very impressed with Ambassador Colby.

LC: Now had you had a great deal of interaction with him at this point or did that come later on when you were down in Saigon?

JS: No. It was mainly while I was province senior advisor there.

LC: Okay. Did he come up and visit?

JS: Yes. He came up and visited me at one point and stayed at my quarters in An Loc.

LC: What was the occasion? Was he making the rounds or was there some particular issue or event that called him up there?

JS: He made the rounds regularly I think with all the provinces. If I remember correctly, he came up with Ambassador Sam Berger, the deputy ambassador [at the] embassy. Berger came along partly because I was being interviewed for a position as the embassy spokesman at that point, which subsequently didn’t work out, which was fine. But Colby and Berger, we briefed them and showed them what was going on there immediately.

LC: Now when you did a briefing like that, did you bring in the heads of the different departments that worked for you, the different civilians or did you kind of have an overview of where they were at that time and you presented it? Do you remember?

JS: Well, kind of both. Sometimes we had formal briefings and I’d bring in my officers to talk about what they were doing. But sometimes it was just—I had a very good cook at An Loc. He was a French plantation trained cook and somehow the word got around that it was a good idea to stop at An Loc for lunch.

LC: I see.

JS: So a number of senior officers would somehow descend on me for lunch. My briefing would be over a good French-type cuisine lunch.

LC: Sounds all right. (Laughing) So you were quite popular in the middle of the day visitors.

JS: Yes. Exactly.

LC: (Laughing) Let me ask you a little bit about economic development work.

Who was heading that under you?
JS: Well, I had a good officer. I thought he’d been there too long and one of the
several mistakes I made as province senior advisor was to get him transferred and get a
new person in who was from out of country and never really adjusted. That was kind of a
fiasco for me, partly my own bad judgment.
LC: Now what was it based on though, John? I mean, you must’ve had some—
there was a line of thinking that in the end—
JS: You know, this officer had been there for about two or three years. A very
nice guy and I don’t know why I got it in my head, but I thought he just—people get a
little stale after time.
LC: Okay.
JS: I thought it would be best to get a new officer to try new things. It didn’t
work out.
LC: Now the person who came in you said had not been in Vietnam?
JS: No. He’d been in Thailand.
LC: Okay.
JS: He was a good man, but for some reason, he fell into conflict with the
Vietnamese he dealt with.
LC: I see.
JS: He got terribly angry and just didn’t work out. So he left in a cloud of
unhappiness.
LC: Now, what kinds of projects, personnel issues aside, what kinds of projects
were you involved with?
JS: Well, in the economic development side, there really wasn’t that much to do
because the economy of the province was based on these huge French managed rubber
plantations. The rest of it was pretty marginal. Our guy I think either tried to help with
the province authority so that small farmers like the Catholic refugees or the pepper
growers there had some support and encouragement. But it wasn’t like the Delta where
farming was a major and successful industry.
LC: Were there French personnel still in the province when you were there?
JS: Yeah. There were a number and I got to know them fairly well. There was a
Mr. Piachaud and a Mr. Gaudeul who were the two French with the plantation based out
of Loc Ninh, the northern of the three districts in An Loc. I got to know them quite well. They cultivated me because among the authorities I had was to sign off or not sign off on defoliant requests by the Air Force. I had a very low opinion of the defoliant operations and never signed off. That was critical to them of course because defoliant would’ve wrecked the plantations. So they treated me and my deputy province senior advisor [Bob Farr] to some very fine lunches up in Loc Ninh, long many-course French dinners starting with aperitif’s and finishing with brandy, which would kind of wreck the day, but were very enjoyable. (Laughing)

LC: Yes. (Laughing) Productivity was down, but—
JS: Productivity was quite down at that point.
LC: (Laughing) How much negotiating or difficulty did you have in declining defoliation runs in the province?
JS: No problem. I just didn’t sign off and they were never questioned.
LC: Can you tell me a little bit about the background to that operation? Was it something that had been kind of SOP (standard operating procedure) in the area?
JS: Yeah. There was very heavy defoliant in neighboring provinces.
LC: Sure.
JS: I saw some of the results of it. Down to our southeast, I visited one of the major Army headquarters there. The area was just gray because so much defoliant had been dumped on it. Then to the west of my province on the Tay Ninh border, they’d done defoliants. My reservation on it was that if you looked at it from the ground after a little while it passed, the bamboo and the tough undergrowth had grown up so heavily that it was even better covered—it was just as good cover as the tall trees that had existed there before. So, without, you know, repeated fairly often heavy defoliant usage, it rapidly diminished as a tool at trying to find infiltration routes for the enemy. So I thought the economic cost versus the military value was not worth it.
LC: Did you see what the costs per run, that kind of thing were? Did you have a sense of what the actual dollar figures were?
JS: No. I had no sense except money goes like water with things like that.
LC: Sure. Yeah. I think you’re probably right. You mentioned that you had seen the effects. Can you tell us a little bit more about that? Can you give a little pencil sketch of what it would look like in an area that had been sprayed?

JS: Well, immediately the tall trees, these great tropical trees would die off. So you’d have these huge dead trees standing up there which were rapidly timbered off even in combat zones. But on the ground, if you walked through these areas, which I did several times, the bamboo and the lower brush kind of grew up by ten or twelve feet tall. That was fairly resistant to defoliant. So, in an infiltrating communist unit, would have little trouble, you know, creating paths that were well covered and resistant therefore to being spotted by the Air Force spotter planes.

LC: Did you, John, have any qualms about the longer term effects of the spray, not necessarily on your own health, obviously that wasn’t really thought of at that time, but just in environmental terms?

JS: Yeah I did, because you saw this stuff often carelessly handled by soldiers in the field. One use for the defoliant was clearing the wire around a position. If you had any sort of a fixed position, of course the military would put out barbed wire and concertina for protection, which was necessary. Then the weeds and stuff like that would start to grow up in it and they’d have to be killed, which they used defoliant.

LC: Yeah.

JS: It was necessary. That was a proper use of it, but I saw guys, you know, handling it I thought very carelessly. It really made me wonder.

LC: By carelessly, what do you mean? Do you remember an incident?

JS: Well, they were fifty-five gallon drums and they were kind of ladling it out and they’d be stripped to the waist of course.

LC: Sure.

JS: This stuff would splash on them and things like that.

LC: You had a sense maybe that wasn’t such a good idea.

JS: Yeah. I didn’t think it was such a good idea.

LC: Subsequently, in the years since your service actually in Vietnam, have you been concerned about your own history?
JS: No, I was never, partly because where I was and partly because I didn’t sign off on these things. Immediate areas where I lived and operated most of the time did not have defoliant dumped on it.

LC: It’s very interesting that the PSA had that kind of authority to decline the spraying. Was that true everywhere do you think?

JS: I think it was true everywhere. I think most places, they didn’t stop it.

LC: Yeah. Yeah. Your thinking in stopping it was just that it was not—it really wasn’t militarily effective?

JS: Well, the first consideration was it would’ve been devastating to the province’s economy.

LC: Okay, because of the rubber plantations.

JS: Because of the rubber plantations and the Vietnamese—it wasn’t the French interests, but the local Vietnamese would’ve been out of work and would’ve had all sorts of remedial things you would’ve had to have done.

LC: Sure. Absolutely, including greater security problems as a result of unemployment probably.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Speaking of security, can you tell me a little bit about the public safety aspect of the work being done under the PSA?

JS: Well, that was another problem I had. My public safety advisor was a former, I think Arizona policeman. He ended up being a problem, one of the few problems I had with personnel.

LC: What happened?

JS: Well, it’s kind of a convoluted thing. He was I think unhappy there and one night he got drunk and was waving weapons around and et cetera et cetera. I tried to get rid of him, get him out of there and couldn’t manage it. So I was stuck with him, and et cetera et cetera. But it one sense, I think he was trying to do a good job. Binh Long was a marginal area for police because it was on the border with a difficult security situation, rather thin populous. But even so, the police had a role and he, of course, the team as a whole worked with the local police authorities and the police field force unit that they had there to try to make them better. Because of the situation, I thought they were less
important than they were down in the Delta provinces, but still, it was something that had
to be done.

LC: The local police, Vietnamese police, can you tell me a little bit about their
structure, effectiveness, equipment, anything you recall about them?

JS: Well, there wasn’t much of a VC movement in the province partly because
the province was not that heavily populated. It had not been a traditional VC base area,
but there was a bit of it. The police in connection with the Phuong Hoang, the Phoenix
Program, did operations against them and picked up some of them. Then there were the
normal public safety things, traffic and minor criminal activity and such. So, the police
function was kind of a standard small scale one.

LC: We talked a little bit before about the, you and I talked about the background
to the development of a police presence, a modern police force in South Vietnam and that
that went all the way back to the 1950s and to the Michigan state program.

JS: Right.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about that or your perspectives on that, anything
that you recall or know about it?

JS: Well, I’m not a real authority on it, but the police in any developing country
are a critical part of making it an effective country. The problems, ranging from
Argentina to Pakistan to Vietnam, the police are always significant. The temptations for
the police for corruption and so forth, the problems training them to operate in the
modern way with modern equipment are so extensive and are so necessary to having a
reasonably successful government, that it’s a critical component. I think our involvement
with the police there was necessary and basically done fairly well.

LC: Were you, as a PSA say in 1970, able to see the, you know, sort of positive
outcomes of some of those investments that had been made earlier?

JS: Yeah. I thought they were getting better and police were respectable by
developing country standards and certainly a necessary and useful component in the great
struggle in the Vietnamese civil war.

LC: You mentioned that in the province, because of the sparse population and
lack of, you know, intensive VC activity that the police force was relatively small. About
what size was it? Do you remember? This is the Vietnamese—I mean, were there—
JS: I have difficulty pinning down real numbers. There was a small, probably platoon sized police field force unit. Then at the district level, I would guess there were probably fifteen or so police and maybe sixty in the provincial capitol besides the police field force.

LC: Okay. Now did they have any intelligence brief? I mean, did they have work to do around VC activity or were they strictly devoted to civil infractions and criminal activity?

JS: No. They were well involved with the effort against the VC, the whole Phoenix Program.

LC: Okay.

JS: That was kind of a divided effort. The Central Intelligence Agency officers of the province level, who were kind of out of the province senior advisor’s control, although we cooperated of course with them, were the main force in the Phoenix Program. But we had a province S2 officer who worked with the Phoenix Program. Then the police advisor worked with the police program of course. So it was a joint effort and they all kind of cooperated in it, of course, based on intelligence that were developed partly through the CIA and partly through the police themselves.

LC: John, any sense of how large the provincial CIA commitment was in Binh Long while you were there?

JS: Well, it was very small again because of the nature of the province. I think we had one or two officers who were CIA contract officers there.

LC: And—

JS: And they—

LC: Go head.

JS: Basically, it was a fairly marginal effort on their side.

LC: Right. Their investments were much larger in other provinces I’m sure.

JS: Yeah, with much heavier populations.

LC: Did you see any of their reporting?

JS: I didn’t see much of it, but they shared it of course with my two officers who worked on the issue.

LC: Okay. Would that have been the public safety officers?
JS: Yeah, the public safety and the Army S2.

LC: Okay. John, did you have any meetings that you attended or briefings either in the province or down in Saigon where the Phoenix project came up and so that you were kept in general abreast of the larger picture as well?

JS: I’ve been quite involved with it in Kien Giang before I went to Binh Long.

LC: Okay.

JS: So, I had a pretty good idea of the effort. Down in Kien Giang, we had a very active PRU, Provincial Reconnaissance Unit, effort run against the VC cadre. So, I had a decent feel for what was being done on it.

LC: Since we didn’t talk about that, can you just review what was happening, what kind of activities the PRU was involved in down in Kien Giang?

JS: It was an effort to roll up the VC cadre in the province. It was part of the wider war. It was termed sometimes in the American anti-war commentary as assassination units, but basically what they were were just armed police units who were trying to preferably capture the VC cadre, but if they fought back, to fight them to the extent necessary. I thought it was an intelligent necessary part of the whole effort. The PRU were men who were recruited directly by the CIA, nominally under the authority of the province chief who certainly had a role in it, but basically run out of the CIA directed Phoenix Operation. They had the flexibility to be used quickly and flexibly against any good intelligence on VC cadre activities. It was a good effort despite the bad reputation it got.

LC: Could the PRU force move fairly quickly in response to battlefield intelligence?

JS: Yeah, they moved—they were not, of course, units designed for real combat—

LC: Right.

JS: Except for small raids essentially.

LC: Right.

JS: Against say a place where VC cadre were known to live or operate. I went out with the province senior advisor in Kien Giang once on an operation with some
choppers delivering the PRU and it developed into a real firefight. They did pick up or
kill some significant cadre members during that operation.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about where you were with regard to the fighting
that was going on? Did you come in afterwards or—?

JS: Well, we were in one of the choppers going overhead. I was there at the
beginning of the operation. Then I went back to the headquarters for some reason. My
province senior advisor came back later in the day and said, “Wow, it really turned into a
significant operation with some real fighting.” I was kind of mad ‘cause I’d missed it.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Was that kind of a one off though with you being actually in
helicopters with PRU units?

JS: Yeah. That was kind of a one off.

LC: Now, the back end of these kinds of operations I’m sure was to develop
intelligence from captured VC.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Where did debriefing take place?

JS: That was usually done by the CIA people.

LC: Okay.

JS: The cadre would be kept in provincial prisons, which were not very nice
because prisons in developing countries are not very nice.

LC: Right. Absolutely. Was there one in Binh Long Province?

JS: Yeah. We had one there.

LC: Where was it? Do you remember?

JS: Just slightly outside the capitol town of An Loc.

LC: Did you go there?

JS: I was there once or twice for one reason or another. They had a ceremony at
it where some of the people were being released if I remember correctly. It was hard for
me to judge it. I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to be incarcerated in one of them, but
from my very superficial look, I couldn’t see that it was barbarous either.

LC: What did it look like? I mean, if you could describe just kind of walking up
to it, was it a freestanding building? Did it have separate rooms?
JS: Yeah. This is kind of freestanding buildings guarded by wire and watchtowers if I remember correctly. I forget what the cells looked like, but the ones I remember in Kien Giang were on the spartan side with several people in them.

LC: Security at these facilities or the one there in An Loc or just outside An Loc would have been provided by Vietnamese?


LC: Okay.

JS: Plus probably some of the police guards.

LC: Okay. John, tell me a little bit about the PF and if they were in An Loc, RF (Regional Forces) forces. Did you have much interaction with them?

JS: Yeah, a great deal of interaction. We dealt very extensively with them through the province authorities. I thought highly of the whole effort with the regional forces, popular forces. They were derided of course as the Ruff Puffs.

LC: Right.

JS: They were certainly not the US Marines, but the core of it was that by building them up, you got local boys into the government forces instead of them being recruited way into the VC where you’d have to kill them.

LC: Sure. Yeah.

JS: The decision for a lot of the young Vietnamese lads in the countryside was that they didn’t want to be taken away to the Highlands in one of the division units. So the RF-PF gave them a real alternative to stay near their homes and defend their homes.

So a lot of kids who would’ve gone to the enemy actually stayed on the government side. It was a very useful effort. As time went on, we gave the RF and the PF modern weaponry, M16s and M79 grenade guns and real support and real uniforms. A lot of these units turned out to be really quite respectable. Later in the war, some of them say up in central corps, really distinguished themselves in fighting. In An Loc also, I thought they operated well. They performed well in the great battle in 1972 in An Loc. They were under the authority of the province chief who had this dual civil military function, kind of like the National Guard for an American governor except this was a real war going on.

LC: Right. Right.
JS: So they were kept locally, controlled locally, used flexibly by the province chief for defense of the province. It’s a very good effort. It was one of the intelligent things we did in Vietnam was to build up the RF and the PF.

LC: You talked about the transfer of American weapons to these forces. Was that beginning when you were a PSA or did that come later?

JS: That actually came earlier.

LC: Oh, earlier. Okay.

JS: By the time I got there, they were being equipped with the M16s, M79s, and other things and the old carbines and old M1s, which the M1 rifle, which I carried in the Korean War was kind of heavy and awkward for a smaller Vietnamese. These were being retired, later given to the Popular Self-Defense Force people, which were the young teenagers and old men who were the local, very local defense. But the RF-PF were being equipped much like the soldiers and the main force units on the republic side.

LC: Now was it Tran Van Nhut who was the province chief?

JS: Yes.

LC: Okay. He would have been the one to deploy RF and PF forces?

JS: Right. Right.

LC: Okay. You gave us a description of his work. Did he remain in An Loc after you left?

JS: Yes. He was there well after I left. When the North Vietnamese attacked in the spring of 1972—

LC: Yes.

JS: He organized the defense of An Loc in a way that was instrumental in preserving it from being overrun by the North Vietnamese and was decorated by President Thieu and moved on in promotion to become a division commander. He was a good officer and I think he proved it well in the military, on the military side during that attack.

LC: Was he a local from the province itself or was he—?

JS: No. He was from a—I think I mentioned it before, he was the son of a lumber company operator and from a fairly well off family I think.

LC: Right. Okay.
JS: But had gone to the French Naval Academy for training and then going into the Marines and then ended up in the Army.

LC: Was he someone that you had a great deal of interaction with as PSA?
JS: Oh, yeah, a great deal.
LC: Like every week?
JS: Oh, every day almost.
LC: Really?
JS: Yeah.
LC: Okay. What kind of offices did he have?
JS: He was in the province building, which was a two story older, probably dating from the French period. We were in a kind of prefab type building right next door. When he moved around the province, I usually would accompany him.

LC: Okay. Did he have a dedicated helicopter or did you?
JS: I had a dedicated helicopter. I got it several times a week. Sometimes I’d take him along. Sometimes he’d have ARVN helicopters or we’d go by road.

LC: In general, I mean, he had a heavily Francophile background, I think you’ve mentioned. What would you say his take on the American commitment to South Vietnam was? Can you characterize that?
JS: Well, I think—
LC: Go ahead John.
JS: He was a broad scale man. I think he, like most Vietnamese, was a good patriot and would’ve preferred to have done it all on his own, but he liked foreigners, got along well foreigners and was easy to work with on the whole. I think wanted certainly the American assistance.

LC: Did you sense tension either, you know, if not coming from him, from perhaps other Vietnamese officials that you came into contact with, especially in this very French dominated province, tension or conflict between their sense of the French investment in Vietnam and the American investment? Did you see any tensions there?
JS: I think there was an underlying tension always. Vietnamese are proud, sophisticated people.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.
JS: Having these Americans, big overbearing Americans with all this wealth and equipment.

LC: Yes.

JS: And this intrusiveness was hard to take naturally enough. So there’s always, I think, a fundamental tension in relation to a Vietnamese. Some like Nhut were much more self confident and used it well. Others I think bridled at it, not without reason. You’d have this spectacle of a Vietnamese who’d been at war for years and years and years and then you’d have this American show up who didn’t know Vietnam, had very limited experience and would come in pushing his ideas and advice and trying to dominate you. So there was a natural basic tension in the relationship.

LC: Did you ever pick up any sparks or anything on the edge of a comment from the French whom you knew either the ones you met in Cambodia or the ones in the province? Perhaps there was some resentment there too about Americans coming in and trying to wrangle the war as it were.

JS: Well, the French had been out long enough and their defeat had been so traumatic that the few commercial French who were still there, I think were pretty much reconciled to the way it was. But naturally enough, I think they probably were not always admirers of the Americans.

LC: Probably. (Laughing) One could say that about French in general though perhaps.

JS: Yeah. So I had very good personal relations with the ones I dealt with there. I enjoyed being with them and thought well of them.

LC: Was there a French diplomatic presence in Saigon or any diplomatic officials who came up to An Loc while you were there?

JS: Not to An Loc. Though later when I was in the embassy in Saigon, you of course met some of the French. But we didn’t have that much to do with them and they were not that intrusive by any means at that time in the affairs of Vietnam.

LC: Let me switch tack a little bit, John, and ask you to recall whether you had any additional interaction with John Vann during the time you were at Binh Long.

JS: Right. I didn’t see John while I was at An Loc because he was down at III Corps at that time.
LC: Yes. Yes.
JS: So later on when I was in the embassy, I saw him a number of times.
LC: Okay. Go ahead and tell me about that and we’ll transition to talking about
your time in Saigon.
JS: I went up once to II Corps where he had taken the military position of being
the senior corps advisor. John’s deputy was a good friend of mine, Tom Barnes, who’d
been one of my predecessors as province senior advisor in An Loc. Tom was a very
effective Foreign Service officer, a true Southeast Asia hand. You’ve talked to him,
Laura, so you know what he’s like.
LC: Yes.
JS: Vann, he was Vann’s deputy. They were very close. So for instance, I went
along once on a trip with Tom and John Vann up to Pleiku and watched John again in
operation with his usual dynamism.
LC: What was the purpose of the trip? Do you remember?
JS: I forget what the immediate ones, maybe just a routine one to talk to the
province chief and the advisors there. John, as you know, kept a helicopter always
available so he could dart off to see his people all over his area of responsibility.
LC: Of course, Pleiku was absolutely key.
JS: Yeah. It was one of the cutting edge provinces.
LC: Who was the PSA up there when you went?
JS: I don’t remember.
LC: Okay. But anyway, the three of you made this trip and you mentioned John
Vann and his dynamism. Can you give a little sense of that to someone who’d be trying
to, you know, gauge who this person was?
JS: Well, I remember I was in a meeting while I was up in Pleiku giving a
briefing on some of the embassy perspective on affairs in Vietnam. John wandered into
it. John was in a sense somewhat domineering and he soon kind of took over the
meeting, which I didn’t mind, expressing his views on a number of the issues. Again,
when we were out in Pleiku seeing him operate with the people there where he expressed
his views forcefully and sensibly I thought on a number of issues, again gave me an
impression that he was one of the best and most effective of our officers in Vietnam.
LC: Would you say, John, and this would just, you know, obviously be your assessment based on your observations, was John Vann a realist?

JS: Yeah. I thought he was a realist. I think he had a commitment to the cause, but he was quite willing to acknowledge the faults and weaknesses of our position there.

LC: For the purpose I’m sure of getting on with it.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Of remediating what problems there were.

JS: Right, doing what had to be done. I think he felt that the basic cause was a just one.

LC: Yes.

JS: So our performance was not always adequate.

LC: I wonder, John, whether you share that general viewpoint that it was—?

JS: Yeah. I still feel it was a just cause. I’m not always sure it was a wise war because America can not handle wars that are long and protracted and have real shades of gray in them.

LC: With an uncertain—in some ways, uncertainty of an endpoint?

JS: Yeah, uncertainty of an endpoint. My overall feeling was that we made some basic errors. One was the over-Americanization of the war. We just put too much, too many young Americans, did too much in Vietnam. Another was that we set the wrong limits on the war. All wars have their limits, like we didn’t—either us nor the Germans used poison gas in World War II or Germans didn’t invade Switzerland. But we set limits that at the end, we extended, like the bombing of Hanoi, the blockading of the harbor in Haiphong, that we probably should’ve done at the very beginning. Johnson had terrible political pressures on him, diplomatic pressures. So I understand some of the decisions like the bombing halt, but the limits of what we did were such that in the end, I think it undercut what we tried to do. Then on the Vietnamese side, there was some essential weaknesses. I was there during a period where the Vietnamese were pulling their act together, but earlier in the game, there would’ve been a really good reason, good justification for having cut off for a commitment at that point because the Vietnamese were not, on our side, were not doing what was necessary for us to try to help them.

LC: Do you have a sense of when that point was reached?
JS: Well, I think when the Vietnamese began to do better was when Thieu, President Thieu, finally got reasonably secure power. Thieu had his faults. He had people like General Quang who were corrupt that he kind of supported, but he was a very good politician. I talked to many, many Vietnamese when I was in the embassy and almost all of them had gripes about Thieu, but very few of them felt that Thieu was either incompetent or a major threat to their group interests. Thieu was able to balance the politics of Vietnam really quite well. There were some real democratic underpinnings. The election for the National Assembly were very credible for a developing country and so forth. There was a tolerated opposition. There were opposition papers that had cartoons of Thieu that were skewering by any American political cartoon standard. So there was a real democratic base to a fairly secure presidency. The Vietnamese began to really pull their act together. But at the earlier stage before that, when the generals were contending when Khanh was parading around, it was really shambles. The officers like my brother, who were there at the earlier stage, I found were much more skeptical of the Vietnamese and our effort than I was and some of my friends at the later period. That earlier stage was one where the Vietnamese really didn’t justify the enormous amount of support we gave the Republic.

LC: Certainly with someone like Nguyen Khanh, he came at, you know, certainly under a cloud on the back of the military and tolerating opposition or, you know, having reasonable democratic participation was not sort of on the priority list.

JS: No. It just became personalized politics of the highest level of scramble.

LC: I’m interested John in your comment about the diplomatic pressures on LBJ (Lyndon B. Johnson) and the limits on prosecution of the military side of the conflict that those seem to impose on him. In general, it’s been observed, I know you’re aware that Johnson was concerned about Chinese intervention, particularly during and after the culture revolution in China.

JS: Right.

LC: And the instability there, but was there another side to this kind of diplomatic pressure too, which came from allies?
JS: Yeah. The Brits and the others were all pressing us to restrict our warfare and seek diplomatic solutions and so forth. So, I well understand the enormous pressures of Johnson and the White House, and the Washington authorities felt at that time.

LC: What about the Japanese?

JS: Well, I know them very well and the sentiment in Japan was against the war. Even the conservatives would urge us to somehow reach a compromise with the communists. Their companies were still wanting to deal with North Vietnam. Japan was buying Hongay Anthracite from North Vietnam. They, of course, wanted to get their ships in there without problem and that was again a pressure, that we didn’t blockade North Vietnam, which in retrospect we should’ve done.

LC: Earlier than the mining at Haiphong?

JS: Yeah. That mining should’ve been much earlier in the game.

LC: Was the coal purchase issue one that the Japanese would bring to bilateral discussions? I know that you weren’t on the Japan desk now at this point, but certainly I’m sure you had some awareness of the bilateral relationship. Was it something that the Japanese would bring?

JS: I just don’t know, Laura. I don’t know how that was mobilized, but it was certainly one factor on the Japanese position.

LC: What were some of the others? You mentioned that of course there was a sentiment against the war. Was it an anti-war feeling in general or was it specifically to do with US combat in Asia that upset the Japanese?

JS: Well, all of the above. The Japanese, because of their World War II experience, had a very strong streak of pacifism that went through the society with good reason. So there was this quick call against any sort of militaristic move by anybody, even their great ally, the United States, particularly United States when the left would protest. Again, the temper of the time was, around the world was for anti-war, anti-Vietnam movements. Japan shared that as much as anybody.

LC: John, when did you actually move from Binh Long Province down to Saigon?


LC: Okay.
JS: After home leave, came back to the embassy political section. Excuse me one second Laura. Let me just make a quick—

LC: John, you mentioned that you had a home leave, how long was that?
JS: I think I had three months. I went back through Europe, which was good fun to see something different. When I came out of the field in Vietnam, I’d had asthma problems in the latter stages of my time there. I was really debilitated. I had lost about thirty pounds of weight and was really tired. So, the home leave was a real blessing.

LC: You needed a rest, huh?
JS: I needed a rest.

LC: John, what countries did you visit in Western Europe?
JS: Oh, I forget now Laura. I’d have to reconstruct it, but it was a very pleasant trip. I think I saw my brother in France along the line.

LC: Do you remember much about the feeling in any of the countries that you visited? France is especially important.
JS: No. I was a straight tourist.

LC: You were just touristing around?
JS: I was just touristing.

LC: Okay. Did you stay in the States at all?
JS: Yeah. I was in the States for a while. Again, I could get a sense of the war, anti-Vietnam War protests at the time.

LC: Yeah. During the summer and fall of 1970, of course, the reaction to the Cambodian incursion had really stimulated the anti-war movement to a new level really.
JS: Right.

LC: Do you remember any of that?
JS: Well, I just witnessed it generally passing through my own country.

LC: Did you see anything in Washington?
JS: I think I did, but I’m hazy.

LC: Okay. Did you already have in hand your next assignment, what it would be?
JS: Yeah. I knew I was going back to Vietnam, which I was pleased to do. I was extremely interested in the issue and had the Vietnamese language experience and experience in the field. I wanted to do more.

LC: When did you—or go ahead John.

JS: So I was pleased to go back.

LC: I should just ask what FSO (Foreign Service Officer) level were you at this point? Do you know?

JS: I was an FSO3. I got promoted just as I was leaving An Loc.

LC: Your upcoming assignment in Saigon was what?

JS: I was the head of the internal political, what was it, section of the political section at the embassy. So I had some, seven, six officers who worked for me. We coursed around, trying to find out what was happening in the internal politics of the Republic of Vietnam, and also what was happening generally with the politics in the military and the situation there.

LC: Was this an assignment that you were really looking forward to?

JS: Well, I was pleased to get it. I had excellent officers working with me. They were a very capable group. All but one of them spoke good Vietnamese. They were all reliable, effective officers. A couple of them went on to become ambassadors, including the one who just recently left there, Ray Burkhardt. Al Adams, who was the ambassador in three countries. My first officer, Dick Thompson, was a brilliant Rhodes scholar with a very good feel for, excellent feel for the politics of Vietnam. They were a very good crew.

LC: The names of the others come to mind at all, John?

JS: Yeah, Dick Muller, a fine officer, Hal Meinheit, a very fine officer, Ernie Sherman, who was the one person who didn’t speak Vietnamese, and I think as a female officer, she felt she was kind of getting the low end of the totem pole, but she was a fine officer in her own right.

LC: Where was she from?

JS: I forget. She later went on to marry another FSO, became an ambassador.

LC: But she was a single FSO?

JS: She was a single.
LC: A single woman at this point.
JS: Single woman.
LC: She went by Ernie?
JS: Yeah, Ernie. Ernestine I think was her name, Ernestine Sherman.
LC: Okay. This undoubtedly would be a matter of interest. Can you tell me, she did not have Vietnamese language training, but had she been in Vietnam for some amount of time?
JS: I think she was only in the embassy political section.
LC: Okay.
JS: A couple of the others had come out of the provinces and Al Adams had been the staff assistant to Ambassador Bunker. But they were a very well qualified group of officers.
LC: They would’ve all been lower grade FSOs than you. Is that accurate?
JS: Yeah.
LC: Okay.
JS: They were lower than me, but—
LC: But as you say, many went on to—
JS: Went on to higher positions.
LC: This wasn’t the end of the career for those guys.
JS: No, by no means. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) Tell me what it looked like from your point of view, looking up the ladder within the embassy. Who did you report to?
JS: Well, it was a long bureaucratic chain. There was a political counselor, political minister, and then that went up to the deputy ambassador and then Ambassador Bunker. But my two immediate superiors were both very nice guys. Neither of them were Asian hands. I felt that they really didn’t have a good feel for the country. So I thought there was a real weakness there. But the ambassador and the deputy were I thought excellent people.
LC: Now who was the deputy at this point?
JS: Well, first was Sam Berger.
LC: Yes.
JS: Who I’d known from a very much of an underling’s position who’d been in Korea as an ambassador, was a decisive, experienced man, a very good officer. Then, of course, Elsworth Bunker, who’s one of the great figures of American diplomacy who we all had great respect for.

LC: Go ahead and tell me a little bit about your observations of the ambassador during the time you were there, which would’ve been from what, the fall of 1970 until ’72?

JS: Yeah. Well, the ambassador was in a sense an imperial figure, the viceroy for Vietnam. He had very good personal relations with Thieu. He was a self confident, highly experienced man. Of course, very mature in his judgments I thought, basically with a good feel for the country, though somewhat remote. You know, he couldn’t move around because of his high position, he really couldn’t move out that much. But he was certainly a fine choice for the position on a very difficult issue.

LC: What, if you know, did he do to overcome the limits that he had in getting around and getting his own information? How did he make up for that? What would a good ambassador do in that situation?

JS: Well, two things. At his level, he dealt closely with the Vietnamese, Thieu and the principle officers of the Vietnamese government. He certainly had a lot of contact, personal contact with them. The other, with a good staff, you depend on their reports and their contacts.

LC: Did he cultivate the staff?

JS: Not particularly. He was so far up there, so senior in position, but he was also good with us. I remember there was—my officers were younger guys who reflected some of the dissidence of the Vietnam War period. They were skeptical of certain aspects of what we were doing in Vietnam. I remember in the critical presidential election, which turned out to be a fiasco.

LC: ’72?

JS: Yeah, that we were all so heavily involved with. Ambassador Bunker and Berger met with us as a group and talked, solicited our individual opinions, which was I thought both appropriate and generous on his part.
LC: Were they, in particularly Ambassador Bunker, essentially being good managers, trying to listen to grievances and non-standard opinion and all of that?
JS: Right.
LC: And just trying to sort of get some of that out into the open air?
JS: Right. Exactly.
LC: Okay. How much did they actually hear in a meeting like that? Did they get the cap off of what might have been brewing in some people’s minds in terms of upset about US policies or whatever?
JS: Well, I think my officers were somewhat inhibited, but also somewhat candid in their views. So, it was a good hearing of a few points that were not dead in line with the official line.
LC: John, let me ask you about the work of your officers and yourself. Was the objective—well, what was the mission? I won’t characterize it. What was the mission of the internal political affairs unit?
JS: Well, it’s basically intelligence gathering on what’s happening in the domestic situation in Vietnam. We coursed out to talk to Vietnamese of all stripes, including some who were very prominent oppositionists or even leftists, critical of the government and would of course write up their views, make our judgments as to what was going on and put it in the official reporting both to Washington and up to our own seniors.
LC: Tell me if you can a little bit about the democratic opposition. What were some of the main features of the opposition, some of the leaders that you might have talked to or that your personnel talked with?
JS: Well, during the board of presidential election, of course, a lot of the opposition coalesced around Big Minh as the candidate.
LC: Yes.
JS: Particularly after Ky had been directly moved out by Thieu’s men. It was shaping up as a reasonably valid election choice, but the people [opposing] Thieu reflected pretty well I thought the whole panoply of opposition in Vietnam, which ranged from people who were conservative, but were not in Thieu’s, among Thieu’s following down to some who were pretty much to the left. In fact, some of who I think were kept
on who were communist either hidden or future to be prominent after 1975. A lot of
these people I thought, you know, were quite very respectable, they were just people who
wanted the opposition to the current incumbent. They thought they could do it better. I
derived some of them, had considerable respect for some of them that I knew, but the
opposition was of all sorts.

LC: John, one area of interest I know to scholars is this leftist group that was
retained within the Thieu government, some of whom were thought to be communist
moles and so forth. Can you give us any names or characterize this group any further?
JS: Well, there were actual moles as you say. There was one who turned out to
be among the Thieu staffers who was a real implant by the communists. There were
some, Jack Ouan, as he was known, Jack Owen, who was I think an economist, partly
American educated who was later rehabilitated by the communists, but I don’t think was
one of their agents, but was just more sympathetic to them. I knew him and I’m sure I
talked to a couple of others who probably were either communist plants or crypto-
communists. I remember talking to a professor up in Hue one time and it was very clear
from the comments that he was made that he was both anti-American and sympathetic to
the other side.

LC: Did you get out of Saigon much in order to make these kind of field
assessments and interview people?
JS: Yes I did, partly because of my interests. I’ve always liked to wander around
and see different areas and talk to different people. I felt it was a key part of the job. I
went up, for instance, several times to central Vietnam, to Hue, once when it was under
the attack in 1972 and was largely deserted by the people there.

LC: What was the situation like when you were there?
JS: Well, it was spooky because Hue was a typical vibrant Vietnamese city and
there was only a tenth of the people normally there and the aspect of fear as they were
expecting the communists to move in. We actually went up to north of there to the
province capitol, which had been directly attacked by the communists and finally fought
off.

LC: Was this Quang Tri or—?
JS: Yeah. Quang Tri I think.
LC: What was the situation?
JS: Well, it was kind of devastated, plus the uncertainty of whether they’d be able to withstand it if the attack was renewed.
LC: How dangerous was it when you were there? How dangerous for you to go up there?
JS: Well, probably average I guess.
LC: Average for Vietnam. (Laughing)
JS: Average. (Laughing) It didn’t bother me particularly.
LC: Okay.
JS: I’ve been in so much of situations, I was just kind of curious more than anything else.
LC: Okay. So you’re kind of inured to the risk?
JS: Yeah. Another time I went up where I may have had a little bit of actual effect, before the ’72 offensive, there were premonitions of it. I went up on a trip to Kontum, north of Pleiku and wrote up an assessment of the local situation, which basically said that the ARVN unit there was weak and there was in real danger of a communist assault taking place. I came back, wrote up my memo on it. I think Ambassador Bunker showed it to General Abrams actually.
LC: With what effect? Do you have any idea?
JS: Well, I think Abrams was an excellent officer. I think he took the, was generally taking the necessary precautionary steps of what proved to be a major offensive.
LC: Do you have any sense of the prefiguring of the ’72 offensive, how much information the US at least on the diplomatic side had about the intention of the NVA to come through the Highlands?
JS: Well, we knew something was coming up. They pre-positioned—there was reasonable intelligence they were doing something. Although, the intensity and the full scope of it I think were somewhat of a shock in the fact that it took place both in my old province of Binh Long heavily as well as Kontum and as well as Quang Tri. It was kind of daunting, but we were somewhat forewarned of it. So it was not a total surprise by any means like Tet had been.
LC: You mentioned briefly General Abrams. Can you give a sense? First of all, did you ever meet with him or share a meeting space as it were? Was he ever at a briefing you gave or anything like that?

JS: I attended one when I was at Binh Long where Abrams was visiting and I was just one of an audience. Later on when I was in Okinawa, I was up at a meeting in the Embassy and Abrams was visiting. I actually talked to him a bit as we walked over to the ambassador’s residence for lunch. But like many other officers—actually I was at a lunch or so with Abrams as one of the various people there. I think I shared the general admiration for Abrams as a man of good sense and thorough military spirit who was trying to work through the Vietnamese instead of bypassing them to prepare for the defense of the Republic.

LC: John, do you have a sense that you can share with us of a comparison between Abrams and the situation he faced and Westmoreland earlier and the situation he faced? Clearly, they were different situations, but I wonder if you can just kind of put the two commanders sort of side by side and give an impression of the two of them.

JS: Well, it’s hard for me to be fully just to Westmoreland ‘cause I never had any direct contact with him or was there during his primary time. But my sense was that [Westmoreland] was fighting an American war against the North Vietnamese. His task was to win the main force battle against the North Vietnamese and then give the whole thing back later on to the ARVN for them to mop up on. Abrams viewpoint was that Americans couldn’t do it for the long run. So we’ve got to work with and through the Vietnamese in large part, supplementing but not doing their task. So it was a very different approach to the war.

LC: When you had these sort of glancing interactions with Abrams, how did he strike you?

JS: Well, as a gruff thoroughly experienced sensible man.

LC: Did he have a large retinue that traveled with him?

JS: Not particularly by Army standards. He wasn’t an imperial general.

LC: Right, of which there had been some.

JS: Of which there had been in our history.

LC: Right. Someone in Japan actually comes to mind.
JS: Yes. Who was that guy? (Laughing)

LC: I don’t know. (Laughing) Did he have a liaison on his staff whose job it was
to interact with you as internal intelligence expert or internal—?

JS: No. No. He dealt directly with the ambassador. They had very good
personal relations, good press between them.

LC: Okay. Okay.

JS: So anything that I and my officers did would come through the embassy
chain through Abrams to MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam).

LC: Okay. Let me ask you a little bit about the sort of personal side if I can of
your time in Saigon. First of all, did you have your wife with you?

JS: Yes. I got special permission to bring my wife and child, my son, to
Vietnam. We lived in a house on a side street, a very nice little house that oddly enough
my brother had lived in when he was in the embassy.

LC: No kidding. No kidding.

JS: I’d seen that house many times over the years later on when it was occupied
by high communist officials. I went up and peered over the fence and his daughter came
out and said, “Would you like to come in?” I came in and talked to the official’s wife.

LC: What year would that have been John?

JS: I think it was ’88. Later on, it became the annex to the school for foreign
children in Saigon. My last trip about two years ago, I was shocked to see it, painted a
pretty pink. But my wife was there during my two years and she really enjoyed it in
Saigon, had good friends. The house was comfortable.

LC: Now, is this a French era building?

JS: Yes. It was an old French house, low one story comfortable high ceiling
house with ceiling fans and all the rest, and a nice little garden, huge papaya trees and
mango trees.

LC: It sounds ideal.

JS: Yeah. For Saigon, I thought one of the nicest houses, partly because it was
off the main street. So you didn’t get this choking blue exhaust smoke, which came from
all the traffic on the streets.

LC: How far from the embassy?
JS: Not too far, about a ten-minute ride. It was just north of the palace there.

LC: Okay.

JS: On a street called Nguyen Gia Thieu.

LC: It must’ve been very interesting for you to see it later on in its different guises.

JS: Right.

LC: Yeah. If you have any sense of place at all, that must’ve been very interesting.

JS: Yeah. It reflected the history of that time.

LC: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. I hesitate to ask you this John, but do you have any photographs of the building?

JS: Yeah. I do I think.

LC: Okay. Yeah. It sounds extremely interesting, particularly the time when the daughter came out and said, “Would you like to see the building?” So you spent a little bit of time with the official’s wife?

JS: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember that at all? Can you tell—?

JS: Oh, yeah. I talked with her. My Vietnamese had gone downhill, so it was a somewhat stilted conversation, but she was quite courteous. Her son who took me out who was in his twenties, made one or two comments, which were, I wouldn’t say that friendly, but you know, were not antagonistic. But she was expressively normal, courtesy of a respectable Vietnamese lady.

LC: Was she from the north?

JS: She was from the north, one of the many communist carpetbaggers who came down to run the south.


JS: No, standard.

LC: Something the Americans and the Vietnamese have in common anyway.

JS: Yeah.
LC: Let me ask you a little bit about your wife’s experience living in Saigon if I can. What kinds of things was she involved with? Did she hang out with other Embassy wives? I hate to use that expression.

JS: Yes. Her closest friends were in the Japanese Embassy, one of the Japanese Embassy wives. The ambassador who I—a Japanese ambassador who I’d known slightly before, Ambassador Togo, the son of the famous Togo, the foreign minister, he had worked very closely with the Americans particularly in the drafting of the US-Japan security treaty. His wife was half German half Japanese, a delightful, lively woman and they were very kind to us. My wife’s best friend was the wife of the Japanese political counselor, Yanai, who was an excellent officer, very savvy. The Japanese Embassy had one officer who was a Vietnam specialist and of all the embassies there, I thought he was the only one that really contributed to our sense of what was going on. He was very well plugged in. Talking to him was always valuable at getting an additional feel for what was going on. My wife had other friends around, including Vietnamese ladies. My wife was a former movie actress.

LC: Right.

JS: And very outgoing. She made friends quickly and well. She had a good time in Saigon. One time I took her to an official reception and she was, as she did it very occasionally, wore a Vietnamese ao dai, really traditional trousers and long skirted blouse. She was standing by the door. And my wife has a kind of a Pan Asian face.

LC: Okay.

JS: She was mistaken for a local in every place that she was in in East Asia. She was standing by the door and Vietnamese men would come in and greet her. She’d kind of bow and clasp her hands like a proper Vietnamese women did. Nobody picked up that she wasn’t Vietnamese. (Laughing)

LC: She just faked them out.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Did she have fun with that?

JS: Well, I think she was only doing it to—

LC: Oh, to be courteous in a way.

JS: Yeah, to be courteous. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) Well, that actually could be quite useful in some circumstances I’m sure, passing as it were for Vietnamese.

JS: Yeah. My young son was, let’s see, he was four and a half when he moved to Saigon. My cook had eight children. She lived in the back of the house, a widowed woman. She had been the cook for my brother actually. She had a pair of twins, this girl is the same age as my son. By the end of the two years, my son’s best language was Vietnamese.

LC: Really?

JS: He squatted and talked like a Vietnamese and had this high-pitched tonal Vietnamese that he spoke, which unfortunately of course he forgot thereafter.

LC: Sure. Sure. But kids are remarkable in that way.

JS: Yeah, they’re just like—

LC: Little sponges.

JS: Sponges.

LC: Yeah. It’s really quite something. Let me ask you just a little bit more about the Japanese Embassy and the officials, particularly the Vietnam specialist that you mentioned. Do you recall his name?

JS: I don’t. I think it was [Murayama] or something like that. He was an excellent officer. He was considered a Class B officer in the Foreign Ministry, which—

LC: What does that mean?

JS: Well, Class A or the elite general is to officers who go from Mexico to Paris to Beijing or whatever. They’re the Tokyo University graduates and the guys who were all going to be ambassadors later on. The Class B officers are specialists who speak Hindu or Vietnamese or Arabic or something like that. Their careers will only go up so far. This officer I heard later had resigned from the Foreign Service to go commercial, partly for the money and lack of promotion chances. But he had long experience in Vietnam and was an excellent observer of the scene.

LC: How long?

JS: I forget how many years, but it had been a number of years and he was particularly well plugged in with the opposition. So, he was well worth talking to.
LC: Now, for someone who wasn’t familiar, which would include myself, with these kinds of exchanges where a friendly diplomat at an essentially allied embassy would give some information to members of the American Embassy, how did that happen? Was it essentially informal, just kind of over drinks or at receptions or dinners and so forth that you would have these kinds of exchanges or was it something more formal in this particular relationship where you would actually have a meeting and kind of compare notes and exchange some degree of information, obviously not everything?

JS: Well, it’s a very standard practice. You get together with friendly diplomats and have what they call the exchange of views, or tour dihorizon, a look at everything that’s going on. Sometimes they’re pumping you, sometimes you’re more pumping them. In the case of Saigon, most of the diplomats were less plugged in than the Americans were. So, they came to us essentially for information. They’d trade what they had, like their own comments of what was going on, but we were better informed than most of the embassies, the Brits or the Germans or the Australians, who we were quite friendly with of course. You’d meet them at receptions or you’d have scheduled meetings with them. They’d come in and ask for a briefing of what’s going on. Because they were friendly and so forth, you’d give them whatever you could. Sometimes they’d have stuff that was of use for us, particularly as I mentioned the Japanese.

LC: So in this case with this particular Japanese diplomat, this was an exception really where he had—

JS: Yeah. He was an exception. He was a true Vietnam hand.

LC: Wow. Do you have any sense of his family background?

JS: No.

LC: Okay. I wonder if he had any family connections to Vietnam during earlier periods, thinking now in general the Japanese occupation of Indochina.

JS: I just don’t know that, Laura.

LC: Of course, there must’ve been many, many Japanese diplomats with experience during that period.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about the rest of the diplomatic community. Did the embassy have interactions with representatives from Nationalist China?
JS: We did, though I never did to my knowledge.

LC: Okay. That they weren’t really a group that you came across much.

JS: No. They were active in Saigon. They had their own contacts among the substantial Chinese community in Cholon. But there was a certain hands off with the Nationalists. I think it was partly the whole issue that we didn’t want to antagonize the communists in China, to do more with the North Vietnamese.

LC: Of course, the time period that you were in Saigon, this was an especially, you know, touchy issue I’m sure because of the president’s visit to Beijing, well first of all, Kissinger’s visit.

JS: Yes. Right.

LC: Do you remember that?

JS: Oh, quite well. Kissinger came through Saigon several times when I was there. One funny incident was when he came at a time, the ambassador was giving a reception, I guess maybe partly for Kissinger to introduce him to the senior Vietnamese in the city. It was at the ambassador’s residence, but the ambassador also had his granddaughter there. So, the three of them were on the steps. The granddaughter was a high teenager, very good looking blonde with long hair and then at that occasion, long legs and wearing a miniskirt. It was so funny because we were taking up the Vietnamese, receiving them and taking them up to introduce them to the ambassador. We walk up and there was Kissinger, Bunker, and this gorgeous young blonde standing, the three of them, Kissinger looking like he was being introduced by the father of the bride. (Laughing) It was a very funny scene.

LC: A little nervous, was he?

JS: Well, I think he kind of enjoyed it.

LC: Oh, okay.

JS: He didn’t mind pretty women. But I talked with his principle staffer, Winston Lord who went on of course to higher glory. But on one of the visits, the second or third he came through, Lord kind of didn’t come into talk to me. I kind of wondered about it. A day or so afterwards, I went up to Hong Kong for some reason. I was talking to one of the China specialist officers there, Jay Taylor, a very knowledgeable China hand. I was asking him whether there was going to be any motion in our relations to the
Chinese. He said, “No. There was no prospect, immediate prospect.” Then two days later, the whole Kissinger thing had occurred.

LC: No kidding?

JS: Of course, the reason Lord didn’t talk to me, he was so busy for the preparation since they went through then on to Pakistan and up to Beijing.

LC: Wow. That’s quite astounding that either Mr. Taylor didn’t know or couldn’t say, one of the two.

JS: Well, I think he just didn’t know. I don’t think anybody was briefed.

LC: Probably not in the State Department.

JS: Not the State Department.

LC: Yeah. That’s intriguing. Did you have much in the way of interaction with Mr. Lord other than that?

JS: No. I just talked to him once or twice, a little bit of length on the internal situation.

LC: What about Dr. Kissinger?

JS: Oh, I never dealt directly with him. Except oddly enough, when I was in the White House he called on Komer. This was long before he moved into government.

LC: When he was in academics.

JS: I was the man who ushered him out, so I talked to him as we paced through the long corridors of the Executive Office building.

LC: No sense then though that he would rise to the great—

JS: No. I didn’t know he was going to be a great man.

LC: Public and party figure that he has become.

JS: Yeah. Exactly. (Laughing)

LC: I don’t mean party in the sense—

JS: The celebrity.

LC: Yes. That’s the sense in which I used the word. (Laughing)

JS: Yeah.

LC: Let me ask you about others of the diplomatic community. You mentioned the Australians. What kind of representation did they have in Saigon?
JS: They had a significant embassy there. I knew a couple of their officers very well. In fact, one of them, I used to play badminton with in the Australian Embassy garage, which was an exhausting game believe it or not in the Saigon heat.

LC: I believe it.

JS: But they were good officers. They, of course, had their substantial military presence in Vietnam. I was later to become friends with an Australian wheat farmer who had been one of their soldiers in combat in the field down southeast of Saigon.

LC: How did that come about?

JS: Well, he had a similar collecting interest as I did. We got in correspondence. I finally went out to four hours outside of Perth where he had his wheat farm and stayed with him one night and talked to him in length

LC: About his in-country—

JS: About his experiences in the field in Vietnam.

LC: What was his MOS (Military Occupational Specialty)? What did he actually do?

JS: He actually carried I think an automatic, a machine gun, and he was a national service soldier who had I think only five months there. But he was in combat, in the field down there where the Australians operated.

LC: What was the impression you got from him about in any sense, his involvement? I mean, did he think that Australian troops ought to have been there or was it more questioning the critical?

JS: No. He was—I think he felt it was a proper thing for Australia to do in view of their interests in, their own security interests against the communist’s takeover, possibly even of Indonesia if the dominos had kept falling, plus, the consideration for their ties with the United States. I think he had respect for the communist troops’ ability and he had respect of course for the Australian’s combat drive.

LC: They, of course, had an operational area that was essentially their own as did New Zealand troops.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Did you form an opinion about the work of those allies or of the Korean allies that you guys had?
JS: Yeah. The Australians and New Zealanders were the best of the foreigners who worked with us. The Koreans were ferocious soldiers, but they didn’t really have good rapport with their Asian allies. Then later on in the game the Blue house, general, President Park Chung Hee basically ordered them to stand down, just guard their own positions. So despite the size of their effort, they weren’t as good as they should’ve been. Then the Filipinos who were fine people, very nice people, their operation was how would you saw, not an aggressive one. They were small in any event.

LC: Yes. That’s right. To what do you attribute that, the sort of lack of aggressive effort?

JS: With the Koreans?

LC: Or with the Filipinos?

JS: Filipinos. Well, I think it’s partly just their nature and partly of Marcos, for political reasons, didn’t want to take substantial casualties in Vietnam. So there was no push for the Filipinos to be tough, aggressive soldiers.

LC: I think you mentioned earlier that you had had some Filipino’s working with you in Binh Long Province on development issues.

JS: Yeah. As you well know, the Filipino’s coursed the world for jobs abroad. We’d hired quite a few to work with the pacification program on economic development and other issues. These were fine guys. I thought they were excellent people. One I had in Binh Long was very dark skinned. I think he probably had quite a bit of Negroid or Aborigine blood in him. The Vietnamese I think all kind of looked down on him because like most Asians, they tend to go by skin color to a great degree and thought he just looked like a jungle Cambodian. But he was a good guy and did good work.

LC: There were as you’ve noted contract employees from these various countries that were allied with the US in addition to their military personnel. Did that cause any difficulties having non-military personnel in the country as far as you know?

JS: No. No particular problems.

LC: Okay. Let me ask a little bit about the British in Saigon, the diplomatic community particularly. What was the relationship between the US Embassy and the British Embassy?
JS: Well, they were very friendly and supportive. They just didn’t have their own effort in Vietnam. So it was just a normal diplomatic post that was watching and reporting on what we were doing.

LC: How large—how big was it?

JS: It was not a big embassy. I think probably I would guess no more than ten officers.

LC: Was that embassy a conduit for the expression of British sort of sentiment, the kind of go slow pressures that I’m sure were being communicated between London and Washington? Was that echoed do you know?

JS: I doubt much though. I’m sure the two ambassadors talked on it, but the main thing I think was probably voiced through the London authorities to our embassy there when the British leadership met with our leadership.

LC: Okay. So it was really happening up at that level?

JS: Right.

LC: Okay. Finally let me ask about the French. What sort of presence did they have in Saigon diplomatically speaking?

JS: They had embassy plus attached consulate. I think they were active, but I never saw any signs that they were trying to reestablish their position in Vietnam. I think they wanted to continue Vietnamese ties with France, continue supporting French language training and Vietnamese interests in French culture and so forth, but I didn’t see any signs that there was wild jealousy of the American presence there and that they wanted to conspire with Vietnamese to the detriment of our position. I think it was just a watching brief at this point.

LC: Did you have any contacts within the French Embassy who were useful in terms of providing information on internal Vietnamese politics to you?

JS: Again, I think we were much better plugged in than they were.

LC: No kidding? Wow. That’s interesting.

JS: I do. Some of the French diplomatic officers met with them occasionally and they were friendly enough. We talked, but again, I think we were better informed than they were.

LC: That’s interesting. Let’s take a break here John.
JS: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University resuming the oral history interview with John Sylvester. Today’s date is December 2nd, 2004. I’m on the campus of Texas Tech and I’m speaking with John by telephone from his home in North Carolina. Good morning, John.

John Sylvester: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Thank you again for spending some time with us. I’d like to just ask a timeframe question. This picks up from our last session when we were talking about your arrival in Saigon. John, can you just say the time frame of your assignment in Saigon in the early ’70s?

JS: It was basically I think July or August of 1970 until July of 1972, which made four years in Vietnam.

LC: Exactly, because of your earlier provincial assignment.

JS: Yeah.

LC: I know we talked last time about a number of the people with whom you served in the embassy and your, you know, appraisals and overviews of their contributions, but I want to turn today to the situation in Saigon. I wonder if you could start by just telling us about the flow of information about the internal political situation between the South Vietnamese government and the US embassy. Can you just talk about that for a little bit?

JS: Well, we were in some ways the standard political section, scowling around for what information we could get from all sources, Vietnamese, the press, official sources and all the rest. We had good access to Vietnamese of all persuasions, including those who were critics of the Thieu government and people in the Thieu government. We didn’t have kind of direct sources who I would say were real pipelines from the palace or from the Thieu government because that was partly covered either by the agency who had their own regular sources there or by our seniors like Ambassador Bunker who of course
had regular discussions with President Thieu. But our flow very much supplemented
what came from both the highers and from the agency.

LC: Were there key people within any South Vietnamese government bureaus
that you remember working with or who had a particularly close relationship either
because of their office or because of their politics with the United States Embassy?
JS: Well, I knew Thieu’s nephew quite well who was an influential figure, much
trusted by his uncle. I think he was probably the key source that I had.

LC: Can you tell me about him? What was his name?
JS: Oh, just a second. I just had a mental block. [Hoang Duc Nha]
LC: Oh, that’s okay. That’s all right. It may come back around.
JS: Yeah. He was a very capable guy, not always liked by others, but I found
him open. He spoke good English, which of course made it easier. He had a key role in
Thieu’s reelection, was later a minister of information and kind of an American style hard
charging young man.

LC: Had he been to the States, do you know?
JS: Yeah, I think he’d been to the States as I remember. He later, after the fall of
Vietnam, came over and worked I think for General Electric. He was originally an
engineer by background. But we knew a fairly wide variety of people. We tapped into
quite a bit into people who were in the opposition. There was a lawyer Doan who was a
very good guy who later died in the reeducation camp. There were some opposition
legislators that I knew who were good sources and my very capable staff, almost all of
them who spoke good Vietnamese roamed around too with their contacts. So, we had a
pretty good flow of information coming in on South Vietnamese politics, including to
some extent the politics of the military.

LC: Well, John, let me ask you a couple of questions about the areas that you’ve
raised. First of all, on President Thieu’s nephew, how did you meet him?
JS: Well, he was fairly outgoing and knew embassy people and I was a logical
person to meet with him. So, like always, you just make your contacts.

LC: That’s sort of standard operating?
JS: Yeah.
LC: Okay.
JS: Yeah, embassy political staffs are supposed to roam around and get as much of a feel, get as much information as they can about what’s going on, anything that’s pertinent. You can get a lot just from the local press of course. We had translators in the embassy, Vietnamese, who would mine the local press and that also was useful.

LC: Now how vigorous was the local press? I think you mentioned in an earlier session that President Thieu had been tolerant of an opposition press.

JS: Yeah. Americans I don’t think gave enough credit to how much public dissent was allowed in South Vietnam. It was often crudely characterized as an authoritarian, a repressive regime, but the press was fairly free and varied from those who were kind of the New York Times type. I think Huong Huan was the main newspaper like that. But there was an opposition politician, who was fairly far out, who had his newspaper. Generally the newspapers would often publish very amusing and critical cartoons, which the Vietnamese struck me had quite a bit of talent at, that were critical of the Thieu government and Thieu personally.

LC: Did you make note of that genre, the political cartooning that was going on? Was that something that you kind of paid attention to?

JS: Yeah. We paid some attention to that, partly because it was just interesting. One of my officers I think kind of collected them, so—

LC: Oh, is that right?

JS: I was always struck by them too.

LC: Well, they can be quite incisive.

JS: Yeah, just like our political cartoons are sometimes the most pungent political commentary there is.

LC: You mentioned that there was at least one politician who in some way it seems had his own newspaper?

JS: Yeah. Again, I should remember his name, but he was rather sprightly and somewhat to the left. He survived with a little bit of government harassment, but he was quite active on the political scene.

LC: I think you’re right that it comes kind of as a demystifier if you will, the idea that there wasn’t an active opposition inside South Vietnam because of the sense that’s been created probably in error that there was this authoritarian government that didn’t
tolerate criticism and that there really was no effective opposition. Can you talk a little
bit more about the interplay between the government and those politicians who were
trying to voice some other view of South Vietnam’s future?

JS: Well, Thieu always struck me as a pretty good politician in his own right. I
may have commented on this, but Ngo Dinh Diem struck me that he wanted to have a
solid pillar of support under him, basically the Catholic northern segment of the
population. But Thieu was widely criticized, but most people did not feel that he was a
real threat to their group interests. So it was more carping than, you know, bloody
criticism. Thieu kept kind of a balance of all the elements in this society. He was a
pretty effective politician in that sense. I think the government—well another facet of the
Vietnamese society was that Vietnamese loved politics. I think they’re feeling kind of
deprived on that right now. The old joke was that all Vietnamese men wanted to be
either a poet or a prime minister. There was this plethora of political parties in Saigon,
often sometimes again, the joke that there’s only one person in the party, the guy who
founded it. You used to see party flags kind of hanging around on the streets of Saigon
on their little tiny headquarters. Often a colored flag with a big star on it, which
resembled the North Vietnamese flag.

LC: Right.

JS: But Thieu knew how to play the political game and rather than stomping on
the opposition, I think he was able to, you know, partially assuage them, partially keep
them within the camp, partly because I think he had the advantage that the opposition
knew that the Americans were working with the president, considered him probably the
ablest leader around.

LC: It’s also of interest I think that there was a non-communist left in the
political spectrum in Saigon.

JS: Right.

LC: Can you talk about that a little bit?

JS: Well, the great political parties in Vietnam had been the Dai Viets who had a
touch of the Fascist background in it, but nothing that we would much recognize. The off
spin of them, the Tan Dai Viets, the new Dai Viets who were a very respectable political
party within the south, and then the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, the VNQDD, who
originally took their inspiration from the Nationalist Party of China.

LC: Sure.

JS: The Kuomintang in China had had a rightist element and a leftist element in
it. I think the political parties also, these great, the broad established traditional political
parties in Vietnam, the Dai Viets and the VNQDD, both had a rightist and a leftist
element within them, a more liberal element or a more conservative element. Then there
were those who were just further to the left who blended into some who were on the far
end who were really crypto-communists, who were true communists. Some of whom I
think survived in the politics of South Vietnam even under government harassment like
Madam Ngo Ba Thanh who later on became a communist, when the post ‘75 government
became a communist assembly member.

LC: What was her sort of status or her operating milieu during the time you were
there?

JS: Well, she led demonstrations against the Thieu government. I remember
actually being downtown with one where the riot police were using tear gas. I got a whiff
of it too. They were arrested her and put her in for awhile, but she was out and active. It
was kind of striking that somebody who was really, even then somewhat identified with
the communists was active within the politics of the south.

LC: Yes. I think these sort of standard image would be that she would’ve been
arrested and not heard from.

JS: Yeah, salted away forever.

LC: Sure. How frequent were, let’s say, anti-Thieu or anti-government street
demonstrations in Saigon of whatever size?

JS: Well, not frequent, but there were such ones organized by elements of the
opposition.

LC: Would it have been standard practice for somebody from the political section
yourself or someone else to kind of go out and see what was going on?

JS: Well, it varied, but sometimes we’d go out because we were curious
professionally.

LC: What is tear gas like?
JS: Well, it causes you to cry for some reason. Apparently the remedy is to put lemon juice on a handkerchief and hold it to your eyes and that helps counter it, but it’s effective stuff I noted.

LC: It was effective in breaking up the—

JS: Yeah. It works.

LC: It works. Yeah. Was anyone hurt? Can you tell me anything more about that day?

JS: No. They weren’t particularly violent demonstrations. There was some, as I remember, pushing and shoving type things, but not people killed or things like that.

LC: Was the point of the demonstration, and I don’t know John whether you remember this or not, to criticize Thieu or to criticize US backing for Thieu or the war or—?

JS: Kind of all of the above I’d say to get press attention, to get international press attention.

LC: Would it have been primarily young people?

JS: Some, but it wasn’t a real youth movement in a sense. It was just people politically committed to the left in the southern society.

LC: Let me go back and ask about another area that you mentioned earlier and that has to do with some of the sources of information that the embassy had, including legislators. Can you tell me a little bit about the assembly and its powers or lack there of?

JS: It was a presidential system, so the main power resided of course with President Thieu, who was backed by the military authorities like in many developing countries, that probably ultimate power. But the assembly was a respectable one. Its comments were noted in the press, the opposition politicians certainly got their voices heard. I thought it was a respectable assembly.

LC: Did you ever go to a session John?

JS: I think I was over once or twice, but we didn’t go over and sit in the galleries. We followed what happened partly through as it was reported in the press.

LC: Were there other ways of keeping track? For example, I imagine there was a journal of its proceedings?
JS: I guess we didn’t look much at that, but we talked to legislators, met with them, and heard their concerns of what was going on, including opposition guys.

LC: Would they seek out the US Embassy?

JS: Yeah, because they wanted to make their views known of course and since we were a major player in the politics struggle in the south.

LC: Absolutely. Just for someone who might not know about the reporting procedures that FSOs followed when they had a contact, for example, a conversation with a legislator, can you just describe what would happen say after the legislator leaves the room and you as a member of the political section have to report on it, what would you do?

JS: Well, sometimes we’d do what is called a memorandum of conversation, a MEMCON, which is just a record of the key points in the discussion and basically just circulates within the embassy itself as part of the record, part of the sharing of information.

LC: Okay.

JS: If it’s something Washington should know, we’d write up a telegram. That would be buzzed off to Washington saying, “Mr. X commented in this fashion and this seems to indicate why,” or something.

LC: How would the decision be made about distinguishing between these two distributions, one that was essentially inside the embassy and the other that would go back to D.C.?

JS: Was just your judgment and the judgment of your superiors. You know, I’d be in constant contact with the political counselor or the political minister who were my two immediate bosses. It was partly my judgment, partly their judgment, what should go in.

LC: Just to refresh our memories, the political counselor when you arrived was—

JS: Was Bill Hitchcock and the—I’m sorry, the minister was Bill Hitchcock and the counselor was Warren Askew, neither of whom were real Asian hands.

LC: Did that help or not?
JS: Well, they were good guys. I thought well of them, but I think they were somewhat out of their depth in Vietnam. It was not their background.

LC: Where for example was Askew’s principle expertise?

JS: I think he was primarily Europe and I think Bill Hitchcock was also primarily Europe if I remember.

LC: Oh, okay.

JS: Warren had been in Latin America also.

LC: Do you know in what posts?

JS: He’d been in Lima among others I remember.

LC: Okay.

JS: I think he’s been in Madrid and Spain before.

LC: Now the political minister, which in this case was Hitchcock, would he report essentially, I’m just thinking up the tree now, would he report to the deputy ambassador?

JS: Yeah, the deputy ambassador and then to Ambassador Bunker.

LC: The deputy, was it Sam Berger then?

JS: Sam Berger and then Charles Whitehouse, who I’d worked for when I was in the field who was a very good officer with I thought with a very good feel for Vietnam.

LC: Okay. When did Mr. Whitehouse come in, do you remember?

JS: He came in I think at the end of ’71. I had only a short overlap with him.

LC: Okay.

JS: As deputy ambassador. Sam Berger was there most of the time and Sam was a very incisive man with good experience in East Asia.

LC: Right. A long record of that.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about your relationship and I say that meaning the political sections relationship with the military structure in South Vietnam. Were there a separate set of sources of information within ARVN?

JS: Well, we tried to keep contacts with ARVN officers partly because the politics of the military certainly were instrumental too.

LC: Absolutely.
JS: So we ventured out and talked to both senior officers and sometimes the
junior officers. For instance, there was a family, a northern family, northern Vietnamese
family, very activist, very capable. Nguyen Ngoc Linh, being the oldest brother, but he
had two younger brothers, one Nguyen Ngoc Binh who was a point and in the embassy in
Washington and then a younger brother who was a lieutenant in the ARVN who spoke
excellent English. I think he’d been partially educated in Australia.

LC: Okay.

JS: He was rather an untypical ARVN officer.

LC: Sounds like it.

JS: But a very bright guy. Just an example, we talked to him and he had
interesting things to say, but we also talked with generals. I knew a couple from my
previous experience in the field and saw them at times. I traveled out to the field a
number of times, partly because I thought that was important and I kind of wanted to do
it, and talked to some of the generals out there and also to American officers of course on
their opinions to what was going on and reported on that.

LC: So we’ve talked about the range of sources of information. As you think
back on it now, do you think that the embassy was well informed about the key
developments inside the Saigon government and military?

JS: Yeah. At that stage, I think we were. I think we had a very good feel for
what was going on. I don’t know about the earlier stages in Vietnam, particularly that
terrible period when the generals were tussling with each other and everything looked
pretty black indeed.

LC: There in the mid ‘60s?

JS: Yeah, the mid ‘60s. We had capable people there then and so I assumed they
had a reasonable good handle of what was going on, but it was also a tortuous period. So
even the Vietnamese principals probably didn’t know what was going on either.

LC: Well, John, if I can offer this, the period when you were there was really
complex as well. There’s no question about it.

JS: Yeah.
LC: For example, the things certainly that will strike any listener is that you
having arrived in July 1970, immediately follows the incursion into Cambodia by US
troops in support of South Vietnamese troops.

JS: Yeah. I’ve been in that and gone over the border myself, as you know.

LC: I wonder what you can tell us about the atmosphere or the ways in which
that development of Nixon administration policy affected US relations with the Thieu
government or with the opposition.

JS: Well, with the Vietnamization program, which was basically a very sensible
program, but it also certainly opened to everybody’s thoughts that America perhaps was
backing out of the war.

LC: Right.

JS: So there was this constant concern I think on part of Vietnamese and
everybody involved, what was going to happen as the Americans reduced their role.

Were the Americans dependable? We certainly tried to indicate we were still going to be
dependable, although we failed the Vietnamese in the long run on that. I think basically
the period I was there was in some ways a more hopeful period than earlier periods
because a lot of it had stabilized and Thieu, despite his faults, was a relatively capable
leader. So there was some real hope that things would go well. There were also some
black signs, both the communist military offensives, the 1973 one. I’m sorry, the one
when I was there when they attacked central Vietnam and Binh Long, my former
province.

LC: The spring offensive in ’72. So the 1972 spring offensive.

JS: Yeah, the 1972 spring offensive. Then within the politics of Vietnam, the
event that I was followed was closely professionally involved with the one man Thieu
election, which was a very discouraging result for our hopes in Vietnam.

LC: Well, I want to ask you about the election in some detail, but I think I’ll
leave that for a moment. Was there any sense or exhibition of opposition within South
Vietnam, particularly in Saigon to the incursion into Cambodia? Certainly there was a
reaction at home, opposition in the United States to this, as you know, and I wonder
whether there was any kind of parallel expression of dissatisfaction, popular
dissatisfaction in Saigon in the summer of 1970.
JS: Well, I was in the field when it took place, so I can’t really answer that authoritatively, but I never saw any signs and I don’t think there were.

LC: Okay.

JS: Everybody knew that the North Vietnamese Army lived in Cambodia.

LC: Sure

JS: So I think people thought it was quite appropriate that you go over and whack them. Besides, there was this kind of basic Vietnamese prejudice or contempt for Cambodians. So giving them a hard time was not unpopular in Vietnam.

LC: You gave an interesting appraisal I think of President Thieu that, you know, he was a capable guy, although there were certainly mistakes and I wonder if you’d say the same thing about President Nixon?

JS: Yeah. I only saw him at a great distance of course.

LC: Sure.

JS: But I think he had a good feel for international politics and I think an understanding in Vietnam that the only way we could handle it over the longer run and probably the only way to be successful in Vietnam was a process of Vietnamization, of getting the Vietnamese in the south capable of handling their problems on their own. So, yeah, I thought he had a capable approach to it.

LC: It sounds as if you think that it was at least militarily sensible policy to go into Cambodia and try to route out the complexes there that were sustaining the NVA actions.

JS: Yeah. I thought it was well justified. Like everything, there’s all great problems. It’s never completely clear cut or black or white or all to the good. There’s always bad effects too, but I thought it was well justified. I disagreed with Shawcross’ works on it.

LC: The book *Sideshow*?

JS: Yeah, the *Sideshow* book.

LC: Can you just for someone who hasn’t read that or doesn’t have access to it, can you just say in a couple of sentences his thesis and how you disagree?

JS: Well, Shawcross basically thought it was unjustified that we just widened the war by attacking a country that was trying to stay out of it. But I’d been on the
Cambodian border at all three of my assignments in the countryside. The North Vietnamese were using Cambodia as a base or a rest area, a planning area for their attacks on Vietnam for re-supply of their combat units inside South Vietnam. What happened with the change in Phnom Penh when Sihanouk was tossed out and the Khmer Republic started was that essentially the elite in Cambodia had gotten tired of Sihanouk’s kind of petty tyrannies and his tolerance of this North Vietnamese major military presence in Cambodia close to the South Vietnamese border. They rather blithely thought that by tossing him out and then telling the North Vietnamese to get out, that they could save Cambodia true independence. So they rather naively told the North Vietnamese units, “Leave.” We got some word of that when I was in Binh Long. The North Vietnamese kind of went, “Huh?” and realized that this was a situation that they could not tolerate. So they started to move against the new Cambodian authorities before we went in. We saw it in Binh Long when the North Vietnamese wiped out the Royal Cambodian, the Cambodian Army contingent in the town of Snoul right across the border and later evidence of it also in Memot and Rattanakiri up the way. The North Vietnamese started to bring in the Cambodian communist émigrés in North Vietnam and started to train Cambodian units in the border. We had in Binh Long two Viet Cong defectors who told us that they left because they didn’t want to spend their time training Cambodians. So the North Vietnamese were already moving heavily against the new Cambodian government before we went in. I thought it was highly appropriate that we went in to whack their base areas and help defend the Republic of Vietnam. We discovered enormous supply depots.

LC: Yes.

JS: Unfortunately, I think the North Vietnamese had gotten good advance understanding that we were coming over the border partly because some of the South Vietnamese units had already attacked over and they pulled back rather quickly from their border areas deeper into Cambodia. Well, they lost heavily supplies and it probably put back their effort in the south by about a year. Even so, they basically remained intact.

LC: So their manpower was essentially preserved.

JS: Their manpower remained intact. But in contrast to Shawcross, I don’t believe that this caused the war in Cambodia because all the evidence that I’ve seen is
that the North Vietnamese had already started to move heavily in Cambodia against the
new government there and the Khmer Army.

LC: Now, can you talk a little bit about Lon Nol and whatever effectiveness he
may have had?

JS: Well, I’m not a Cambodian expert, but my understanding from talking to
friends in the embassy in Phnom Penh at that time was that Lon Nol was very senior, well
experienced, corrupt. He’d been a main conduit for money involved in the North
Vietnamese re-supply through Cambodia. He was the obvious person to be kind of the
senior leader because he was a highly experienced senior officer of the Cambodian Army.
His weaknesses became increasingly evident that he was highly mystical, like many
Cambodians inclined to astrology and all the rest. In some ways, he was just kind of out
of it. He wasn’t aware of modern warfare. His military experience was more as a
political general than a military general. In the longer run, he was just not an adequate
leader for the new Khmer Republic.

LC: You mentioned, John, that the North Vietnamese commanders inside
Cambodia probably had some foreknowledge of US plan to actually move US troops into
Cambodia, at least for a short time, and that they had moved their men back from the
border further into the interior of Cambodia.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Now would these be territories that were not essentially under the control of
the Khmer Republic?

JS: Yeah. They were essentially, you know, isolated areas that probably never
saw much government control.

LC: Okay. Did this in your view again, now this would be retrospectively, have
any impact on the acceleration of the internal Cambodian communist movement?

JS: Well, yeah. The North Vietnamese wanted to get it going, so they brought in
cadre as I mentioned from the North to help it. But the local cadre, who had stayed there,
had not been brought out [from] Vietnam, North Vietnam, basically started rather quickly
under Pol Pot and his colleagues to get an independent communist movement going
there. In the longer run, they were the harder, better-based crew. They basically
destroyed the North Vietnamese support in communist groups. One of the great ironies
of the war in Vietnam was of course that the communists were to fall out among
themselves. After ’75, you had this war between the communists on two sides of the
border there.

LC: Yes. It was an extremely interesting development that pretty much exploded
the myth of monolithic communism I guess.

JS: Yeah, exactly, another illustration of how nationalism really dominates the
communists.

LC: Now, I don’t know whether this is something you would know John, but in
these more interior areas that the North Vietnamese had withdrawn to, did they exercise
continuing control over those areas or was it the case that when the US pulled out in the
summer of 1970, they moved back into their former territories? Do you know?

JS: Yeah. I think they basically moved back into their former base areas along
the border. They had their own program of trying to Cambodiazation in a way. So they
were trying to turn over the effort in Cambodia against the Khmer Republic to
Cambodians while they came back to what was their primary task as the seizure of the
south.

LC: These would be essentially North Vietnamese protégés who were
Cambodian?

JS: Well, they turned it over to what they thought were going to be protégés and
it turned out the Khmer Rouge was ungrateful.

LC: Yes. Right, an ungrateful protégé.

JS: Yeah.

LC: I want to shift tack just a little bit and ask you, John, about the changes in the
pacification program in South Vietnam that took place in 1970 and whether in the
political section you were observing the effects of these changes. I’m thinking
particularly about the spring of 1970 when the Phoenix program was shifted from the
prime minister’s office to the national police. Does that sound right to you? Does that
ring a bell with you?

JS: No. I was kind of out of it on that side at that point, Laura, so I’m not able to
comment on any intelligence on that.
LC: I wonder if the police, generally the national police in South Vietnam was another group that the political section wanted to monitor in any way.

JS: No. We didn’t monitor it very closely. We were interested in it, but we didn’t have much of our own contacts with them. My general impression, partly based on what I saw in the field is that they weren’t bad, the police. They certainly were not a superb group, but they were a reasonably effective police.

LC: Was that effectiveness would you say the result of US assistance or primarily the South Vietnamese government in some way getting it right in this area?

JS: Well, I think it was both that the American aid and advisory effort was certainly instrumental, but the Vietnamese were capable people and under the Thieu government, they got their share of attention. I think kind of pulled their act together.

LC: Well, let me ask you a little bit more about President Thieu himself. I wonder if you can characterize the insights if any that you got into him, into his personality or his administrative style as a result of the contacts with his nephew. Did you feel like you had kind of an inside track on who Thieu was rather than what he was doing so much, but who he was?

JS: I only met him once or twice at official receptions, had never talked to him personally. But as the head of the internal political unit within the political section, I had a very strong professional interest of course in trying to understand Thieu and how he worked and his government worked.

LC: Sure.

JS: So I tried, at one point, I wrote a report on Thieu and his staff, which my superiors were not particularly happy with because it wasn’t always, how would you say, supportive of him.

LC: Do you remember what pieces you pulled out that were problematical for the higher-ups as it were?

JS: Well, there were some comments, which were not positive about Thieu. So I think they didn’t want to put it on the record in a sense because it might be leaked and then cited against our policy and that was a reasonable concern on their part. I was trying to be, you know, fully candid in my report. That wasn’t I think always appreciated. But on the whole, I had respect for Thieu. I thought he was a capable man, an able political
general. Like my junior officers, who I think tended like many younger people to be more critical of the government, I certainly embraced some of those criticisms, but I could understand the ambassador’s viewpoint that Thieu was really the only person around who could probably hold it together. That he wasn’t perfect by any means, but we weren’t going to put in place a different person who would be better. So, when the election came, I think the ambassador and certainly we all wanted a very respectable election, a fair election. Certainly I think the ambassador hoped that Thieu would be re-elected in a credible way rather than Big Minh, who was somewhat amorphous and undoubtedly less capable.

LC: You know, it strikes me that the characterization that you made of the ambassador’s view of Thieu that, you know, he wasn’t perfect, but he was the one who kind of could keep it together.

JS: Yeah.

LC: You know, evokes a parallel with some of the things that were said by embassy personnel, including the ambassador about President Diem in the early ‘60s. You know, there were serious problems with him, but he was keeping it together. I mean, you talked a little bit earlier about the distinctions and the contrasts between Thieu and Diem, I wonder if you can expand on that a little bit?

JS: Well, as you said, we thought earlier that Diem was holding it together and I think that was probably true because when he was killed, things did fall apart and things got considerably worse in a hurry instead of a quick salvation of Vietnam. It took a long time before the politics and power straightened itself out again in Vietnam as the generals squabbled among themselves. Again, to repeat my earlier thought, I thought Diem’s basic weakness was his dependence on one solid block of northern Catholics, while Thieu had this talent to reach out to all sorts of people, even though they weren’t completely happy with him.

LC: John, can you tell us a little bit about the background to the elections, including the timing of the elections and the contestants?

JS: Well, when I got to the political section on July of ’70 I think it was, there’d just before that been an election for the National Assembly. I think people felt that that went quite well, that it was a rather proper election, fair, and they elected a good variety
of viewpoints to the National Assembly. So there was quite a bit of hope that an election for the president would be equally respectable and creditable and add to our ability to continue to support the Republic of Vietnam. The preparations for it, like all presidential elections started early and there was a lot of maneuvering with the three candidates emerging, President Thieu the incumbent, Nguyen Cao Ky, who had always resented Thieu’s replacement of him as the leader. Ky tended to attract I think more northern Catholics or the military who felt that they had been bypassed and some other elements. Then Big Minh, who partly because of his vapidity, attracted a fairly wide variety of people who were discontented with Thieu, people fairly conservative to those who were on the left side of South Vietnamese politics, just people who wanted a change. The process of the election, there was a lot of maneuvering around and what happened in effect was that Thieu wanted a two-man election. He wanted himself against Big Minh, but I think Thieu probably wanted a creditable election because I think he felt he could win a creditable, a believable fair election, but he wanted Ky out of it. So there was some real, some hanky-pank and Ky and his supporters finally realized that they weren’t going to make it and opted out. I was actually there. We were sitting, one of my officers and I were sitting outside of the building as Ky and his guys wrestled with whether to continue or not and finally decided that they couldn’t do it.

LC: Now John, when you say you were there, what was happening and where were you?

JS: Well, Ky and his main lieutenants were in a room figuring out what to do, whether it was worth staying in the election or not.

LC: This was at the embassy?

JS: One of my officers and I were out in the hall in this building elsewhere in Saigon.

LC: Oh, okay.

JS: Trying to wait to see what happened, which we rather belatedly reported to our seniors. Then the election marched ahead and it looked like it was coming off, but Big Minh and some of his lieutenants kind of like Ky, finally decided they just weren’t going to make it and opted out of the election. It ended up kind of a fiasco of a one-man election, Thieu, the only person left in it.
LC: Now when was it actually held, John?
JS: I think it was ’71.
LC: Okay.
JS: I forget exactly what month or so.
LC: Now can you describe the circumstances of Big Minh pulling away from
contesting the actual election?
JS: Well, Big Minh himself was not a fairly, was not a resolute man and was not
clear that he really had the stamina to fight a competitive election. Thieu had a lot of
advantages. He was the incumbent. He had, you know, fairly capable campaign
administration set up under his nephew. He had the allegiance of all the province chiefs
who had depended on him for their jobs. I think Big Minh felt that whether Thieu wanted
a fair election or not, the province chiefs were going to deliver the correct vote, probably
impossible for him to win.
LC: So his vanity, if nothing else, would dictate that he would need to exempt
himself from exposing himself to the humiliation.
JS: Yeah, the humiliation of defeat. So it all ended up a fiasco and it was
certainly harmful to the Republic’s support in the United States, that Congress saw it as
just one more sign that Vietnam was the loser and we ought to get out. I don’t think it
casted it, but it was just one more reason it came about.
LC: How much information did you in the political section in the embassy have
about the temperature in Washington?
JS: Well, we had a fair understanding of it, but we were a long ways away.
Certainly at my level, I didn’t have the contacts with the political leadership in
Washington. But we knew it was delicate because we had senior politicians coming out
to Saigon fairly regularly and occasionally I would be included in session with them.
Senator Dole was one who came through. So you had partly through that and more so
through the press, New York Times and so forth that we got, an understanding of the
intensity of the feelings in the United States on this issue.
LC: Let me ask you about the VIP (very important person) and politician visitors
who came out to Saigon and probably wanted or were given even if they didn’t want
them, briefings and, you know, tours and walk-about and meet and greets. You mentioned Bob Dole. Was he one of the ones that you saw?

JS: Yeah, usually was handled at a level above me.

LC: Sure.

JS: So I was not directly involved in it. I was at a luncheon with Senator Dole and thought him an impressive figure who asked serious questions about what was going on.

LC: Well, he of course was an experienced, you know, military man in his own right.

JS: Yeah. Right. He’d seen combat. A strong supporter of President Nixon, he was also a man of independent judgment.

LC: Let me ask you about leaders from the other side of the aisle. I’m thinking about Ted Kennedy. Did he come out at any point?

JS: No. I don’t think Kennedy ever came on the scene.

LC: Is that right?

JS: A lot of the—you’d get stray figures, Bella Abzug came at one point just before Vietnam fell and the people who dealt with her had scathing opinions about her.

LC: Can you share the sense of those with us?

JS: Well, it was just at the very end. One officer who I knew who dealt with them thought she was a bigoted self-aggrandizing intelligent fool.

LC: Wow, probably not the only person to form that opinion.

JS: Yeah.

LC: I want to ask about an event that you certainly would’ve been aware of reading the *New York Times* in 1971 and that’s the release of the Pentagon Papers, as they’re known.

JS: Right.

LC: Do you remember that, John?

JS: Yeah. I did. I’ve heard—who was the guy who did it?

LC: Oh—I’m sorry. Now I’m having a block.

JS: Both of us at the moment.

LC: Daniel Ellsberg.
JS: Yeah, Daniel Ellsberg.

LC: Sorry. (Laughing)

JS: I’ve heard him speak twice I think, once at your meeting in Lubbock and once when I was at Princeton after Vietnam.

LC: So you have been out here before, John?

JS: Yeah.

LC: Oh, okay.

JS: Yeah. I’ve been to beautiful Lubbock once with Tom Barnes.

LC: (Laughing) Scenic Lubbock. Yes. I guess that’s right, you had told me that.

JS: Yeah, for one of your meetings.

LC: Mr. Ellsberg apparently comes relatively regularly out here to speak.

JS: Yeah.

LC: What was your impression of him, either at the time, ’71, or latterly as you’ve seen him speak?

JS: Well, I thought he was a very bright guy with a background, strong background involved with Vietnam.

LC: Absolutely.

JS: Who also had a very high opinion of himself.

LC: (Laughing) Can you offer an opinion about the action that he took?

JS: Well, I have conflicting views on it. Being a good government bureaucrat, I think secrets deserve to be kept as secrets, if the government’s to work effectively. On the other hand, America certainly deserved to know about Vietnam in its whole. So I’m kind of mixed views on it.

LC: Have you ever sat down and read any version?

JS: Not particularly.

LC: Not really?

JS: No. I’ve read fragments of it at times. I think I got it at one point. I certainly read some of the documents while I was in government.

LC: Well, exactly. Sure. Sure. I just wonder if you thought there was, you know, this may boil it down too far, but you know, much ado about nothing in a way. I
mean, there was certainly some revelations about particular operational details, but much
of it really I think was, you know, the outlines anyway were public record.

JS: Yeah. Yeah. It’s often said that the government lied to the American people.
I’ve always been a little jaundiced on that. The government’s always put a spin on what
happened, but I’m not sure that Johnson or so forth deliberately tried to mislead the
people about Vietnam. Sometimes I think it was more that they were mislead themselves
in thinking they were doing better than they were at combating the communist effort.

LC: Let me throw this out there John and see what you think. There’s also a
sense I think of kind of collective amnesia on the part of the public that, you know, there
was something about the French in ’54, but you know, that didn’t really seem to involve
us that much and the sort of incremental engagement of the United States with the
defense of the South Vietnamese state was just something that wasn’t front page
everyday, but it certainly was in the press. That essentially the public kind of forgot and
then kind of woke up in ’68 or ’69 and found themselves in this, you know, huge
protracted conflict and wondered how we got there.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Does that sound, I mean—?

JS: Yeah. I think that’s essentially it. Most Americans are more interested in the
basketball games than they are in world events. We’re basically a somewhat, during
those years, were an anti-communist country with good reason. What we were doing in
Vietnam I think was most people didn’t think much about it, but they thought, hey, that’s
correct. You know, we’ve got to stand up to the evil commies. Then suddenly it turned
out to be bigger than anybody expected and then the anti-war movement reflecting the
temper of the 1960s got going heavily. Suddenly the whole thing was boiling.

LC: In 1971 was really a point when it really reached fever pitch in the States,
not just with the disclosure about the Pentagon Papers, but also with the Winter Soldier
Hearings and the terrific amount of media attention devoted to reports of, you know,
abuses by American servicemen inside South Vietnam and also in Cambodia to be
honest.

JS: Yeah.
LC: Did any of that, the Fulbright Hearings or, you know, of course now in hind
sight, we kind of telescoped the role of John Kerry. But that whole ambiance in
Washington, did you in Saigon have the sense of how hot things were in Washington?
JS: Yeah. I think we had a fairly good understanding of that. We knew things
were fever pitch on this. Americans don’t have tolerance for long difficult wars. There
were certainly things like the whole disgraceful thing with Lieutenant Calley, the
massacre at My Lai, that were black marks on us, with the eerie parallels of course now
with Iraq and the prison scandal there and so forth. So we knew that the criticism was
mounting and there were some reasonable grounds for it.
LC: Did it have an operational effect on the workings of the embassy to your
knowledge?
JS: Well, yes and no. We knew we were dealing with a major issue. It added
importance and urgency to what we were trying to do in our daily work there. In a sense,
that felt good ‘cause you were dealing with something that was of vital national interest,
it didn’t feel peripheral. On the other hand, it did put a special pressure on things and
sometimes had a little bit of warping effect on what you were doing.
LC: Yeah. I’m sure you must’ve been keenly aware of the difference between
the amount of attention paid to what was happening in Saigon and, you know, to sort of
strike the cliché, the sort of dose backwater posting, you know, somewhere in, you know,
I don’t know, the Middle East or somewhere.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Yeah. You felt that as you were going about your work?
JS: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It was important work and in a sense, we were glad to be
involved with it.
LC: But as you say, there was that twin edge as well that you had the urgency of
the day and of the moment.
JS: Yeah.
LC: And the importance of it. Let me ask you about one other development in
1971 and that has to do with the South Vietnamese incursion into Laos, Lam Son 719.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Again, with American support this time, primarily American air support, the operation developed and turned out I guess most would agree not to have been a success. How did US, how did policy making at the embassy reverberate with that operation or did it?

JS: Well, the operation reverberated because it was certainly a discouraging event. It indicated that the South Vietnamese Army was going to have a hard time coping with the North Vietnamese Army. It was a semi-fiasco and boded badly for the future and was thus I think quite discouraging. It didn’t affect directly what we were doing. We were still trying hard to, in my work, to understand what was going on and others to, you know, implement the variety of things that were felt necessary for the South long term viability. But I think it put a blacker cloud over what we were all thinking.

LC: Did the Laotian government protest to your knowledge?

JS: I don’t know that, Laura. The Laotian government always was ambiguous on this. They wanted to keep the formalities correct. So they often would complain, but in reality, they didn’t care because they had no control over those areas and were happy to see North Vietnamese Army guys killed.

LC: But as far as the diplomacy of it, it was pretty subterranean if it existed.

JS: I wasn’t close enough to know exactly what happened in Laos at that time.

LC: Okay. Let’s go ahead and take a break here John.

JS: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with John Sylvester. Today’s date is the twenty-fifth of January 2005. I’m on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections building and I’m speaking with Mr. Sylvester by telephone. John, you’re in North Carolina this morning.

John Sylvester: Right.

LC: Good morning first of all.

JS: Good morning.

LC: Thanks for continuing the oral history interview with us. When we left off, you were talking about the sort of end of your tour at the US Embassy in Saigon as chief of the internal political affairs unit there. Can you tell me something about your recollections of the spring offensive in 1972?

JS: Well, yeah. I was, of course, in the internal political section of the embassy, but I got a premonition of what was coming up. I was sent up by the embassy to Kontum to see what was going on up there. I went up and talked to the American military advisors there and also in Pleiku. There were good signs that the North Vietnamese were preparing a major offensive. I wrote a report which actually the ambassador showed to General Abrams that people were concerned about it, that the ARVN division commander in that area of Kontum was considered a fairly weak commander. There could be some major problems up there. Then it wasn’t much longer after that, that of course the offensive started and it was of both major interest and concern to me, partly for personal reasons because the North Vietnamese hit my old province town of Binh Long very heavily, first taking Loc Ninh, the northern district in my former province of Binh Long and then besieging the capitol city. The province chief there, Tran Van Nhut, a very fine colonel, a former Marine—I think I’d commented on him before.

LC: Yes.

JS: Was there during the siege and handled himself very well. The province forces along with the ARVN regiment there and the airborne troops that had been lifted
in kept up a very good defense of the town. I forget whether I commented the last time we interviewed, but it was a major siege, only relieved a number of months later. The North Vietnamese troops launched a fairly heavy assault on the town itself, including to everybody’s shock, armor.

LC: Now was this An Loc?
JS: This was An Loc. The North Vietnamese mishandled it. They came in with their tanks, without an infantry screen and these regional force troops and the ARVN troops there would be carrying these LAWs (light anti-tank weapon), the single shot bazookas around for years without ever getting much use of them, finally got very effective use of them against the North Vietnamese tanks. I visited there with General Minh, who I’d known quite well, the deputy regional commander of the ARVN. It was interesting to walk around the town and see these North Vietnamese Soviet tanks, carcasses lying here and there in the town, which was of course badly destroyed. The town itself survived both by a fairly effective ARVN defense, plus of course massive bombing by our B52s, which were a terrible weapon against the poor North Vietnamese troops on the outside of the town.

LC: You mentioned the lack of infantry to support the tanks. That was on the NVA side?
JS: Right.
LC: John, for someone who doesn’t get that, can you just explain why that would be problematical for an armor to solve?
JS: Well, if the tanks have an infantry screen around, it forces the defenders to be much more cautious on attacking the tanks, but if there’s no infantry protecting the tanks, an ARVN soldier for instance in An Loc can go up very close to a tank and pot it. So it makes armor a lot less effective. Attacking tanks can be very frightening indeed, but if they don’t have the infantry screen, they’re somewhat helpless in some ways.

LC: They’re vulnerable to—
JS: Yeah. They’re vulnerable to anti-tank weapons much more than if they have their own protecting infantry around them.
LC: If I can just go back for a moment, you said that you had written a report that General Abrams and his staff saw at some point about the signs of the NVA buildup in the Central Highlands area.

JS: Right.

LC: What sorts of signs did you see or do you remember being told about?

JS: Well, the advisors in Kontum through their ARVN contacts and so forth and the local Montagnards and others kept getting reports that North Vietnamese units were moving in here and there. They were trying to prepare for it. For instance when I was there, I saw the big Rome plows, the huge bulldozers, cleaning up fields of fire around some of the fixed emplacements outside of Kontum.

LC: Wow.

JS: But there were just good signs that something was going to happen and it was going to involve a fairly large North Vietnamese military force.

LC: How did you have the opportunity to go back up to the Central Highlands and actually see those burned out Soviet tanks and so forth?

JS: Well, that was in An Loc and I went up partly personally. It was after I’d left duty in Vietnam. I went back for a quick visit to Vietnam out of Okinawa where I was then stationed as the consulate general in December of 1973. The town of An Loc was still left pretty much as it’d been left after the battle, very badly destroyed, including my house, my former little house, and things like that.

LC: Right.

JS: The marketplace and so forth. There were just these Soviet tanks scattered here and there as remnants of the battle.

LC: That certainly sounds like it would’ve been a haunting sight in a way, particularly since you had spent so much time there and knew that area very well.

JS: Yeah. I’d spent a whole year there.

LC: Exactly.

JS: In this rinky-dink provincial town and to see it shattered like that was pretty, well, sad I guess.

LC: Had people come back to An Loc?
JS: Not many at that point. Later on they did. I went back again around 1992, ’93 and the town had been largely reconstructed. It was still pretty shabby looking, but it was back to being a fairly vibrant town.

LC: I would imagine that all the destroyed tanks had been gotten out of there.

JS: Oh, yeah. Everything had been cleaned up by that point.

LC: Yeah. Sure.

JS: There were very few signs of the war left.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about the bombing, which you mentioned as being, you know, very destructive obviously, particularly for NVA units lying outside of An Loc and that area. Of course, in the spring and summer of 1972, President Nixon authorized a renewed bombing campaign in the north.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Did you see much in the way of the impact of that either in the traffic that you were reading or in reports that you were getting from South Vietnamese officials?

JS: No. The bombing in the North probably I knew not much more about it than the ordinary reader of the New York Times. My own feelings were that it was about time that the bombing—bomring is a very mixed weapon. I think usually its war benefits are over-emphasized by the Air Force, but it certainly at that point had a very heavy effect on the North Vietnamese leadership’s thinking and I think was instrumental in reaching the so called peace agreement that Kissinger got. It was a display of American power, which we probably should’ve used earlier.

LC: Was it a morale builder for South Vietnamese?

JS: Yeah. I think it was, but again, it was ephemeral.

LC: When did you actually leave Saigon?

JS: I left in July, beginning of July of ’72.

LC: Were you there then, John, and I’m going to ask you just about a sort of, I don’t know, a moment that a lot of veterans think about and that has to do with Jane Fonda’s visit to the North. Do you remember anything about that at all?

JS: Not much more than what the press reported. She was an attractive, bright woman, but I thought—I tend to be liberal, but I thought it was kind of a traitorous act the way she performed. Some of my friends are still vitriolic on the subject of course.
LC: Yes. Absolutely. We’ve certainly heard that too. Did you have any sense of her as—well, did you think it was traitorous at the time?

JS: Yeah I did.

LC: You did. Okay. Okay. How did you feel about the viability of South Vietnam as you were packing up to leave?

JS: Well, I had mixed feelings about it. I had then and I still have. If our support had stayed constant as Mr. Nixon promised, I think there’d still be a Republic of Vietnam. But I think I was quite apprehensive because I knew the intense war weariness, political turmoil in our country. You had to be at least partially skeptical even then that our support would continue.

LC: What kind of support do you think it would’ve taken?

JS: Well, probably air support, which would’ve kept us in the fight. It would’ve taken budgetary support and that would’ve demanded Congress to be generous. It would’ve taken just a certain amount of continuing political and leadership commitment in Washington. You had to wonder whether that would happen.

LC: Right. Well, how did you find out where you would be going next, John?

JS: Well, after four years in Vietnam, I was tired. They offered me senior training and because I’d worked so closely with the military for so long, I asked not for one of the war colleges, which is standard for Foreign Service officers, but I asked for university training and got the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton.

LC: Now why did you, if you don’t mind saying, not want to go to one of the war colleges? Were you just kind of looking for something different?

JS: Yeah. The war college is excellent experience for Foreign Service officers, but I’d worked closely with the military before. For me, it was probably not as useful as going into an academic environment.

LC: How did your stint at the Wilson school go? What did you do?

JS: Well, it’s interesting, like the Kennedy School at Harvard, it’s probably one of the very best schools for international and domestic policy studies.

LC: Yes. Absolutely.

JS: I didn’t know quite what to do when I went there. I got some good advice before I went. One was the first week, go to twice as many classes that you plan to take
and see which ones you find the most interesting and best. The other was don’t take
classes for credit, just take them as auditors so you don’t have the necessity to do some of
the scud work of study.

LC: (Laughing) That’s good.
JS: So in a sense, it was kind of leisurely and I basically concentrated on China,
not as a Japan hand and Vietnam hand. I’d lived in China. It still in a sense is the center
of Asia, the central kingdom. I wanted to know more about it. So I took quite a few
courses that dealt with China, including Chinese language, which I took one year of it
just to see how it was.

LC: How did you do? Probably pretty well would be my guess.
JS: Well, it was funny, the classes, I had more than extensive practice learning
two other Asian languages, so I thought I’d be pretty good.
LC: Right.
JS: But a lot of the kids in the Chinese language class were Chinese ethnic origin.
(Laughing) For some reason, they did better than me. So in some sense, it was a little
humiliating, but still, it was worthwhile.

LC: Now were you interested primarily in China’s, you know, international
profile, or were you cultural studies or what were you looking at?
JS: Yeah. I did Chinese history under a very fine Professor Fritz Mote. I took
his undergraduate course and he gave brilliant lectures on Chinese history. I took a
Chinese art course because I was interested in it. I took Chinese language. I took one
course on Chinese foreign policy, which you know, filled in some blanks for me.

LC: Now was the State Department guiding you in any way or is this kind of a
hands off experience for an FSO?
JS: Kind of a hands-off experience. You tried to make the best of it.
LC: Okay. So the personnel Pooh-Bahs in the State Department are not looking
to you to accomplish a particular set of things during this time period?
JS: No. No. You have almost complete freedom for one year.
LC: Well, that sounds great.
JS: Yeah. It was very nice.
LC: This was 1972, ’73, the academic year?
JS: Right.

LC: During that time period of course, the Paris Peace Accord that you’ve already alluded to was finalized.

JS: Yeah.

LC: The POWs were released as well.

JS: Right.

LC: Can you reminisce about that at all? Do you remember anything, any of your feelings about that?

JS: Well, I was hopeful, but partially skeptical. I thought it was in a sense a compromise on both sides. We got our prisoners back. The North Vietnamese got to keep their troops in Vietnam. We didn’t get what we really needed out of it, but the North Vietnamese had wanted us to tear down the Thieu government as we left because they were I think skeptical, not sure they could do it on their own and we didn’t do it. We kept the Republic of Vietnam politically intact as we left with a supposed commitment from us. So it clearly was a compromise on both sides. One officer I knew, John Negroponte, is now the ambassador in Iraq. Kissinger had somewhat of a falling out over it because Negroponte thought Kissinger had given away too much. On the other hand, I think Kissinger was looking at the political realities in the United States, that our congressional and popular support for Republic of Vietnam was getting even thinner. I think Kissinger probably felt we had to do less in our objectives if we were going to get anything out of it.

LC: Did you give much thought since you were steeping yourself in Chinese history and Chinese foreign policy at this point, Chinese language, to the role that the recently revealed trip to China by Dr. Kissinger and then Nixon’s follow on trip had played in all of this diplomacy? Did you think about what the Chinese angle was?

JS: Yeah. I certainly did. I was very interested because I may have mentioned this, I was in Saigon when Kissinger came through on his way to Pakistan and then to Beijing.

LC: I don’t know that you did mention that actually, but—

JS: Yeah. I talked to his assistant, Winston Lord who later became ambassador in China. In a previous Kissinger trip, I talked a lot to Lord about events in Vietnam and
then the next trip, he didn’t talk to me at all, I kind of wondered about that. It turned out,
he was just preoccupied with the preparations for Kissinger’s trip to Beijing.

LC: So that was certainly an element that you had in your mind.

JS: Yeah. Of course, as you know well Laura, the North Vietnamese had China
very much on their mind because the chaos of the Cultural Revolution had eviscerated a
lot of Chinese capacity to support them. They turned to the Soviets very heavily to

Chinese disapproval.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JS: Then Kissinger opening to China certainly was a major factor in their

concerns. I think probably an impetus for their compromises in the Paris Agreement.

LC: Go ahead, John.

JS: Yeah. Well—

LC: You mentioned that in fact the US had left the South Vietnamese
government intact and with a substantial amount of war making material and had no
doubt, I’m sure you’d agree, damaged North Vietnam’s immediate war making capacity
with that heavy bombing, especially the Christmas bombing.

JS: Right.

LC: Did you still have your continuing lingering doubts about how long South

Vietnam could hold out?

JS: Well, I just didn’t know of course. I was hopeful. The South had a fair
amount of things going for it. The ARVN had gotten more seasoned. We’d certainly
caused heavy casualties particularly on the poor Viet Cong and then also on the North
Vietnamese forces. Thieu had more or less stabilized his position in South Vietnam at
that point. There was a fairly cohesive South Vietnamese administrative and
governmental structure in place. So there were some grounds for real optimism, but I felt
that the North Vietnamese were totally committed to unifying the country on their terms
and would try, try again. So much depended, of course, on whether the United States
would follow up on Nixon’s commitments or not.

LC: John, let me ask you about going to Okinawa as consul general. How did
that come about? Did you have any choice in the matter or was it sort of, was it assigned
to you?
JS: Yeah. I asked for it.
LC: Okay.
JS: I was a solid Japan hand in the East Asia bureau.
LC: Absolutely.
JS: I was very pleased to get the job. You know, being a principal officer in the Foreign Service is kind of a pleasure, you’re your own boss. You get headaches out of it, but you’re your own boss.
LC: Yes.
JS: I was interested in the issues at Okinawa. I dealt with the military before, so that was relatively easy for me and comfortable.
LC: Well, can you give an overview? Now you were there ’73 to ’76, is that right?
JS: Right.
LC: Can you give an overview of your time there? What were the principle issues there? I’m sure the US bases must’ve played a big role in that.
JS: Yeah. The American bases at Okinawa were still huge. Okinawa in ’72 had been returned to Japanese sovereignty and our bases there were under thus the American-Japanese Security Treaty arrangement. We’d run Okinawa like a military colony under Army high commissioners since the end of World War II. Some had been I would say quite enlightened, others were very protective of military turf in Okinawa. But it was not a viable situation because the Okinawans, one million people, were not Americans. We were not going to make them American citizens. We were stingy with our aid to Okinawa. Congress I think at the most gave twenty million or so a year.
LC: Meaning development type aid?
JS: For development aid. We were beneficent, but we were alien. The Okinawan political movement both left and even on the conservative side wanted to return to Japanese sovereignty and get out from under the military, American military rule. There were a lot of problems because there were just so many Americans, particularly young men who in their twenties had the normal troublesome problems of youth, looking for girls and liquor and so forth. There were, you know, periodic incidents of various sorts, which inflamed Okinawan opinion. It was partially resolved by returning the Japanese.
The Japanese government was extremely generous in budgetary support for Okinawa, putting in a billion a year in contrast to our pennies.

LC: Wow.

JS: Okinawan economy boomed for a while. The Japanese government was also very beneficent to the American military presence, giving us a lot of money to support our bases and taking a lot of the problems away from us and shouldering them on the Japanese government side. Actually, despite what the military had expected, it turned out to be very much in our self-interest when the Japanese regained sovereignty on Okinawa and our base presence continued on the pretty generous terms there. The American consul general’s role was essentially be somewhat of a buffer between the military and the Okinawans and the Japanese officials who came down from the central government to head various bureaus in Okinawa. It was somewhat of a limited role I thought because when I was there, I thought the American military commanders were quite enlightened people who basically knew how to act vis-à-vis both the Japanese government officials and the Okinawan officials and populous.

LC: But perhaps that had not always been the case.

JS: Yeah. There had been a couple of the military high commissioners there who were quite autocratic in their way and very resentful of the State Department role vis-à-vis Okinawa. Ambassador Reischauer who I served under was sometimes a recipient of pretty nasty official messages from a high commissioner in Okinawa, all but accusing him of being a traitor to American interests.

LC: In what context?

JS: Well, as we were negotiating with the Japanese government, sometimes the embassy, the ambassador has to argue with Washington and thus with the Department of State and Department of Defense that the Japanese position has some correctness in it. The high commissioners in Okinawa did not like this, particularly during the period of ’62, ’63, when I was a lowly official in the embassy in Tokyo.

LC: The substance of the argument would’ve been something like, “How can you take up the Japanese side or legitimize their claims?” or something like that?

JS: Yeah. The Japanese government even well before they regained sovereignty in ’72 was trying to extend more economic aid to Okinawa. A couple of the high
commissioners felt this was quote, “Salami Tactics,” that the Japanese were trying to 
regain control away from the American military commanders by extending this aid. If I 
remember correctly, the embassy was saying you can’t turn down the aid. The 
Okinawans will be, for good reasons, very resentful if they don’t get this extra support 
that we could not give them, we were not willing to give them.

LC: It’s an interesting problem. Can you just off the top of your head remember 
the names of any of the military commissioners before ’72?

JS: Let’s see. I’m having a blank right now, but—at the moment I forget, Laura.

LC: Do you think it was considered something of a plum for, I’m sure, for an 
Army general I presume to be placed at Okinawa as the high commissioner?

JS: Yeah. I think it was considered a good assignment. The person was 
somewhat out of the line of direct military unit command.

LC: Sure. Sure.

JS: But it was an important and powerful position in its own right.

LC: Now during the time you were there, were there one or two or more 
incidents that you recall that had some kind of lasting impact? I know you’ve talked 
about some of the rowdiesm and so forth amongst the troops, but were there things of 
lasting impact that set the tone?

JS: No. I think they were just part of the series that goes on. There’s always 
something, you know, a rape, a traffic accident, an artillery shell goes off course, 
helicopter goes down or something. The local press there, the Okinawan Times, the 
Ryukyu Shimpo, were both quite leftist and they were very quick and eager to seize on 
any incident as evidence that Okinawa was being hurt by the American military presence. 
They would of course expand on any incident and the communists and the socialists who 
were both hostile to the American military presence would very quickly mount 
demonstrations and so forth. I used to get at the consulate general delegations coming in 
with protest notes, partly because the military commanders would usually not take them, 
delegations and I would. So I met the communist diet member, Senaga Kamejiro, who 
was a long time member of the Communist Party and met him at a few more occasions 
than I wanted to.
LC: (Laughing) What was his take on you as a representative of the State Department?

JS: Well, I was just a handy recipient of his protests.

LC: Do you think he appreciated the difference between you and the base commanders?

JS: Well, he knew I was a diplomat. So I think he probably would’ve preferred to have done it with the military commanders.

LC: That would’ve been more direct.

JS: That would’ve been even better publicity for him.

LC: Oh I see, right. Well during the period that you were in Okinawa, of course, President Nixon resigned and Saigon finally was overrun by communist troops and South Vietnam ceased to be. Can you give me any recollections that you have about that time period?

JS: Well, as I mentioned before, I went down to Vietnam in December of 1973.

LC: Right.

JS: One of my former officers, Jim Nach, a very capable Vietnamese speaking guy, and I drove out through parts of III Corps, which I’d been in for my second year in Vietnam. We drove very close to the so called tunnels of Cu Chi and places like that. It was kind of eerie because there’d been a heavy American military presence in these areas and they weren’t there. There were less than half the, there were only about half the friendly forces defending the area, that I’d been there before. So it was a little spooky. There’d been an incident just before I came on that little trip where they’d attacked an oil depot just down the river from Saigon and with a tremendous fire and loss of umpteen, hundreds of thousands of gallons of fuel. So you knew the war was going to continue and you knew that there wasn’t that much compared to before on the friendly side. So in a sense, it was a premonition of what was coming in ’75. I was in Okinawa at that time. Because of my own Vietnam background, I was intensely interested in what was going on there. Friends of mine were scattered around the place. Terry McNamara, consul general in the south and another good friend, a consul general up in Da Nang. Former officers that served with me were in the embassy in Saigon, so I followed it as closely as I could. I was dismayed at the collapse in II Corps when General Phu had to evacuate. It
turned into a complete route. I guess at that point I thought it was probably over. When they evacuated Hue, had to leave, most all of II Corps, I didn’t see how they could hold on. I volunteered to go back to Vietnam to help at the end because I was a Vietnamese language officer and I knew many of the people there who would have to be evacuated who needed to get out.

LC: So this would’ve been in the spring of ’75?
JS: Yeah, April of ’75. My wife was very unhappy at that of course.
LC: I bet she was. I’ll bet. (Laughing)
JS: Actually, the embassy in Tokyo didn’t want me to leave either for the temporary duty. The embassy didn’t want me back. They had enough people I guess. So I got turned down. But I saw it fall with great sense of depression and afterwards I talked to a number of my friends who had been there at the very end and got a good read out on what had happened in the last panicky days.

LC: Can you share any of that if you recall it?
JS: Well, my friend who was up in I Corps acted with extreme bravery as this terrible panic took place there among the ARVN troops, expecting the North Vietnamese final assault on Da Nang. When troops, the discipline of troops collapses, it’s an extremely dangerous situation. He acted with great courage. He’d been a protégé of—this was Al Francis. He’d been a protégé of Ambassador Martin. I think Martin had looked on him as almost like the son he’d lost in Vietnam, a soldier, an officer who’d been killed. But Francis had I think a falling out with Ambassador Martin because Al, who was a thorough Southeast Asia hand, excellent man on Vietnam was saying it was probably over. Martin was in somewhat of a state of self-denial on it. In the embassy, people commented that Ambassador Martin, who acted himself with a lot of bravery at the very end, including driving out to Tan Son Nhut when it was under final attack by the North Vietnamese. But he’d had some severe medical problems, had been on leave in the United States and came back. People felt that both psychologically and physically he wasn’t at his best in those days. People had to go around him to make the final preparations to get out, to evacuate the people that had to be pulled out. The planning thus for the final days in Saigon was not as well done as it should’ve been.

LC: I didn’t realize that he had been ill.
JS: Yeah. He’d been quite ill I think.

LC: Do you have any idea what the problems were?

JS: I don’t remember now, Laura. He retired later in Winston-Salem in North Carolina. I went over and called on him. I’d known him when I was on the Thai desk. He had come to the United States back to the US escorting the king and queen of Thailand when they made a state visit to the United States in 1967 and traveled with them. I knew of him of course as a far lower ranking officer. I had a long talk with him at his home in Winston-Salem. He was a very bright man, a very forceful man. In some ways, well suited for the job, in some ways not I think at the end.

LC: Because of his health or because of other things?

JS: Well, I think basically because of his viewpoint on it. He was trying to hold it together at the end. He just wasn’t getting the support from Washington that he needed on it. He told me, when I saw him in Winston-Salem, that he called on Senator Helms for instance who is of course to the right side of the Republican Party at that side. Helms was ready to give up on Vietnam and was not willing to help on trying to get more military and economic aid for the Republic of Vietnam through Congress. It was kind of symptomatic of what was happening. Martin was somewhat of a one-person man, very autocratic in his attitudes. I don’t think he was willing to listen as well as he needed to to his staff. I’m not privy to what happened, but people say that at the end he was fixated through the Polish delegation [of] the International Commission of Control and Supervision, that he thought he could get a negotiated end in Saigon and that turned out not to be the case. So it collapsed in a way that he was not prepared for.

LC: Did he share with you any thoughts that he had about President Ford for example?

JS: No. He didn’t comment on much else besides that, Laura.

LC: That’s very interesting. When did you have that conversation with him?

Can you—?

JS: Well, let’s see. That must’ve been around 1983 or 4, about one or two years before he died I think.
LC: Let me ask if there were any VIP visitors to Okinawa during the time you were there, people who others might be studying at some stage that you remember coming through.

JS: Well, we got a few, Sam Nunn, the CINCPAC (Commander in Chief, Pacific Command) and a few others, but it wasn’t a place for high pilgrimage for senior officials when I was there. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Did General Abrams ever come through?

JS: I met General Abrams at a meeting at the American Embassy.

LC: In Tokyo?

JS: About a year before he died.

LC: Oh, okay. Was this in—?

JS: Had a short conversation with him. I told him in a sense I’d served under him when I was in the field in Vietnam.

LC: What did he make of that?

JS: Well, he just made an appropriate light comment. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Okay.

JS: But I had a lot of respect for him. I met him a couple of times when I was in the embassy in Saigon and of course knew a lot about him through others.

LC: Sure.

JS: A friend of mine, Charles Cooper, the economic minister in the embassy knew Abrams considerably better than I did. I think all of us considered him a very broad gauge, very capable man who did things as well as could be done in a difficult situation.

LC: How did the Japanese government officials newly in power in Okinawa treat you?

JS: Very well. We shared a lot in a sense. One of the officials I knew quite well, once commented to me that when the Okinawan staff didn’t want him to understand something, they went into their strong local dialect, which he could not understand. So he felt just like me being a foreigner there.

LC: That’s interesting, very interesting.
JS: The Japanese government I thought sent down as its representatives in Tokyo very capable people. The head of the Okinawan development bureau, the head of the one that worked with the American bases, the head of the bank of Japan who were down there were all really first class people who had, I thought, fairly good diplomatic skills on how to work with Okinawans, who are Japanese, but are different too and with lots of grievances against the Japan for its war time contact down there.

LC: That’s right. Absolutely. How did your next assignment come up, John?

JS: After Okinawa?

LC: Yes.

JS: Well, let’s see, I just rotated back to the States. In fact, I didn’t have an assignment when I first went back. Finally a friend of mine asked for me in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. So I dealt again with East Asia as a whole, including some work on Vietnam, Indochina.

LC: Now, were you first with the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs?

JS: No. I went back to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

LC: Okay.

JS: My final four years in the Foreign Service were in that.

LC: Okay. Undoubtedly, many, many different issues came across your desk in that incarnation within the State Department. Let me ask you just about a couple of them. In the late 1970s, can you give us a sense of how America’s relations with China had been changed and what was the State Department particularly watching in terms of either bilateral relationships or the internal dynamics in China?

JS: Well—

LC: I mean, that’s a big question. I know.

JS: Yeah. My section in INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research) had some very good China analysts. I ended up not only being deputy for the whole office, but being directly responsible for the China part of it. So I followed it closely. It was the final days of Mao.

LC: Sure.

JS: Mao Zedong.

LC: Yes. He died in ’76 I think.
JS: Yeah, ’76. You know, what was going to happen? We had the Liaison Office in Beijing at that time. We had newly developing ties with China, although they still kept us—how would you say—with a fairly stiff hand against us in many ways. We knew China was changing because Mao was dying and then the Gang of Four was there. What was going to happen? The final collapse and arrest of the Gang of Four was as much a surprise to us as it was to Chinese and everybody else in the world, though I think we thought their position was not that strong. Hoa Gru Feng, I think even from the beginning we thought was an interim leader without the basic strengths that was necessary. It was pretty clear that Deng Xiaoping was coming on as the strong man and leader of the new China, and of course, you know all too well was leading this great transformation.

LC: These were surely rocky days, you know, not being certain of what would emerge post Mao. How good would you say US information, the State Department’s information was?

JS: Well, it was reasonable, but as you well know, the leadership politics in Japan [China] can be pretty murky. The knives are flashed in the darkness there.

LC: (Laughing) Yes. Yes.

JS: You can get a surprising amount of course from the old Kremlinology, reading the Renmin Ribao editorials that the change of a word here or phrase there can indicate a lot.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

JS: So we had a fairly good concept of it, but we certainly hadn’t penetrated the Polit-Bureau with our agents.

LC: Let me ask about the relationships with Japan in the late 1970s. Was the US primarily concerned about trade issues during that time period? Of course, there’s the overarching strategic cooperation between the two. Can you give a kind of overview of what was happening at that time?

JS: The trade and the security issues with Japan always meshed with each other. The trade issues on both sides can be pretty picky. You know, North Carolina textile manufacturers and their political pressures and Japanese widget manufactures and their pressures on the Japanese government. Kissinger and his book expressed the frustration
of having to deal with some of these issues, how he basically found it more fun to talk
about the great polar bear and world issues with Chou En Lai than the nitpicking issues
that he ran into with Japan. But clearly Japan was still the American friend and the major
economic presence in that part of the world. So there was a continual stress on good
relations with Japan. I think basically they kept on and have remained to be good and
strong.

LC: Was there, to your recollection, any sense of threat or potentially
disappointment on Japan’s part because the US was making efforts to get closer to the
Chinese, especially after Deng Xiaoping emerged?

JS: Yeah. They were ambivalent on it. They were both benefited and threatened
by better US-Chinese relations. They worried about this whole concept of, using a later
phrase of Japan, passing, where we somewhat ignored Japan as we were infatuated with
our relations with the new China. On the other hand, the American rapprochement with
China allowed Japan to have its own even closer rapprochement with China and the
enormous trade benefits that then came out of that. China has since emerged as an
equally great market for Japan as the United States is a great Japanese benefit.

LC: Sure.

JS: So they were ambivalent I think on it.

LC: Were there any issues that you recall that arose around Sakhalin Island
during this time period?

JS: Well, that’s a continuing thing. The Japanese have three terra irredenta
problems around their borders. The Senkaku Islands with China and Taiwan, these
rocky, worthless little islands with Takeshima or Tokto as the Koreans call it, an isolated
island in the Sea of Japan, which always disturbs relations with South Korea and then the
lost northern territories. The Japanese claim the two great islands, Kunahiri and what’s
the next one up—

LC: I do not know. I don’t know.

JS: Well, the two big islands in the Southern Kurils and then the smaller islands,
Shikotan and the Habomai islets. They have a good historical claim to it, which we give
passive support to the Japanese for. The Russians, both under the Soviet period and now,
don’t want to give these back, partly for just normal nationalist reasons. I think it just
remains as a basic issue in Soviet, in Russian-Japanese relations, which they generally
overlook for their normal diplomatic and economic ties, but still remains there, as a
grating issue between the two countries.

LC: During the late 1970s and the Carter Administration, you know of course the
kind of dish on Carter is that, you know, he wasn’t a strong executive. He didn’t advance
American interests effectively. He particularly let down US diplomats and the diplomatic
corps in his reactions to events in Iran in 1978 and ’79 and into 1980. Do you have any
recollections about any of those feelings and did that permeate the State Department? Is
that accurate?

JS: Yeah. The State Department is buffeted of course by the political winds and
the Carterites came in determined to press human rights and goodness and niceness
around the world, just like the Bush Administration is going in a different direction. So I
think there was a lot of skepticism in the Department of State, the aspects of it. Richard
Holbrooke came in as the assistant secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs. I knew
Dick from long before. We’d both been staff assistant in the White House. He was a
very hard, charging, self-seeking, but capable guy. He came in with the Carter injunction
to improve relations with North Vietnam, normalize. This was a major endeavor of
Holbrooke. It all collapsed because the North Vietnamese still thought that they could, as
a price of normalization, could get huge amounts of economic aid from us, which was of
course naïve on their part. So that all collapsed and nothing happened, vis-à-vis, Vietnam
despite the Carterites’ desires.

LC: Was there any—well, I’m sure that the POW (prisoner of war) and MIA
(missing in action) issue played a role in those talks.

JS: Yeah.

LC: Did INR have much to do with any research on that issue or—?

JS: Well, one of the things was that Washington was no longer interested in
Indochina—Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

LC: Right.

JS: They basically wanted to forget it, the bad old days.

LC: A lot of fatigue.
JS: There was a lot of fatigue, of desire to think about something else for a change. There was no real encouragement to do much research, much intelligence on Indochina any longer. That was a thing of the past. For instance, the terrible crimes of the Khmer Rouge, what they were doing to Cambodia, there were some inklings of it in Washington, but basically the administration didn’t want to hear anything about Cambodia or that.

LC: Which is fascinating because as you’ve indicated, the Carter Administration felt itself driven by issues of human rights—

JS: Right.

LC: And based a lot foreign policy decisions on those kinds of values, and yet here in Cambodia, just the most dreadful events.

JS: Yeah. They just didn’t want to know about them partly because they might have to do something about it and that would re-visit the past and take them away from things that they thought were more urgent.

LC: As you think about it, John, was there anything that the United States could have done, not necessarily should have done because I think that’s a different realm, but was there anything that the US could have done to respond to reports about what was happening inside Cambodia?

JS: Yeah. I think there was some, probably not much because the Khmer Rouge were so isolated, so fanatic that they basically wanted to ignore the outside world and whatever they would press, but we certainly could have called attention to the issue worldwide. It was a second holocaust. We had not done as much as we should have during World War II to try to bring attention to what was happening to the Jews in Germany. We did the same. We didn’t bring enough attention to what was happening to the Cambodian people in Cambodia under these people who were as nasty as the Nazis were. We could’ve put some pressure on China I think, who was kind of the Khmer Rouge protector and their only real outside supporter. We probably couldn’t have done much, but we certainly could’ve done more than we did. It was, I thought, somewhat disgraceful and certainly a black mark on the Carter period.

LC: John, tell me how your decision to leave the Foreign Service after that four year stint with INR came about? I mean, you were very young in 1980.
JS: Yeah, in 1980, I'd made fifty, which allowed me to retire. I had a problem in Okinawa with some staff problems. I'd got an efficiency report that was not very good from a visiting inspector. I felt it was extremely unfair, but it was on the record. I felt that I probably wasn't going to get promoted again. So, I had to take the plunge and try something else. So I didn't leave with bitterness, but I had a very good career. I thought well of my colleagues and the Foreign Service, but I felt that I personally probably had to do something else. So, when I turned fifty, I ran and ended up with a job with the University of North Carolina.

LC: Tell me how that came about. You left the Foreign Service without anything as it were lined up?

JS: Yeah. I left with nothing lined up.

LC: That's a little frightening I suppose.

JS: Yeah. It was. You know, losing your job is always traumatic.

LC: Yes. Yes.

JS: In a way, the Foreign Service treated me well. They gave at that time a grace period where you could look for a job on government time. They had a training program contract with a private organization on advising you how to write a resume and what to do. A very nice guy, an Episcopal priest was my advisor with this little private consulting company. He was very nice and very supportive. But it was a period of great personal uncertainty. I pounded the pavements in New York and San Francisco and elsewhere without ever turning up anything.

LC: What did you think you might like to do?

JS: Well, I wanted to deal internationally because that was my experience.

LC: Sure.

JS: But I was a complete naïf on the great business, economic problems. So I wasn't of much value to a company, I finally realized or investment bank or something like that. I couldn't be a rainmaker or an analyst. So, it was kind of a vacant feeling for a while. I looked at academia, but I didn't have a PhD. But fortunately this position in North Carolina finally emerged and I came down and interviewed for it. A friend of mine, Dick Petree, who had an ambassadorial rank, was their first choice, but he decided not to take it. So they took their second choice, which was me.
LC: Now this is at, what, NC State?
JS: Yeah. It was NC State running a new Japan center that they’d gotten a
special state appropriation for.
LC: So you were, although, as you put it, that you were their second choice, but
you were the founding director, is that right?
JS: Yeah. Roger that.
LC: Okay. What was—they had state funding?
JS: Yeah. Governor Hunt who was a very able political leader in the state with a
rather broad perspective had thought that this might help the state in his hunt for Japanese
investment and for the general state’s international outlook. So with his encouragement,
the state legislator gave a special grant to the university who found this and with some
wavering cost, it ended up in the university budget. I came down with basically to get
something going. I really didn’t know what. I think they were pretty vague on it at the
beginning.
LC: So you got to make it up as you went along.
JS: Exactly. The dean of the College of Humanities, Bob Tillman, was a very
broad-gauge man with a strong East Asian background of his own. He was very
supportive, gave very good advice to me. So I charged ahead with it and got something
that I think had been reasonably successful.
LC: Now, John, let me ask a question about the university’s system. North
Carolina is one of those states that’s very, very well placed for universities. Not all states
have the kind of richness and higher education opportunities that North Carolina does.
How was it that NC State got this Japan center rather than UNC (University of North
Carolina) or any of the privates? I guess I can figure out why the privates didn’t, but
UNC system of course is huge.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Was it partly to try to balance things out a little bit do you think. Was it a
political—?
JS: Well, it was partly because the university’s in the state capitol and partly
because of Bob Tillman, the dean, was a go-getter. He kind of quickly saw the
opportunity to add something to North Carolina State University.
LC: Now you mentioned he had an Asian background too.
JS: Yeah.
LC: Can you tell us a little bit about that?
JS: He’d done considerable work, research on security issues in Southeast Asia, particularly dealing with Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia.
LC: So he was sort of the sparkplug within the university that wanted to attract this.
JS: Right.
LC: You got on well with him?
JS: Yeah. He was a fine man. He died all too early from a heart attack, but he was a very capable man I thought.
LC: Now you were there for some fifteen years, am I right, something like that?
JS: Yeah. Fourteen years before I did my second retirement.
LC: Okay. Tell me if you can, and I know this is a long time to cover, but can you give me a sense of the growth and accomplishments of the center over that time period?
JS: Yeah. It’s somewhat amorphous, but we got an awful lot of students and faculty involved with Japan. We had a program of sending professors to Japan after some language training for six months.
LC: Wow.
JS: A lot of these guys developed permanent interest, teaching capability, research interest involving Japan. We have a very active Japanese language program at the university and we got a lot of students over to Japan, particularly at Nagoya University, which we developed a particular tie. We also did a lot working with the State Department of Commerce, trying to help them in their efforts to attract Japanese companies. I knew most of the senior Japanese company officials in North Carolina. We developed about a hundred and fifty Japanese companies in the state over time.
LC: Wow. That’s a pretty impressive record.
JS: Yeah. Some of them very large.
LC: Did you decide in ’95 that, you know, you’d done your thing and decided to hand it off to someone else?
JS: Right. Exactly. My deputy, Tony Moyer, was a first class Japanese specialist, in his own right, out of both an academic and an investment company background.

LC: Okay. Sure.

JS: He came aboard and has been a very activist, good second director for the center.

LC: You’ve decided to stay there as your home.

JS: Yeah. You put as you know, Laura, you put down roots after awhile. My beloved wife and I had planned to go back to Washington eventually, but we went up once and the streets were so crowded that we decided we’d become hicks and would stay in North Carolina.

LC: (Laughing) Right. I think Lubbock is having a similar effect on some of us here.

JS: Yeah.

LC: It’s nice that things are a little slower.

JS: Yeah, easier to commute. Isn’t it?

LC: Yes. It absolutely is. That’s certainly true. In ’95 when you were making the decision to retire from the university, the United States was making a decision under President Carter to go head with the normalization of relations with Vietnam. Was that something you paid attention to?

JS: Well—

LC: Probably you were preoccupied with your work and so on—

JS: Yeah. I knew a little more than what I read in the newspapers, but I thought it was all to the good. You had to accept the new realities. Our presence there would probably be useful in ameliorating the authoritarianism of the regime over time, even though somewhat marginal. In normal diplomatic discourse, it’s just good to have contacts like what we established with the new embassy in Hanoi.

LC: I wonder, John, on any of your sojourns up to DC, did you ever go to the Vietnam Memorial Wall?

JS: I’ve never been though one of my own men, his name is on the wall and I plan at some point certainly to do it.
LC: Can you say who that was? I think you may have mentioned it earlier.
JS: Yeah, I lost—one of our advisory team was up in the northern district of Loc Ninh and Binh Long. He, a Sergeant Love, was accompanying his lieutenant on a little patrol in the northern part of the district and ran into an ambush and he was killed.
Ironic, his last name being Love, I saw the body bag as his remains went out.
LC: That undoubtedly was a very sad and shocking moment probably.
JS: Yeah, ‘cause I’d known him and you don’t always get to know everybody in your advisory team well, but I’d known him and talked with him. He was dead.
LC: That’s something that you think you’d like to do at some point?
JS: Yeah, visit the wall?
LC: Yeah.
JS: Yeah, exactly. I would. It’s been a very creditable memorial to our losses there.
LC: As you think back about your time in Vietnam and more broadly, the US commitment in South Vietnam and the way it was drawn down, do you think now that it was a good investment for the United States to have made?
JS: Well, it was a mixed investment. The costs were so heavy in lives, diplomacy, budget, and American politics that on balance, we shouldn’t have gone in as heavily as we did. I think some benefits came out of it. I think we gave Southeast Asia a breathing period and communist insurgency and activity in Indonesia, in Thailand, Malaysia faded away by the end of the Vietnam War.
LC: You know, of course John, some have argued that that was indeed the point of the United States making the investment of ground troops in South Vietnam was to try to forestall the growth and expansion of these communist lead insurgencies elsewhere in Southeast Asia and particularly in Indonesia, do people think about very much, especially with regard to 1965.
JS: Yeah. I agree. Communism was an expanding doctrine at that time and the Soviets and the Chinese, well, engrossed with their own problems, were supportive of expanding communism. It was a threat. We’d failed in Europe before 1941 to stand up to expanding Nazism and Fascism there. That finally plunged us into a world war. If the world war was going to be the end of an expanding communism in a period of nuclear
weapons, our country was not going to be insulated by its oceans anymore. So there was reason to go in. I felt that the Republic of Vietnam with all its faults, which were many indeed and were well pointed out by the media, was still a respectable country, as a respectable place to help. It was a semi-democracy at least. The people were not supportive of communism except for a small minority. It was a country with great diversity with some strength, many weaknesses. I thought it was a just war, maybe not a wise war, but the results were mixed terrible costs for them and for us and yet some benefits came out of it.

LC: John, a lot of people are drawing parallels now with the contemporary US investment, both military and financial in Iraq. As we speak now in January 2005, we’re on the eve of the elections. Do you see parallels with the contemporary events in the Middle East?

JS: Yeah. There’s certainly parallels. We’ve plunged into a very costly war with a very uncertain outcome, just as we did in Vietnam. I think there are differences also. The rationale for going into Iraq I think was even weaker than the one for going into Vietnam, the lack that’s been proven of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction, and the lack of support I think for American conquerors, American occupiers of a Muslim country. My own feeling is that it’s helped the, Al Qaeda helped the growth of terrorism rather than suppressed, helped suppress it. There are a lot of parallels and some real differences between them.

LC: John, in winding up, is there anything that perhaps I have failed to ask you or neglected to ask you that you’d like to add to the record of the interview?

JS: Well, I have been back to Vietnam a number of times since the war, ’88 to I think at least four or five trips to Vietnam. It’s been fascinating personally for me to see it. You certainly come away with an intense feeling of deja vu, that Saigon is as commercial, as lively, as choked with Hondas and young people running around pursuing private lives as it ever was during our period, that more of the same on them shows. The North is also facing this drastic change. They won the war, but they’ve kind of lost the battle to preserve the pure communism, which they supposedly upheld. The war also I think corrupted the communist movement in the sense that there’d been a purity of just fighting a bitter war against the Republic of Vietnam and against the Americans. Yet,
when they won victory, there were all the spoils of victory that their officials, military
and civilian could move into the South and enjoy life and in effect, become
carpetbaggers. The South I think as before still deeply resents the northern control, the
northern presence in it. But the southerners know that with the authoritarian regime that
they have to try to exercise economic freedoms without political freedoms. I guess one
other thing for my return visits there that really struck me, particularly on this last trip
where I drove from Hue all the way down to Saigon, including up through the Central
Highlands, you see almost no sign that there’d ever been a war there. The American
bases that used to be omnipresent, you can’t even see where the remains are. You can’t
see the craters. You can’t see the scars of war. That time changes, time heals, time
makes things different.

LC: John, I want to thank you very much for participating in the oral history
project.

JS: Well, my pleasure Laura, thank you. You asked fine questions. I hope this
will lie in a paper repository somewhere and be of some use.

LC: Well, I’m sure that it will, thank you very much.