

An Interview with Roy Wehrle Volume II (Sessions 5-7)

Interview with Interviewee Roy Wehrle

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Breiseth: It is November 1, 2013. We're into our third day of the interview between Roy Wehrle and Chris Breiseth. Today we're going to look at kind of the quality of life for Roy, playing the many roles he was playing in Vietnam. I thought it would be best, Roy, for you to just start talking about what a day was like for Roy Wehrle in Saigon.

Wehrle: Well, that gives me a chance to say something about Doris Knauer; that's K-n-a-u-e-r. She was my chief secretary, and her assistant and my second secretary, was Pat Swisher; it's S-w-i-s-h-e-r. Let's note first of all, that these secretaries had served overseas on these missions, particularly high intensity missions like this, had to work any hours that they were needed. So, if they were needed at seven o'clock in the morning to get a cable back out to Washington on negotiations, they were there at seven o'clock. If they had to work at night, until eight o'clock or nine o'clock, to get a memo for the ambassador the next morning—and that's typing on an electric typewriter with seven different carbon copies, and all the difficulties of that time—they would be there. Doris Knauer had worked before in Indonesia, and she'd been in Vietnam before I got there. But when Jim Killen came, she was demoted because he brought his own secretary. So, I was just the most fortunate guy in the world to find her way down in a basement someplace, tucked away doing nothing and very discouraged. I was told that she was outstanding. The truth is she was outstanding squared. I mean she was just a fantastic secretary. Doris is living down in Alpine, Texas, and is almost a hundred years old now. She's a delightful person, and nobody has served their country better in that capacity than she did. She stayed all the way to the end and left on one of the last helicopters that went out of Vietnam. But her ability to do an accurate job of taking my scribbles in

those days and turn it into a cable that Lodge said he was proud of, is really quite remarkable.

I would mention another thing about this that will lead into what my day was like. That is that she was not only secretary, but she was a social secretary in the sense that she had to handle all of the representational work that we had to do there. I'll talk more about that later. That's the receptions that we gave and the buffet dinners that we gave in our apartment, and all those aspects of being in contact with the Vietnamese government and other governments. On top of that, she arranged my whole workday. I mean I did not arrange it. After I got there for a while and got going and she knew what I needed, and she was very well trusted by the ambassador's secretary and others I was simply unaware of. That is, the ambassador's secretary would call her and say, "The ambassador wants you to meet with the Minister of Economy this morning. He says he's going to have to discuss X, and I want a report back by noon." Then she would call the Minister of Economy, and she'd set up the appointment, so that when I came in, in the morning, she'd hand me a five-by-seven card that had typed on it—and I'd be in early—typed on it, my whole schedule for the day. So, I just stuck that in my pocket, and then I followed the scenario for wherever it led. The scenario usually started about nine o'clock, and it would be going here and going there, around Saigon, to different offices and going to the embassy and going over to the electric generating station to find out why the electricity was down, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

I often talk in these discussions here, about getting plaudits from other people and how I was well regarded and all that. That's very nice, but it's not me; it really was the staff that I had that backed me up. I couldn't possibly have done the work we did for our country without people like Doris Knauer and people like Bill Sharpe and John Holmes in the econ section and all the others that I mentioned like that. It was a team effort. I was the spokesman for the team; that's true, but it was a team effort. Their analysis and their briefings and all the rest were really very, very important.

So what was my day like? Well, it depended. If I was in my normal job as economic counselor, then my day would start probably around eight o'clock, something like that, maybe seven-thirty. I would meet with Doris, and she would tell me at the office the requests that had come in yesterday and if there were some question of whether one thing took priority over another. Then we'd decide that and go ahead and set up the day, and then the day would go forward. As time went on and the economic situation became a little bit more severe, then she would take also many telephone calls from the press, because when the press were pushing the embassy for what's happening to rice prices and what's happening to this or that, the embassy quickly learned that they could deflect all those calls over to Doris. She got them from all kinds of correspondents. I could name them for you; they'd all be names that, in those days, were very well-known. Then, when she had enough, then she'd set a press conference. Then, I'd have a press conference in my office, and I'd usually have five to fifteen press there, depending on how interesting the economic news was. So she'd set all that up.

Breisetz: Mostly U.S. press?

Wehrle: Mostly, and Agence France-Presse. Agence France-Presse was also there, but mostly U.S. press. So she'd set those all up and go back to the bureaus and tell them about the press and such, all the things you had to do to do that. Then, I would go through the day, doing whatever I had to do. Now, if I was in the situation of negotiations, then I had to get cables out to Washington, asking for permission to take certain steps in the negotiation. We'd have to do that in the morning before work started because after nine o'clock, Charlie Mann would be calling me upstairs or Jim Killen. I had to try to plan against those. It was very difficult when you're working for two bosses because you don't want to slight either one. But, on the other hand, you've got some things that have higher priorities. We used to have lots of discussions about this sort of thing, and then we used to do the best that we could.

Now, if I was acting director, which took place for months when I was over there, I don't know how many months I was acting director, but it was at least three, maybe four, maybe more, I don't know. Then, of course, I had to move up to the director's office one flight up, and Doris would come up with me. Then I had to run the whole mission, and it was a different lifestyle because then I had to have a staff meeting. I had to call the regional directors in, had to get reports from the field, had to decide on questions of policy and execution coming in all the time. In those days, if I was negotiating, I had to get all my work done by eight o'clock. So, I'd be up at five-thirty; I'd be in the office by six, and then, by the time the day started, I would have all the work with Washington done, which I had to have done by then. Then, of course, then I would deal with mission business or embassy business or whatever it was.

Most evenings, and this is a generalization, except for maybe one or two nights a week, I would have at least one or two receptions I had to go to. These are receptions by the Italian Ambassador, by the French Ambassador, by whoever it might be, and also by Vietnamese officials, where people came together and drank and exchanged information. For us, that was part of our workday. We got a lot of our work done in that time. We would see the Minister of Economy, and we'd say, "We talked this morning about this but what if we tried this? Do you think that would work on your side?" "Yeah, that's a good idea." So we did a lot of that. Of course, in that way, you got to know people in a different way than sitting in an office in upright chairs, looking at each other in the face. So, those were very helpful. We would complain because they would take so much of our time, but actually, there's a lot of truth to the diplomatic idea that you have to mix.

Then there would almost always be a dinner. It might be at the minister's house; it might be at the ambassador's house. A lot of those dinners were related to guests coming in. In fact, I'd say maybe eighty percent of the dinners that we would have at Ambassador Porter's or at my house or wherever, were related to somebody coming in or leaving. It had to be treated properly, and that usually meant a dinner. I'd be home

by ten or eleven o'clock at night. The Vietnamese, just like the Europeans, like to eat meals later. I just detested that. I did not like a nine o'clock dinner, and my stomach didn't like it either. But that's the way it was. So, I'd be home late, and then I'd usually write a letter to JoAnn, which is where a lot of the quotes I am using now come from. I called her JG; that's my familiar name for her. Then I would sack out, and then the next day would start over again. But that's under the most—that's when I'm acting director; then I have to really go into overdrive. The other times it was not nearly that bad. So, that's kind of how our days were.

Breisetsh: This is a kind of parentheses, but having spent some time with you on this and read a lot of the letters, there's another name that should come in this, and that's the name of Chen.

Wehrle: I'm glad you mentioned that, because I was talking about receptions and what is called, in the diplomatic service, representation. Chen became our servant up in Laos, when I went up there. We found he was up there, and everybody told us he was a gem. I'm telling you that that is an understatement. Chen is one of the most remarkable people I've ever met in my life, and I'm saying that about a servant. He was Chinese; he looked very Chinese. His bearing was regal, and you would think he was a prince. I mean, he walked so erect, carried himself with such pride, and everybody who came in, he'd look them right smack in the eyes. He was able to carry on our representation with aplomb. I will not do that, but I could read many letters to JoAnn that would tell about the receptions we had during the week, cocktail receptions, and then the luncheons we'd have, and then the dinners that we would have. Sometimes those dinners were buffets with forty, and sometimes they were sit-down dinners with as many as eighteen to twenty people. He would get somebody to help him on those dinners, to serve, but he and his wife, whose name was Homoy, would handle the whole thing. He cooked in a little kitchen. We didn't have a special big kitchen. How he generated all that luscious food coming out of that little kitchen, I will never know. He was a master. He was born in Northern China. He worked at the Majestic Hotel in Shanghai in 1938. During the Japanese invasion, he worked for one of the Japanese overlords in Shanghai, as their servant. And then, when jobs kind of ran out in China during the Mao days, he went down to Laos to work for the Americans and the AID programs down there. That's where I met him; that's where I got to know him.

My mind goes back to Chen. He left Vietnam when we left. He'd had enough of the war, and he and his wife went back to Hong Kong. I think he retired. I think he was well off. He did well.

I remember the time that Joseph Alsop came to our apartment one time. Joseph Alsop was kind of called the president's journalist. That's what John Vann called him, the president's journalist, because he was very much in favor of the war and not—I shouldn't put it that way. He wasn't in favor of the war; he was in favor of the American effort to succeed in South Vietnam. The ambassador would always have these kind of

problems. What do I do, I've got all these people, what do I do with them? I can't just ignore them. So he called me up and said, "Roy, I really need you." And I said, "Well, I'm busy this evening." "No, you're not busy. I want you to take Alsop, have him for dinner at your place and bend his ear during the evening." So okay, I did that. And then Alsop came, and he was a very dignified guy. He was very nice, gracious, but in an Eastern, distant, British kind of way.

The point I want to make about all this is that he was arrogant, and just looking at him seemed arrogant. Maybe that's just Eastern style, I don't know, but anyhow he was. He asked... Chen would go up to everybody, as he always did, and asked them, "What would you like to drink?" He could handle four or five people at a time. He'd ask each one of them, look him straight in the eye, and they would say, "I'd like this." That was when there was a lot of hard liquor drunk. I mean it wasn't like today, when people drink mostly wine and beer. It was fancy drinks. He'd take those orders, and he'd come back with each one perfect. Alsop looked at him right in the eye and said I'd like a blah-blah-blah-blah, with a little bit of blip and a little bit of blop. Well, I didn't understand anything of what he was talking about. I never heard of that drink in my life, and I'd heard of a lot of drinks. So, I watched Chen's face, to see if he would wince. Chen never winced; I mean his face said, "Certainly." The only time he would really sometimes show a little emotion is when we said we had a buffet for forty for tomorrow. Then he would look at you and say, you know, "Wow, what are you doing to me?" But in this case his face didn't change. I thought, what's he going to do; he's never heard of this drink, I'm sure. Well, a couple minutes later he came back and handed it to Alsop. And Alsop, in his dignified way, took the glass to make a sip, to see how it was. I was watching for an explosion or something. Chen, perfectly straight, and Alsop said, "Very good; thank you very much." I was astounded. I about collapsed right on the spot. Wow, the evening is a success. Chen came through again. So, that was Chen.

Breiseth: Obviously part of the representations is dealing with visiting Congressmen. I've made a list from your notes of the people that you dealt with. Not all Congressmen. You obviously dealt with a lot of journalists, and one of the people you dealt with was Mr. Nixon before he was president, but clearly an aspirant for the presidency, who wanted to be on top of things in Vietnam. Tell me something about Nixon. And let's just go through some of the other people that you dealt with and get your impression of what their interests were about the war and what you thought about them.

Wehrle: Well, I guess, in terms of their interests, they all came out roughly the same way. They were all very, very inquisitive, very interested, very hoping they could go back and say that things are going good. That's basically what they wanted to do, and for good reason; that was our major national effort.

Nixon came out, as I recall, maybe three times. I'm not sure. It was a number of times, and I saw him each time. One time, after my wife got back, the ambassador seated her right next to Nixon. So, she could always say, "Well, I had dinner with Nixon," which, of

course, she never did. But her view was that Nixon was dull and boring (chuckles), and it's probably because no particular issue came up when she was talking to him that night.

I have a note from a letter that I wrote back in '66, of when I met Nixon. As you can see, I was fairly impressed.

Breiseth: Just by way of—that's interesting, you're dealing with him in '66. He is a private citizen at this point.

Wehrle: Yes.

Breiseth: It's two years away from the election.

Wehrle: Right.

Breiseth: His determination to be up on foreign policy is indicated by these visits.

Wehrle: That's right, and I would follow on from what you just said that, when we had these discussions with Nixon, I remember that he talked foreign policy all the time. And he had a strategy. He thought of foreign policy in a comprehensive way. It wasn't just do this or do that. I was very impressed that he had that strategic quality of mind, and particularly the Far East and all these things. So, I say in this letter, "I had an interesting talk with Nixon last night. He is quite a different person than I had imagined. I found him interested in our briefing this afternoon and understanding of the nonmilitary point of view, which we had stressed. He said last night, some things about this struggle in the countryside which were very pertinent. He has a much more probing and reflective mind than I had guessed from the public image. He also said some surprisingly nice things about me and the job that we were doing out here."

I was by no means a supporter of Nixon. So, it's interesting that again, like often happens in life, when you meet somebody upfront, you see there's much more to them than the cardboard character that's given to them.

In terms of the briefings that you asked me, much of our life was briefing. I hadn't thought of that before, until now, but basically it was. Much of our life was briefing. Now, it wasn't fancy as I said earlier, like today. It was always just a flipchart of some sort. We were writing on that flipchart, or we had graphs and things, or it was on a blackboard. I remember when we did the briefing for George Romney, which later became infamous, and the other seven governors as I recall. They were all seated right in front of us, and we were at a blackboard. I remember that time, I did a fair amount of work just on a blackboard. So, there was nothing very fancy about them, but we spent an awful lot of our time doing those briefings. I have a little thing in a letter that I wrote July 16, 1966, talking about these briefings on a particular day where I'd had a lot of briefings. It goes something like this. "I had a very interesting discussion with General

Wheeler, Chief of the Joint Chiefs, this evening, and also with General Goodpaster, who is his special assistant and was President Eisenhower's special aide. Both men were very interesting, and I had a very enjoyable talk with them. Right as I was leaving the morning briefing, Ambassador Lodge asked me a few questions on land reform, et cetera. As I was leaving, he commended me on an excellent and informative briefing. Then, in the afternoon, General Wheeler came up to me and said I certainly did a good job in standing up to Secretary McNamara."

I'll just interlude right here that, in the briefing that morning, I remember McNamara was really pushing me on a couple of points. I was very confident that I had the right facts and that I was right. I remember going right back to him and said, "Mr. Secretary, this is what the situation is." So Wheeler was referring to that.

I'll continue quoting now. "Tonight, the secretary went out of his way to thank me," that's McNamara, "for the briefing, and said he enjoyed it very much and found it most rewarding. Then on leaving, Ambassador Lodge came up to me again and said how well informed I was on the subject. So, you can see, my head is larger than it should be tonight. I am really thankful that it went well, but mostly I'm thankful because McNamara, by his questions, forced Taylor to accept certain realities, and henceforth, we should have a better policy on certain areas." Even to this day, I remember when that happened. I'm not quoting anymore; that's the end of the quotation.

I remember rooting for McNamara when he had a particular line of questions, because I could not get through to Maxwell Taylor, the idea that we were—this is the rice thing again—that sooner or later we're going to have to import rice. Max Taylor just couldn't understand that, and we weren't making any progress. But McNamara, he had a hammer-like drill quality to his questions. He'd hit, and then he'd hit, and then he'd hit. I remember to this day that that did change Taylor's mind. When he saw the two of us discussing it, he saw it from a different light. Well, that's just an example of one day where we had an unusual number of briefings, but it was not too unusual.

I remember one time we had a briefing for one of the top people in Washington. I had briefings most of the afternoon, and then he came in and said, "I'd like a copy of that briefing." Well, I didn't hand out copies of briefings; they were oral briefings. So, I had to rush back to the office and Doris and I had to work up a briefing. By seven o'clock that night, I got it to him that night, before I had to go out to some dinner. They were certainly interesting days.

Breiseth: You mentioned that famous, infamous briefing of Governor Romney, which he referred to when he came back to the States, and said that he'd been brainwashed about our policies in Vietnam, which had the effect of pretty much dumping his candidacy for the presidency in 1968. The briefing, as I understand it, was in '67. Just recall that situation with these other governors, along with Governor Romney of Michigan, the father of the man who just was our nominee.

Wehrle: Our candidate, right.

Breisetsh: In 2012.

Wehrle: There was nothing special about this briefing that I recall, compared to other briefings, except there was eight governors; that was a lot. But for us, it was just another group that we had to brief. We took the briefing seriously. Not everyone was the same. They had different kinds of interests; what they were doing. But, when you look back on those briefings, it's obvious to me that when you decide what you're going to say, you don't tell lies, but you don't bring up the bad things if you don't have to. You accentuate the positive, and that's what our briefings were. I would put emphasis on the fact that we're making progress on taxation. The fact that they weren't paying taxes anywhere near what I thought they should pay, I'm not going to say that.

Breisetsh: The Vietnamese?

Wehrle: The Vietnamese, yeah. But if they're making some improvement on a particular tax, well then I'll mention that, because from our point of view that's progress. And if the rice price is decreasing or there's more rice coming out of the delta, I'll accentuate that fact. We all did about the same thing. Phil Habib, when he'd make the political briefing, he wouldn't talk about the fact that the government is apathetic. He would say, we're making progress on this or that. So, that's what we did. I don't know how long that briefing—it was probably like a two-hour briefing between all of us that was given. Right after that, I had to take four governors down to the delta, and we spent the rest of the afternoon down in the delta, looking at the rice. Those were impressive projects. I talk about the discouragement and all that, but a lot of the American aid projects, anybody in America, would have been very proud of those projects in terms of how they were distributing the new breeds of hogs, how the new IRRI rice number eight was being distributed, how it was working, and the smiles on the farmers faces, that they were getting support finally, because the government didn't give a wing-ding about it, except that we were doing these things. And that would be very impressive to the people we were taking out. I remember when Eugene Black came. That was a big, big deal.

Breisetsh: Head of the World Bank.

Wehrle: Head of the World Bank. He was the one that wore a fedora. I don't know if it was a fedora; it's a fancy hat. It was his kind of signature, and that was really kind of funny. When he came, the ambassador was completely loaded down with other people and couldn't give him hardly any time. So, when he has that situation, he calls me up. Well, it turned out that I was completely loaded up at that time, for whatever reason; I don't remember. But, I couldn't give him much time, so I called in my assistant, Dick Crist. I said, "Dick, you're going to have to take care of Eugene Black." And he looked me in the face and said, "What, a special assistant taking care of the head of the World Bank?" I said, "That's it buddy. You draw up the schedule, and you meet with Black's aide, and

you work it all out. It's going to be yours for three days. You're going to take him all over the country." Dick did a marvelous job of it. Eugene Black came in to see me at a dinner we gave for him the next night and told me about how great it was.

I'll say a word about Dick Crist at this point because Dick and I became friends in the orientation program, as I mentioned, back in Washington in the fall of 1964. We really hit it off. He was a Harvard MBA graduate; he was a Marine Corps, four-year veteran, as patriotic a person as Vann, in his own way. [He] gave up an MBA degree. I mean he gave up what he could have done with the MBA degree, in order to work in Foreign Service because he believed in it. He started working in the comptroller section. We worked together in Laos; it just happened that we were sent to Laos together. He soon realized that the fun work in AID was in programs, it's not in accounting. So, he switched over. And then, when I went to Vietnam, I immediately asked for him to be my special assistant. He was in an adjoining chamber to my office, so everything was together, and he was an absolute lifesaver. He's very, very bright, very taciturn, very quiet. He was single, so he could work all the hours that I wanted him to work. (chuckles) He had a particular flair for working with the Vietnamese, as he did with the Lao. He learned Lao; then he learned a lot of Vietnamese. But he just had a knack for working with the Vietnamese that was just in him. He didn't get along as well with Americans who he thought were not pulling their weight. But anyhow, he was in on everything that I was in on. When I was not sure of information that I needed to make a big decision on, or the ambassador did, then I'd send him out in the field. He was my assistant; and boy that works; I'm telling you. You send them out, and if you've got a good guy like Dick, he'll ferret it out. He'll find out, and they can't stop him because he's got the authority from my office. So, I think I used him effectively; he felt we did. We were a good team; we were known as a team. We'd talk out policy late in the night and different things, how we tried things out. So, anyhow, the point of this story was that he took care of Black just wonderfully, but that's an example.

Breisetsh: Given that Romney's experience cast a light on these briefings in terms of the American press, ultimately to his discredit, but taking seriously what he had to say, and you've just indicated that you were there to accentuate the positive. When you were at receptions afterwards, and you were having a drink or your guests were having a drink, and they would probe a particular point that struck them as a negative, how would you handle that?

Wehrle: Well, I would be fairly frank with him. I would say, "Yes, that's a real problem," and then I'd immediately come back in terms of what we're trying to do to rectify that problem. An example of what you're saying is they'd often come in and say "Why is your exchange rate so low; why don't you get the exchange rate, have a better exchange rate?" I'd say, "Well, you know, that's a very sensitive subject, but you make a very good point, that we really want the import prices to be higher to help us combat the inflation." And then, I'd probably wave them off the track by talking a little bit about economics and why they are right in wanting a higher exchange rate and hope to deflect

them from the further question of why the heck aren't you doing more about it. And if they then went to that point, why the heck aren't you doing more about it, I'd say, "Well that's—it's a sensitive subject. You don't talk exchange rate when you're in that kind of situation." I wouldn't dissemble, and certainly, I don't think I would be very tricky, but I don't know.

Breiseth: Since you had this kind of remarkable insight into the Republican nominee for president in 1968, Mr. Nixon, tell me about your interactions with his opponent, Hubert Humphrey, the vice president.

Wehrle: Hubert Humphrey was wonderful to have because he's bubbling (chuckles) and just full of energy and full of all kinds of stuff (chuckles). We took him out one time to see a bridge out near north of Saigon. There was a new highway America built up to Bien Hoa, which is where the big airport was. It's a four lane highway, and they'd never seen anything like that. It had a fancy overpass. We were out there looking at it, showing it to Hubert Humphrey and how good it was, and he was very impressed. He liked to go talk to the people. He was that kind of a person. So, he wandered over and took his interpreters to this old lady walking along the shoulder of the highway with her basket, going back home, humped all over. He went over to her, and through the interpreter said, "Wow, isn't this wonderful?" and pointed over there to the highway. She mumbled back in Vietnamese. She didn't know who he was, of course, and mumbled back in Vietnamese, something or other and kept on walking. When the interpreter turned around to Humphrey, well, she said, "Well don't blame with me; I had nothing to do with that." Humphrey was crestfallen. His essay in talking to the people was messed up at that point. But Humphrey was great to have around. On some of these aspects of Vietnam, his questions were not as trenchant as I thought they might have been. I remember that. But other than that, I don't remember much about it.

Breiseth: Did you have any sense of his being the kind of representative of LBJ in the role of fact finder out there?

Wehrle: No, I don't; I don't remember that.

Breiseth: Because that relationship becomes so interesting as we get towards '68.

Wehrle: Right. No, I don't remember. I just remember him being kind of like the vice president. He was out there and he was looking and he was asking questions.

Breiseth: I have a long list of Congress people that you met, but before I go down that list, are there any other members from the Congress side of our government that struck you particularly forcefully in terms of their intelligence, their sense of the issues out there, and that you particularly enjoyed working with?

Wehrle: I don't think so. Back in Laos there were a couple—but I can't remember their names—that were enjoyable. That is, they really got into it. You took them out in the field, and

they really absorbed it. I don't remember that in Vietnam. It probably happened, but I just don't remember. I don't remember any particular names except John Moss, and we're going to be talking about that later.

Breiseth: The Moss Committee.

Wehrle: I had a lot of respect for him.

Breiseth: Well, one of the people in your notes, you indicated, and he's not a member of Congress at this point, was the Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman.

Wehrle: I remember, just in terms of rereading a lot of these letters, that I was very, very impressed with Orville Freeman. I think Les Brown was working for him at that time, and Les Brown later became the head of World Watch Institute. I think that Les kind of pushed me. I'd known him back in Washington, and he kind of pushed me onto Freeman. I think he kind of pushed Freeman on me, and so we went out together into the countryside a lot. I was just very, very impressed with him.

Breiseth: And agricultural issues were ones that were very important to you.

Wehrle: Oh, they were big; they were very big.

Breiseth: So he was, he came as a specialist.

Wehrle: That's right, that's right. So, we really went over our agricultural program with Orville Freeman, and he liked a lot of what he saw. And we liked his interest in it. He also told us that he would back us up. So, if we had special problems in agriculture, we had a direct line to the Secretary of Agriculture. I'll send out an expert if you need it; if you've got some disease problem or whatever it happens to be, I'll back you up. When you're out in the field like that, that means a lot.

Breiseth: Well, we've dealt with the Minnesota twins, Humphrey and Freeman, but there's a triplet here.

Wehrle: Who's that?

Breiseth: That's Mondale.

Wehrle: Oh, Mondale.

Breiseth: What do you remember about Mondale's visit?

Wehrle: I don't remember much about that.

Breiseth: Then there's the tall man from Montana, Mike Mansfield. Do you remember his visit?

Wehrle: No, I don't.

Breisetsh: Jake Javits from New York?

Wehrle: Well, I remember he was there, but that's— you know, he was one of those faces going through.

Breisetsh: Back on the administration side, Mac [McGeorge] Bundy.

Wehrle: Mac Bundy came out several times, and I got a chance to talk to him a couple times and all that, but he was so high up in a sense, that he didn't let you know what he was— You couldn't have a conversation with him; you just said well, this is what I think. I was critical, and I was trying to suggest the United States should do some other things. I could tell that he was not receptive, you know. It was just pretty obvious because there was no follow-on questions. If there's no follow on questions, you know that that's not going very far. So, I didn't feel I got anyplace with him.

Breisetsh: So what did that tell you about Washington and the White House?

Wehrle: Well, who was the other fellow that was...?

Breisetsh: Rostow?

Wehrle: No. There's another fellow we haven't mentioned who was assistant to Harry Truman and then came back as the great counselor.

Breisetsh: Clark Clifford?

Wehrle: Yes, thank you. I do remember very clearly talking to Clark Clifford. He came with McGeorge Bundy one time, and I remember the same thing. Here was this historic personage and I was alone with him in the room. I was talking about the economics, but I was also talking about some broad things, and you couldn't tell what he thought either. He was just, you know, there, and I feel I got no place with him whatsoever. But, I wasn't the only one. I mean, Holbrook and a couple of others of us who had a chance to talk to him felt that he was aloof. We couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Dick Holbrook had a theory about McGeorge Bundy. Was it McGeorge Bundy? Yeah, I think it was McGeorge. Could have been Bill Bundy, who was assistant administrator for the secretary for the Far East. But I think it was McGeorge Bundy. This is an interesting story. This is completely Dick Holbrook, and others agreed with him. That is that McGeorge Bundy was out visiting and consulting with us at the time that the first attack took place on Camp Holloway, which was up north. That's the first time the Viet Cong had really attacked an American base, and I think eight Americans were killed. Ah, that was electrifying. I mean, all across the United States, Americans killed in Vietnam; it was that early in the game. And McGeorge Bundy was there, and that feeling

of immediacy... how should I put it? A feeling of hurt that our boys had been killed and that we were really engaged in something much more than an advisory action at that point. Dick always felt that that changed McGeorge Bundy's view, that he was blooded himself in terms of that happening there, because he was there when it happened. So, he was, as the French would say, *engagé*. He was really mixed into the war after that, and that may very well be true.

Breiseth: And became, as I recall, the parlance of the time, became one of the key hawks.

Wehrle: He was; he was a big hawk.

Breiseth: In the Johnson Administration.

Wehrle: He was.

Breiseth: That's a fascinating story.

Wehrle: If so, that's just an interesting example of how history turns on smaller things.

Breiseth: You mentioned Bill Moyers yesterday. Is there anything else to say about him? He has such an interesting future after this, with the Johnson Administration, and then sort of alienated from it in some ways.

Wehrle: That's right.

Breiseth: And then plays a very unusual public role, henceforth, to the present. Do you have any recollections of Moyers?

Wehrle: Well, I just remember that when I went over to talk to him in the White House, he was very open and gave me plenty of time. So, I could go over a lot of different pieces around my mind, about the thing, and he was fairly receptive to most of the things that I was saying. His big interest was in land reform, and we had quite a discussion on land reform. He wanted to know why it wasn't going forward, and I said, "Well, it's not going forward because the political elites don't want to give up the land; that's very simple." I remember recalling to him the story of Bishop Cahn up in Hue, that when he was told there was going to be a land reform program, he told the Vietnamese government that wanted reform which was back in Diem's time. He said, "No, I can't do that. I need all the rent from these planned land reform lands that we own," that the Catholic Church owned. "I need all that to pay for my Catholic church." And they said, "Well, could you take it down from twenty percent rent to a fifteen percent rent?" He said, "No, I can't do that. I need all that money." Well, it wasn't too long before he was gone and killed, and Diem was gone and the whole thing, illustrated—that I recall saying to Moyers—that illustrated that kind of a metallic or brittle view of how things are, that you don't bend. You have that authority and you don't talk about what might be the

consequences to your authority. Anyhow, it was a nice conversation with Bill, and he's always been one of my heroes. Even to this day, I think he's just a fantastic American.

Breiseth: You said, in one of your letters, you had a joint briefing with Senators Muskie and Inouye, and you made some very complimentary observations about their intelligence and response. Of course Muskie ends up being a Secretary of State.

Wehrle: Right.

Breiseth: So, he's getting some early exposure to the issues. Anything that you remember in particular about them or their visit?

Wehrle: No, except that I do remember, having read the letter and having my mind opened again on it, I do remember that was a very satisfactory briefing. What do I mean by that? Well, what I mean by that is that the conversation moved someplace. That is, I gave them information, and they came back with very, very good questions. Sometimes they were historical questions about how this fits in, and it was just a broader level. I remember, that was so much fun to have two people that were that wise, that had that kind of wisdom that they could come back with a broader perspective on the whole thing. It was fun; that makes it a lot of fun.

Breiseth: You did have some interesting encounters over a couple of years with a fellow named Henry Kissinger, and part of this, you actually make a special visit for him. After you leave Vietnam, you come back in January of '68, and let's hold on that until later because it's not the period that— you leave Vietnam in '67. I'm just reinforcing the fact that you leave while things are still relatively positive, compared to what they will become in '68 and thereafter. Pre-'68, what do you remember about your interaction with Kissinger?

Wehrle: Well, I remember that Kissinger was employed by LBJ as a special assistant. He had a wonderful ability to work both sides of the aisle, so to speak. So, he came out. I don't know how often; maybe every three to six months or something like that. And I would see him every time he came out. Sometimes we'd have lunch together; we'd have dinner together. He wasn't particularly interested in the economic side, but he was the kind of mind that was so, so bright. I mean it was just obvious that Kissinger was all over the place. He always scared me, or maybe this is me looking back on him, that he was too bright, because he could turn any particular thing you give him and twist them and turn them any way at all. I don't mean that badly; I mean that that's the kind of mind he had. He could manipulate and pull different things together, that he was very convincing, very persuasive. I would give him arguments of this or that, and I'd be amazed at how he'd come back and show that I was absolutely wrong; I was going in absolutely the wrong direction. And I never even had thought about putting it in the context that he would bring it back.

Anyhow, we had a lot of conversation. I had a lot of respect for Kissinger in those days. I don't have that respect any more, but I did in those days. I think the only Kissinger story that I remember, and this is critical, I think, of Kissinger, although if he were sitting right here he'd say, "Roy, you don't know how things really work. I had to do it that way." But the story is that we would sit down, sometimes with another Foreign Service officer, with Phil Habib or someone, and we'd come to kind of a conclusion. Let's say it was on the need to do something on corruption. Let's just take that as an example. Usually, Kissinger would just wash that off and say, "Corruption, there's always corruption." But sometimes, when we would get to a point where he would say, "Yeah, that is so"— Let's just use that as an example that we should do X, Y, or Z. Then I'd go back to Washington on consultation. I'd talk to people at the White House and I'd say, "What did Henry tell the president?" Of course, they would not know everything, but they knew pretty much what he told the president. I said, "Well, did he say anything about corruption?" "No, he didn't say a thing about corruption." So we quickly learned that even though he might agree with us out there on something, that was absolutely no guarantee that that would be a policy piece that he would take back to the president.

Now, as I said before, Henry could very well say "Well, that's the way you do it. You have to play your parts, and you have to deal your best hand when you're dealing with the prince or the president." We all felt that was sort of a minor betrayal. Now, why did he sit with us and go over all these things and come up with that conclusion and then not carry that back to Washington? Because that was the only interest we had in it, and we were sincere in trying to get that to a higher level. So, that became part of my realization that Kissinger could play it any way that he wanted to play it, for good or for ill. Later on, I learned that he did things in Chile and other places in the world that I find horrendous. But that's not our story.

Breisetsh: That's not our story, but not uninteresting. You felt particular pressures when you became acting director, because you and Jim Killen had some very important differences. We've touched on them in terms of rice, but as a reflection on your job and how you were dealing with it, reflect on those pressures, and that leads ultimately to Jim Killen leaving. You had some real ambivalence about that, but also were very clear in your mind that that was a necessary change, which had a great impact on you and your position.

Wehrle: Well, what you say is certainly true. I think I mentioned before that I did enjoy being acting director. I complained about the workload, but, as I said, having that opportunity to try to change the direction, try to make a whole big organization like that work together effectively, I found that a really remarkable challenge. The work was endless, but in this little snippet from the letter home to my parents in 1965, and I'll quote as follows a brief description: "I am acting director this month since Killen is back in Washington. He's back in Washington for consultation and a week or so of leave. This is not a job I like here, because it means taking over somebody else's ship and parts of the ship I do not particularly feel happy about. The director and I have not seen eye to eye

on a number of issues, and this makes this present job more difficult, because I have to trod into the policy path he has laid out when I feel it is not going where we should be going. Nothing too major, I guess, but it could be serious. The workload is tremendous now, what with the VC summer offensive and the monsoons and all. I generally get to the office by seven and get home by eight or nine, except when I have a dinner, and then it's at eleven. The new eleven o'clock curfew is some help, almost a blessing, since it means we almost always get home by eleven. I must admit now, that I am so tired of writing and tight deadlines, that it is hard for me to concentrate on writing this letter." That's the end of that.

So, when I think about that, I think back on Jim Killen and the admiration and the disagreements that I had with that gentleman. I've talked about that before, but he is in my mind somewhat of a Shakespearean character. He's bigger than life, and he goes down in his own mind, I'm sure, to defeat, because he didn't come out there to go away being fired. And that's what he was, fired. But I had conflicting ideas about Jim leaving. I was thinking, when I look through this letter, that it tells a little bit about this. I'll comment a little bit more on it, because it was a very important time out there.

So I'm quoting now from a letter, which was near the end of July in 1965. This is a letter to my wife. "Jim's departure has really discouraged me to the marrow of my bones, not because I feel his staying longer would improve things, in fact, greatly to the contrary. But because the whole mission was built up to work for him, very personalized, and only he could really make it work, and all the problems which must be resolved and were piled up, waiting for Jim's return, on my desk. Oh my, so many problems, and now what do I do? Really a problem. Do I let them lie there until we get a new director in several months, and the sores which are out there will fester and become serious? If I try now to solve some of the issues, the new director will want to reverse the decisions because they are bound to be controversial. And what do I do about poor personnel out there, like this chap up in the Second Corps. He's got all kinds of problems. I'll tell you a bit about him when I come over, but what do I do? I hate to let that just go on and on and see good people go to leave our mission because they get no attention. And their problems are not solved; they're just allowed to kind of fester out there. This is terrible. We lose good people, often who speak Vietnamese, and don't take care of their problems. They go home, and then we recruit new people. Does this make sense?" End of quote.

Well, that shows some of my frustration, but it also shows some of the realities of how you keep a big ship like that going at a time in which there's no captain, and when a new captain is coming, and you have no idea what his policies will be.

Breisetsh: So did you become the captain?

Wehrle: Well, for that point of time, I became more or less captain, yeah, because I felt that was really what was needed. You can see the tension in that quote that I had. My heart was

out to those people that were asking to have problems fixed. By and large, what I decided is, for better or worse, we're going to make some decisions. And that's where Dick Crist helped me a lot, because I would send him out to Quảng Nam and say, "Let's just do this. You go out and find out what he needs, and then we'll do it."

When I was acting director, my position was, whatever the provinces say they need, we're going to get it for you. And if the administrative people back here have to work overtime to do it, that's tough. So, in this reflection on Jim Killen, I come back again to the deeper sense that Jim was right. Jim was right all the time at the deepest level of enforcing Vietnamese responsibility, but he could find no way to make that rightness American policy, and neither could anybody else. But he had the guts to state his policy. The rest of the people, a lot of them, probably myself too, we danced around it and lived with it and did the best we could. But he put it out in the open, and that makes it all the sadder, I think, for the fact of what happened to Jim, because he was a great person. But, he also had this feeling that he had to have everybody's loyalty. He had to have people working right for him, so he brought in particular people and built personal lines of relationship and often favoritism. And that's bad in a bureaucracy. It's bad because it doesn't go forward when the person who assembled the machinery leaves.

(static in the recording)

Breisetsh: I know this is not easy for you, but it strikes me as you tell that situation, make it real, that there had to be others, both your colleagues, your subordinates, but also your superiors, watching your behavior under these circumstances. And I know that, in some of these letters, there's some rather extraordinary recognition of what you're pulling off as a person in your position. I wonder if you could share some of those encomiums from some pretty interesting people.

Wehrle: Well, that's certainly true, and I'd be happy to do that.... I think we'd better do that—we'd better pause.

(pause in recording)

Wehrle: I can do that kind of in two parts, I guess. One of the things, as we'll see, a lot of time I was really discouraged. Maybe because I had too much information, I knew too much, so I couldn't be taken in by any of the kind of superficial optimism that often was purveyed. One of the things that buoyed me up was that I got really, a lot of support from the Vietnamese. I obviously didn't ask for it, but I got it. And as we mentioned, in talking to each other the other day, I think part of it was my youth. My youth was against me in many respects, but I think working with the younger members of the Vietnamese, it was refreshing for them to have somebody who was not the more formal kind of person.

This is a quote from a letter, a fragment of a letter, that I wrote to my wife. It says, "I guess I know why I am feeling good tonight, in addition to having your letters and cable.

Went to a big reception at Cuong's, and everybody was so nice. I met everyone, and all are so friendly and asked about you and how you are, and tell how proud they are to have me here. They say, 'Wehrle, he understands them and he works so hard,' and must say it is nice to hear kind words, unsolicited, and it happens often. It makes up for the long times of downness that I have and the frustration of USOM and all else. Others brag how close they are to the Vietnamese. I don't have to even mention it. These close personal friendships, of course, make the pain of the overall situation more difficult itself to bear."

I mean, it's obvious in that quote that you can have kind of a down day in one dimension, and then you go out at night and you meet these friends and they buoy you up, and that helps an awful lot in doing this. I did receive appreciation, especially from Ambassador Porter, I would say. Ambassador Porter was a deputy to Ambassador Lodge; he was a deputy ambassador. A lot of the work that I did, I did it through Porter. We saw things pretty much the same way, and he supported me. He backed me up, and when I was failing or flailing (chuckles), he would be a good father to me and help me to see that we were on the right track. That was very, very important. And as I mentioned in some of the other things we've talked about, Lodge and others, they were really very kind to me, and they said nice things about my briefings and my work. So, when you're in a situation like that, those little droplets will help get you through an awful lot.

Breisetsh: Towards the end, I want to refer to two extraordinary recognitions you got, the two Jump Awards, and actually quote from the citation. But let's hold that off until the end. You mentioned the word discouragement, and I think one of the characteristics of your time there was how you had to keep your positive attitude up, certainly for your staff and for others, at the same time in writing home and writing to JoAnn when she wasn't with you. You sometimes were quite poetic in describing what your mood was. Sometimes it was very positive, and you were quite elated to be where you were, and other times you really were despondent. Why don't you speak to that combination of discouragement and happiness in your situation.

Wehrle: I'd be happy to. I think that this one quotation here, what I'll try to do now is just to give you a feeling of what it was like to be in this swim of events out in Vietnam. I've indicated different pieces of it, but when you start putting it all together and the days passing and directors coming, directors going, battles out there and everything else, I think this following is kind of a good pickup on that. It was written to my mother and father back on August 29, 1965.

It says as follows: "This really has been a nightmare." I'm referring to my days here, the weeks and everything else. "It's been like a dream. Weeks come and go; faces come and go all day; problems and crises come and go, and time has no meaning, except as measured by the wonder of a trip to see my wonderful wife, or as measured in relation to the arrival of a new director." So, it's kind of like a blur, it just kind of all goes by, and you do what you have to do every day. But the individual pieces, they don't stand out.

And sometimes, when you ask me questions about this or that, that just becomes part of the blur and goes right on past you.”

I have another piece here, if I can find it, which refers a little bit to again, a reflective thing. You know, you can't be in a situation like that without pulling out of it every once in a while and reflecting on what does it really mean. You do that late at night, and if your wife were there, you would do it with her. But she's not there, so you do it with Dick Crist or somebody else, but you have to do that; otherwise, you just drown.

This is a quotation written to my parents on October 8, 1965, or it could have been '66, it doesn't really make much difference. So, I'm going to quote from this. It's a little bit longer than the other ones, but it describes the way I felt at that time. I say, "This is a happy and a joyous night. My heart sings because it is a beautiful evening, and because I have a night off and, most of all, because I will soon be with my wonderful wife for a week, and I will be able to see you, my mother, very soon, when I come to Washington. What a happy thought all of this is for me. It was sheer fate that I could not get the flight described out of here, because I had to stay here to brief Ambassador Lodge on the economic situation, and so had to go to Bangkok to catch a flight. What luck. And now, JG can go with me (my wife) back to Washington. Had a cable from JG this evening, and she said she is all set. The ambassador is letting us use his jet to go over to Bangkok, so that will be just a little over an hour flight. At Bangkok, I will have a meeting with Thai and U.S. officials on rice shipments here and, now and then, an evening off with my wife. It will seem so good to leave this place which haunts me and yet turns me to bitterness. Vietnam life is a strange dream of like a beautiful woman. At first, it seems nothing, and then it haunts you and draws you. The mystic beauty of the country tugs at you; the horror of the war repels you. The acrid taste of corruption and in-fighting among the Vietnamese turns you to bitterness. The foolishness and childishness of the U.S. saddens you. And yet, through all shines the spirit of the people and the smile of one child along the bank of some lazy canal, indeed, will pull you hopelessly, like in some opium dream, toward this strange land and its people. It seems a love-hate complex, something unexplainable which gets under your skin."

That's the end of the quote. Then it goes on to how the monsoons are really coming down. (laughs) So, I mean, that gives a feeling of how I felt at that one particular time.

Breisetsh: Also, just to elaborate, in several of the summaries of letters, you go up on the roof.

Wehrle: Right. (chuckling)

Breisetsh: And the stars and the Southern Cross seem to have a particular pull for you and give you a sense of a larger perspective than just the maddening stuff you're dealing with day-to-day.

Wehrle: I'm going to use that as a segue to something that I thought might be of interest. This is reflective also, but this is a letter to my parents, and it reflects on an attitude toward

life. Your question relates to the stars, and the stars are my sense of wonder with the universe, and the fact that I wanted to be an astronomer at one point. So, the stars were very close to me. The Southern Cross was always that wonderful thing that was down where we couldn't see it. I could see pictures of it, but I couldn't see it, and it is beautiful. So, when I would talk to JoAnn, I would say, "The Southern Cross is rising out of the South China Sea." That's kind of poetic and dripping, and, of course, it did. It would rise right up. I could see it coming up.

So, this thing about wonder has always been intriguing to me. I'm writing back to my parents. The time doesn't make any difference. And I'm quoting now, and I'm talking to them. They've asked me some questions about whatever, and I'm responding to them, and I say the following: "I would agree that reverence for life is an excellent light motif for one's life. I think I prefer wonder, however, as the most exhilarating and religious of all the attitudes one can adopt toward life. I think that you both instilled wonder in me at an early age, wonder at the heavens above, at the small cat bird in the nest just sprouting tiny wing feathers. Wonder or work and a sweaty and tired body, wonder of discovery around a new turn in the road, or of a new theory, or in some book of learning. And most of all, wonder at humanity, with its inestimable gifts of beauty and sin."

So, that really ties into what you've just asked me. So, when I go up on the roof in Saigon it brings a sense of distance. We had a really nice apartment. It was an apartment that looked out of the one set of windows onto Tu Do, which is the main street of Saigon, probably on the seventh floor, and this is a relatively new apartment. The inside was completely open. You went from a balcony on the one side, looking out on the cathedral and the Post Telegraph and the square. That's a famous part of Saigon. On the other side, you looked down toward Tu Do and toward the South China Sea. Both of those had small balconies on them, and it was a clean sweep from one balcony to the other. You just could walk right through; there were no walls, nothing; it was all open. So, it was remarkably good for holding big receptions and big dinners because people could mill around. There wasn't any going in and out of rooms. It was just a great space.

And so, on this night, being in the mood that we talked about, in the reflective mood, I went up on the roof. I was reflecting, of course, on what's going on. But more, I was reflecting on the beauty of the evening. So, to bring a sense of the emotion or the feeling, I will read from a letter that I wrote about October 8, 1965. I said, "After dinner tonight, I went up on the roof and sat for a quiet time in the bright, white light of the full moon. We have a magnificent view from this roof. All of Saigon stretches out below in all directions. The front is downtown Saigon, and then a string of bright lights, which follow the curving course of the wharves and freighters along the Saigon River. Then all lights stop and the marshy Rung Sat, full of lost rivers and meandering streams, leads out to the South China Sea. To the right, the dense lights of Cholon (Cholawn phonetic) mark the living space for over a million Chinese. Then the blackness that marks the rice

paddies begins, and with the interruption of the Mekong and its delta branches, extends all the way to the tip of Vung Tau, hundreds of miles farther south. Behind me lies the cathedral, stretching peacefully in meditation, bathed in the white opaque light of the moon. Perhaps thinking of the shouting mobs of students who, just a year ago, went storming by in search of the other student group coming up Tu Do from the south, so they could beat and kill each other. Or perhaps reflecting that just about two years ago, the army tanks rumbled by and pounded the palace all night with their artillery and caused Diem to flee and fall and die. To the left lies an exposed arch of the Saigon River, reflecting the moon and white clouds in its still waters. Beyond is Tu Duc, lighted like some sort of old medieval castle that has suddenly received the extravagance of electricity. Then, blackness, the blackness of rubber and tea plantations, where the soft moon lights cannot filter through the trees; the blackness of the winding roads moving gradually through the deep forest, in search of the highlands many miles farther up. Also, the precise shadows of the lonely watchtower falling on new, fully laden fields of rice. And in the blackness, U.S. troops are moving in on one of the largest operations so far, to seek out the VC bases hidden so deeply in these notorious hills. Out over the China Sea, the clouds are low and flat and full of the moonlight. In the opposite direction is the north, massive. Thunderheads rise from the horizon and dominate the sky. The stars do not yet speak, but they light up almost continuously, like iridescent bulbs. Suddenly, out over Tu Duc, a flash is dropped, another, and finally four, all hanging eerily and perfectly in a row in the sky over Tu Duc. They make a great deal of light, which is probably badly needed by some outpost, which has been attacked by the Viet Cong. As they burn in the sky, making light, they leave a column of smoke behind in the still air. The small, red light of a plane can be seen, and then another four flares, and the sky is bright. And the first ones near the ground and burn out, leaving the curious smoke trails high up into the sky, which stand out in the moonlight. It is an exceptional evening, but it is also time for bed.”

Breiset: Wow, that’s beautiful.

Wehrle: That’s something.

Breiset: How often would you feel that kind of exhilaration?

Wehrle: Not very often.

Breiset: Not very often.

Wehrle: No. That was pretty unusual.

Breiset: Maybe it’s a counter to that, to say is there any... In terms of the frustrations, can you remember at what point you began to think that this whole policy was maybe not going to work?

Wehrle: No, I don't really think I can. It really came creeping over me. You don't think about this all the time; it just hits you. You're hearing a report on something or other or talking to Frank Scotton when he's in, and you're having a beer at night or something like that, and all of a sudden it hits you that the way you're thinking about it isn't quite right. That changes your appreciation of the situation, a little bit like that. It was a very gradual thing. I don't remember any particular time. It was almost like it generally would go in cycles. You'd get discouraged, and you'd think well, how can we do this? Then, the military troops come in, and they start banging and you think well, all this military power, we should be able to do something. And then you find out that the Viet Cong are adapting to it and still recruiting, and it's not doing what you thought it would do. Well, then you go down a little bit, and then you'd find out we're dropping sensors on the Ho Chi Minh trail, and Westmoreland is telling the ambassador that we're going to obliterate the trail, and they won't be able to re-supply, and then you find out that's not what's happening. So it goes up and down like that.

I have a quote from one letter that I wrote to my wife. This is January of 1966. In this letter, I talk about—I don't answer your question, but I talk about the fact that I don't have that cycle any more. Now I'm just discouraged most of the time. It goes something like this. "And on top of all, I find my discouragement with this place just won't leave me. Before, there was cycles, now up, now down, but now it's all the time. And Charles..." that's Charles Mann, "... has not performed well, and I am ashamed for AID. But I don't worry too much about these things any more. What will be will be. I am certain that Dave Bell and Rud Poats could see how poorly Charles is doing." The point of this is not so much my talking about Charles Mann, but that's what obviously tipped off this particular feeling, when I was writing home. Discouragement is like a low tone in a musical play, where you have a common chord in the bottom that plays all the time, and that's what it became.

Now, as I said earlier, I certainly don't think I displayed that at all when I was working with staff or anything like that. I don't think I showed it, but it was there, and I guess a perceptive person could see that maybe a little bit of my buoyancy wasn't quite the same way it had been three years earlier or two years earlier, something like that. But in terms of a specific event or time or something like that, that caused me to say, "Oh, now I know." No, I don't have anything like that. There was no sudden conversion or anything like that to the discouragement.

Breiseth: One of the elements of your discouragement that you've talked about before is the apathy of the Vietnamese. And why don't you— Maybe this is even kind of concluding this session, and this afternoon, let's get into the exchange rate negotiations and the Moss Committee, as well as the military and the interaction between your responsibilities as an economic counselor and AID manager, and the role of the United States Military.

Wehrle: I'm going to use your question to kind of close out what we were talking about and then make the segue over into your question about the Vietnamese. I've got a quote here from a letter that I wrote back in '65—I don't have the date right here—in which I say, "It's a crazy situation; it's all confused. I do not really know what is going on. Everything is so confused, and morale in the USOM is lower than ever it was before, even under Killen." I'm interjecting now and saying this is during the time when Charles Mann was director. "Charles has reacted to attacks from Washington by lashing out at his own staff. And some of my staff have also not fared well; I admit that there certainly are shortages of commodities and staff and everything else. The government is starting to function a little bit, but the aspects of our agreement at Honolulu are not being respected."

So, that's again the same theme that I've mentioned before, and it brings in USOM morale, which I haven't talked about.

Breisetsh: Let's just give a definition of USOM.

Wehrle: USOM is simply the name for the United States Operating Mission for AID, and that's what we call an AID mission. It was toward the end of Killen's tour of duty, and people could see that Jim Killen was not showing his prior leadership qualities any more. Morale went way down, but it went down primarily because of the attacks in January and February of 1965 by the Viet Cong. That was a whole new episode. We never, ever would have expected those kind of strong attacks. Then, the next year, Charles Mann, the morale went down again. And again, it was partly due to his leadership and a lack of vision, because it was not good. But it was more the overall situation that caused that morale to go down. That leads me to your question, which is well, what about the Vietnamese? Well, what about the Vietnamese? I had friends like Cuong, that I talk a lot about who were nationalists, and who despaired of what was going on because they didn't see any revolution. I'm using the word revolution now in the sense that something different will come out of this war than a continuation of the old ruling classes that ruled during the French, and now the American time.

So, take Cuong's point of view. Cuong's point of view would be to say well, what's the point of all this war for? Americans say get rid of the communists and then Cuong would come back and say, get rid of the communists? So we have the same fancy pants elites running this country that have done it ever since the sycophants under the French bowed down to the majesty of the French, or these people today who bow down to the majesty of the Americans, why? Because they've got the dollars. You call that a new government; is that worth the fighting? Where's our revolution; where's our social revolution; where do the people come in? So the voice of the nationalists was, "You know the Americans, they're not giving us anything to fight for." And those nationalists, I respected a great deal. They had a fair impact on me, and I think they were right. That's one of the themes that we talked with Lodge and others about, but we didn't find a way through.

I'm going to contrast that now with going out into Vietnam at night and seeing the nightclubs overflowing with money, overflowing with soldiers, particularly officers, overflowing with the fancy girls that you could buy or take or whatever else you wanted to do, at the same time that others were out there fighting a war and dying. Now, I'm picking the nightclubs, but I could pick the places that were selling fancy consumer goods or anything else. I'm just making a contrast between a national sacrifice to win a war and people who were protected by the American Army, the American safety net, so to speak, in the cities. Their life could go on pretty much as it was. It wasn't like today, where there's terrorism and terroristic bombings. I mean, it's important to realize that, in those days, I could walk home from work if I wanted to, at two o'clock in the morning. I was perfectly safe. JoAnn and I could go wherever we wanted to go. We wouldn't want to go into Cholon at night, the Chinese section, because that's asking for trouble, but within Saigon you could. There was no terroristic bombings or anything like that going on. So, inside the cities, you could have a bourgeois life, a pretty good life. There was plenty of money flowing through a lot of different courses.

Sometimes, I'd go to receptions, and I'd be talking to some of the Vietnamese, not necessarily in the government, or in the government, it didn't matter. They would be chitchatting about where they should send their son to college in France. Should we send him to Paris or should he go down to Leon, which has a very, very good school. It made me sick. Their boys weren't going to go and fight or do anything like that; they were going to go to Paris. And then you've got other people talking about—kids talking about rock and roll, or the blaring of the rock and roll in the cars going down the street, and the traffic increasing and all the rest of this. I guess the gist of this is that this made me sad and even sick, because it was clear that there was not a national sacrifice any more than there was in our country when we went to war in Afghanistan.

Breisetsh: You contrasted this earlier with the home front during World War II for the Americans.

Wehrle: Oh, that's right; I'd forgotten about that, yeah. In World War II, which you and I remember very well, my evenings were going out and selling E Bonds. I was in the scout troop, and we sold E Bonds. School was let out for a day, and we took our little wagons, and then we went up and down the streets and collected...

Breisetsh: Paper.

Wehrle: ...scrap metal and paper. And by the end of that day, we had a big pile of scrap metal at school. We couldn't play baseball in the field anymore because we had that big pile there. And there were many other examples of that. So, we all felt that we were part of that.

Breisetsh: And that was absent from Saigon.

Wehrle: That was very absent, and it was a sign, I thought, a bad sign. It's worthwhile, I think, for our listeners to contrast that with the North Vietnamese who made an effort to involve

almost everybody in the war effort in some way or other. It may have been foolish, but that makes the point. Foolish in the sense that they would have people in each block that were assigned to run up on the roofs and see if American planes were coming. Then we'd call that in, if you saw an American plane. There were people filling ammunition trucks and putting the other things for the troops that would go down, you know, help kits and all that kind of stuff. But they all felt involved.

I'm switching now, but when they went into the—the Viet Cong went into the Southern Delta, and they went into a village; they organized that whole village. Everybody had a role. I mean there was, sure, a tax collector, but there were guards, and there were this and a lot of that, maybe make-work. Was just nonsense. But it wasn't nonsense because the nexus that they created tied all those people to a responsibility and gave them some pride. They may have a title, I am such and such, but there was no sense of that in the Vietnamese fabric of society. Up in the north there really was, I mean they were all battling this war one way or the other. Anyhow, that's a memory that's very clear.

Breisetsh: One final question, since we've been dealing with the pressures that you were experiencing. You said a little bit about it, but let's clinch this point. What were the pressures from Washington?

Wehrle: Oh, wow, I didn't think that question was coming. They were tremendous; I mean they were absolutely tremendous. I think we should look at it this way, because I always try to say, "Well, okay, that was overwhelming to us, the amount of pressure they put on us." But then, I always tried to say, "Well, okay now, be fair about that Roy. What was causing that?" The reality was that Washington wanted to win the war just as badly or maybe even more than we did, and so they all had ideas of what to do. They were all well-meaning people, and they were all thinking that they were helping by coming up with ideas. A lot of those would be sent to their congressman. They'd be sent to the president, and I think I mentioned yesterday, it was like a funnel. All these things were poured into this funnel, but we were just a tiny diameter spout down there at the bottom, going into the Vietnamese government, and we couldn't absorb all those things.

I think I told yesterday, the story of Bob Komer in his office. That really illustrates the kind of pressures that we felt coming out of Washington. I have a letter that I sent back, talking about these frustrations. I think I can find it. So, an example might be the fact that, where the United States has had successful social programs, why don't we transfer those to Vietnam? So, Lilienthal came up and he talked a lot to the president about TVA and how that had been successful.

Breisetsh: David Lilienthal, who was head of the TVA.

Wehrle: Right, and of the U.S. nuclear agency. And, of course, you can imagine Lilienthal going in and talking to the president. And the president, being kind of a populist Texas president,

would say, "Sure, that's a great thing to do for the poor." Then they'd send Lilienthal out, and then, of course, we'd have to spend a lot of time with him and have to deal with the question of well, you know, resources, building dams, at a time when we're...

Well, in any event, that would be one example, but then there'd be things like the Rural Electrification Program. That was a great thing; that changed the rural landscape of America. It was a marvelous program. Why don't we do that out here? Now, I'm just using those examples. I'm not trying to derogate them. I'm just saying that these were examples, and there were many, many, many examples. So, they all flowed out to us, and then we had to spend time on those. And, of course, we had to turn most of them down because, as I said before, we were asking the Vietnamese government to do twice as much as it could do if it were effective. And it was not effective. It didn't have direction, didn't have a lot of things. So, these took a lot of our time and a lot of our energy. We were pretty unhappy about this. But on the other hand, I've said I know why they were proposing so much, but I can realize that dispassionately now, better than I could when that was going on.

Here's a quote from a letter that I wrote in May of '65, when we're getting all these programs that were coming out. I said the following: "More cables from Washington, with bright new ideas for programs. I sometimes think I will lose my mind, between Jim Killen and his ideas, and Washington and theirs. The Vietnamese worry you to death, but that is nothing compared to the aforementioned two. All day, crisis to crisis, no time to think or even catch your breath." Well, that's an exaggeration obviously.

Breisetsh: But you felt it.

Wehrle: But it made a point in my mind at that time. That's right, but I felt it; that's right. That was a big problem, although every time Komer would come out, he would promise that he would act as a screen for us, to turn a lot of those things down. But when the president liked them, he couldn't do that. So, that was a continuing problem for us.

Breisetsh: It also indicates—and again, I'm drawing on my personal recollection—Lyndon Johnson, who was an immensely complicated guy, he really wanted South Vietnam to develop.

Wehrle: Oh, he did.

Breisetsh: And that he was an old "new dealer," as he was personally part of that in Texas, before he became a congressman, and helped push the ideas of developing the south, which was very backward economically at the time.

Wehrle: Right.

Breisetsh: So, the bigness of his thinking was a dimension of this, not just, how do we defeat the Viet Cong?

Wehrle: That's right. There was nothing artificial about this from Lyndon Johnson's point of view. He really wanted those programs to grow.

Breiseth: Maybe just clinching this, let's close this off until this afternoon. Besides through Komer, were there any direct ways that you felt Johnson's— did you ever see him when you were in Washington?

Wehrle: No, except when he sent me out the first time. Well, I guess, one time when I was in Washington. Yeah I did; I went there. In fact, it was raining in the Rose Garden. He opened the door, and the little beagle ran outside and came in. He picked him up by his ears in front of us, as he was known to do, and shook him to get the water all off of him. I think he showed us his scar. I mean, it was just—LBJ. We weren't doing anything serious; it was just... In fact, I was in with Don MacDonald, who we'll talk about later, at that point. I'd forgotten that. He was introducing the two of us to the president, his main two key economy people out in Vietnam. That's all it was.

Breiseth: Let's end the session there, and we will pick up this afternoon, dealing at least with two big topics. One is the exchange rate negotiations with the Moss Committee, where you're testifying before Congress, and the general military situation as it impacted what you were doing in the economic area. So, thank you, Roy.

Wehrle: Thank you.

(end of interview session #5)

Interview with Interviewee Roy Wehrle

VRV-A-L-2013-098.06

Interview # 6: November 1, 2013

Interviewer: Christopher N. Breiseth

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Breiseth: It's the afternoon of November 1, 2013. Roy Wehrle and Chris Breiseth are at it again. Roy, we were talking about your sense of the overall situation that you were struggling with in '66 and '67. You've got a couple of documents that really capture the spirit of your experiencing of the place. Why don't you pick it up at that point.

Wehrle: Well, the overall context of what we're talking about is that after Diem, there was no stable point. There was nothing to measure from, nothing to tie to, nothing to hold. It was kind of like a merry-go-round of different governments, all military governments, until Thieu was elected in the election of '67. So, during this period, I want to give a feel a little bit about what it's like to be negotiating when you're at one of those periods of transition on this merry-go-round, and how difficult it is to go forward when you don't have a stable partner to dance with.

This is a letter that was written to my mother and father back on about the twenty-fourth of April, 1966. I'm now quoting. It says, "The government has now become a caretaker government. The U.S. government is committed to elections. Whoever heard of building democracy and having elections during a bitter and nationally destructive war? The elections will be used by the communists and the Buddhists to finish the job of destroying effective government. There's not much left now. All the demonstrations, the tragic vacuum of leadership at the top, the dissensions, and all will complete the job of disintegrating this government, in my view. Elections all will complete the job, the undoing of the government and of our efforts. We are now at a crucial turning point. There are no easy alternatives to stop the Buddhists, who are too far down the road. A

Buddhist government would bring in a nationalist leaning government that would, in time or immediately, be controlled by the communists. Yet the Buddhists are organized and skillful, and Tri Quang, who is their leader, is a fanatic. None of the other groups in Vietnam can stand up except the Catholics, and if they decide they must resist him, we will return to the vicious gang warfare we had for so long. So, the outlook in this instance, is not good.”

Now, in that discussion I’m only giving you an introduction to the start of the factional political jockeying that was starting to go on. In that political jockeying back and forth, in one sense, it was primarily a movement against the military, because all governments had been military up to this point, and the government had put the Buddhists down in very, very strong, strong ways.

Breiseth: Put the Buddhists down.

Wehrle: Yes. Everyone else down that was not military. So, to have this happen then made it very, very difficult when the Buddhists came back into the picture. And in the end, what the military did is they put them down again, as they had done earlier, before Diem fell, in a fairly strong way. That makes the situation—I haven’t really talked in that quote, particularly about the transition governments, but the point of the transition governments is that you’re trying to negotiate budgets and trying to negotiate aid and various other aspects. And you’re caught by the fact that your minister can’t make decisions because he has nobody to go to because it’s a transition government.

Breiseth: Precisely at the time when America’s involvement is getting greater and greater in terms of men and material and dollars.

Wehrle: That’s right, which all suggests a greater and greater need for decisions by their government, as well as by our government. So, when you have all these demands from Washington, and you’re trying to negotiate these things, it’s very difficult, and especially if you’re negotiating tax increases. I mean, we know a little bit about that in our own country, how incendiary tax increases can be. They were the same way in Vietnam. So, a strong government might be willing to do something on tax increases. But, is a weak government going to do that? No. There’s no self-incentive for them to do that.

You put all these pieces kind of together, and I come to a quote that I wrote back to my parents on Sunday evening in 1966. A relatively short quote, but it kind of gives a feel for what the situation was, as it was going through my mind at least, at that time. It says something like this, quoting, “This sure is a funny place. It gets under your skin, won’t let you go. It insistently asks you why did things go so wrong? What can be done now? Can the Vietnamese cut out their internal feuding? If so, how? What is needed, democracy or dictatorship? These questions float around and around and yet, like in a dream, one can’t pin them down. Even we Americans can’t agree on the right formula, and yet the

stakes become higher and higher as more American soldiers' blood is increasingly committed to this conflict."

So, when you know the stakes that you're involved in, but then you've got nothing really to push on, you get the situation, which many of us felt out in Vietnam during the war, that you're right in the middle. You're caught one side; you're caught from another side. You can dance as well as you can, but you really can't really accomplish very much.

Breiseth: Looking at the relationship of your operation as economic counselor and AID administrator or deputy, what is your relation, by '66 and '67, with the military and with General Westmoreland and his deputies?

Wehrle: That's a good question. Thinking of it structurally, it was really that USAID or USOM or the AID mission was responsible originally for all of the social and economic programs in the countryside. So, that's pretty simple; that's school buildings and dispensaries and chicken programs, et cetera, but in a pacification program that's linked closely to the military. So, you immediately have a conflict. You've got a MACV adviser out there that wants to do X and Y. He's responsible for the security situation. Then you've got the province rep, who's responsible for the economic aid. That tension, that dual line of responsibility, has bugged the United States all the way. And I suspect it has done it right through the Afghanistan War and our problems there because it's, again, a clash between the civilian and the military objectives and the responsibilities. USOM was responsible for what I just said, but how do we work it out so that we have a situation where the military doesn't destroy what we do or we destroy what they do?

I mentioned much earlier on, the situation in the tri-partite signoff that was used before Killen came. I would say that, after that was done away with by Killen, we did not have a unified command out in the countryside until probably '67, spring, when we got close to it, when the president sent Bob Komer, who had been kind of my boss back in Washington, out to Vietnam and to act as an overall person in charge of pacification. Well, if you're going to have an overall person in charge of it, where should you put it then? You should put it in USAID with the military then under the civilian authority. Or do you put it under the military and you have the opposite, the civilians under the military? Well, General Westmoreland is a very good bureaucrat strategist. He saw right away that he wanted that under his control. That way he could take the credit if it goes, I guess, or he could push it off on some other problems. However he did it, Komer worked for him, with very high authority.

Now, thinking back to what we talked a little bit about before, John Vann had been arguing for unity for years and years and years and years, because he felt you had to have a unified command out there. If one person is not overall responsible, then there's always a chance you can scapegoat the other person or whatever. Let's just leave it that way. So, in a sense, John Vann's vision was finally coming true, when CORDS, the military and the USAID were integrated together and they had a single unified

command. It's a deep subject; we're not going to go into it here, but there are still many, many questions about even whether that worked very well. So, from a USAID point of view, the time that I was at the very end of my tour out there, that was being unified. Clay McManaway, who I mentioned earlier, was the program officer. He worked for us, and he was right in the middle of that and had been partly responsible for working out all the arrangements.

I'll do a quote from my special assistant, Dick Crist. Dick and I worked with Clay. We watched Clay work with the military, and this is probably an underestimate, for at least a year, almost all the time, working out all the arrangements, who's going to do this; who's going to do that? In a bureaucracy, you've got to lay out all kinds of stuff of who is responsible, the steps that are going to go, all kinds of stuff like that. In Dick Crist's view, a year and a half after that was all done, he said, "You know, I don't think it made any difference at all." All that work. But people feel comfortable in reorganizing when there's a problem, and, I think, anybody that knows government well would agree with me on that. And, as I look back on it, that's more or less what it was.

Breiseth: Not just in government.

Wehrle: Not just in government.

Breiseth: It even works in higher ed.

Wehrle: I guess in business too, in corporations.

Breiseth: In business too, reorganization is the anecdote.

Wehrle: So, that kind of is where that was. I would put kind of an addendum on this, and looking at the larger picture that we were really worried about, my friends, I might call them our group all the time, was the question underlying that, which really was a question in relation to what is the relationship between pacification and the use of MACV forces in Vietnam? Now, that was not our responsibility or anything, but we had the fallout from that because, let's look at it this way, John Vann and later General Krulak, who I'll just say a word about. He was an I Corps Commander, up on the top, and he was a little bit of a John Vann himself. He was kind of a free thinker. For quite a long time, he saw there were problems in what was going on because we weren't making any progress really. Each time it came to a high-level briefing, we would have somebody— I knew Krulak, but I didn't talk to him very much, but I had people that did, and someone would always say— Well Krulak didn't say anything at the briefing. We were surprised because we knew that he had a real insight into some of these things.

So here's the question. Krulak says that our main objective is pacification, and that means security in the countryside. It means what I said when we talked up in Laos. It means that you use all your resources to bring economic and social improvement to the people, and then you say to them, we will never leave. That was Rufus Phillips, when he

came up to Laos and first talked to me about this. We will never leave. Our security forces will protect you. You can relax and go about with your business. Well, that became Krulak's view, and it comes from John Vann and a lot of other people. Scotton and a lot of people saw that view.

Now, let's look at the Westmoreland view. The Westmoreland view is that the only way you'll ever win this is not by playing pitty-pat with the peasants, which is the way one person put it. They're not going to determine the war. What's going to determine the war is who beats the North Vietnamese forces, because that's the main strike force that is against us, so we have to beat that force. If we don't beat that force, we will never win. So, Westmoreland's strategy at Khe Sanh and other places up north, in opposition to what the Marines wanted, and we were all aware of this. Westmoreland wanted to put the Marines out into a vulnerable position, Khe Sanh, way out away from everything else, and then hope the North Vietnamese would come in after them. Then he was going to hit them, just break their back.

Well, that's a long story. And the end of that story is that it took away forces from the pacification. This is a point that I wanted to make. The relationship between pacification and the main force war is that you can't have both. Krulak would have said, and tried to do up in the north and was somewhat successful. But it's a long process of what we said before. He was using his forces to go out and pacify. This is interesting. He went also to the end of combining the forces that were working up there, so that the patrol leader would be American and the deputy patrol leader would be a Vietnamese. They went out as a combined unit. Now, that idea was pressed on Westmoreland way, way back, '64, '65. Westmoreland would have none of it. But as you can tell, I mean for those of us who thought we had to get the Vietnamese engaged, that's the obvious way of getting them engaged.

So, the end result of all of this was that Krulak had to move—it was General Lew Walt by that time, who is a famous name in American Marine history, W-a-l-t. He took over after Krulak left the I Corps. Walt was just torn back and forth because Westmoreland was ordering him to put his main forces up around Khe Sanh and those places. He wanted to keep them to do pacification, but he was the subordinate general and he had to do it. It's an interesting story, the extent to which he tried to get out of doing it. But the end result of this is that the Vietnamese started attacking Khe Sanh, or it looked that way, and Westmoreland poured more and more forces into there. He had almost eighty percent of all the American forces, fighting forces, up into this area. They were placed up there because he wanted a main force war, and the Vietnamese looked like they were going to give it to him. But that was a feint. They never did attack Khe Sanh in full force, but they put enough forces in there to suggest that they were. And then Westmoreland poured more forces in. Then they came down and wiped up the central highlands, they just cleaned it out by breaking through all the forces because there were insufficient forces to stop them.

Now, in saying this, I'm not saying that I know that the pacification, and you'll never have to worry, would work, because I'm not sure that the North Vietnamese main forces wouldn't have found ways to spoil that whole thing. I don't know. But it was clear by this time that the main force war would not be won. There's no way we could do the attrition. So, I'm just saying here that we were really frustrated because we really felt that, if the pacification is given up, then you've given up the countryside; you've given up the people. And you're going to have some people that were in cities, and that's going to be the end of it. That's not what we came to do. That's kind of a long way of saying something that was very dear to our hearts over there.

Breiset: Let me say very briefly, in my words, what I hear you saying. The escalation of the military involvement by the Americans under Westmoreland increased, and the North Vietnamese successes and strength increased. Your mission in the countryside was weaker and weaker.

Wehrle: It was much harder to keep up a continuous program. Just think of this. When the Strategic Hamlet Programs¹ were said to be such a success, back in...

Breiset: Which goes back to...?

Wehrle: Which goes all the way back to '63. When you lost the head of government, Diem, that was all gone because it had been personalized under Diem. So, then you have the Viet Cong coming back in, and controlling most of the countryside, and then you've got to start all over again.

Well, we start all over again; we were making quite a bit of progress by '67, then the Tet Offensive, which most people know a lot about, which was on January 31, 1968. When that hit all over, it demoralized everyone even though the ARVN, that is the Vietnamese National Forces, fought very well. They fought well because they were backed up in cities this time right against their family's houses. They were fighting on turf they had to defend, and they fought bravely. The Viet Cong were defeated in the Tet. Why do I say defeated? Defeated because the objective of Tet by the Viet Cong was to overrun the centers of government enough that the government would collapse, and they would be able to occupy it enough that the war would be over. Well, they didn't accomplish that. But on the other hand, the whole countryside again went to them, by default, because the ARVN forces were not going to go out there again. They were demoralized themselves.

Breiset: This presses the point where Lyndon Johnson steps back from running for reelection.

¹ Plans by the governments of [South Vietnam](#) and the [United States](#) during the [Vietnam War](#) to combat the communist insurgency by means of [population transfer](#). (Tucker, Spencer, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ABC-CLIO, 2011, p. 1070.)

Wehrle: That's right. He was demoralized.

Breiseth: Just in terms of the tidiness of our interview, I would make the observation that Roy's active duty in Vietnam goes until the summer of 1967.

Wehrle: That's right.

Breiseth: Tet happens in January of 1968. So, while he is there on a special fact finding mission, at this point he's now assigned to Washington, after September of '67. He does not witness the full kind of collapse of the, if you will, the civil program in pacification, that will come after this. Let's go back to your period again and say what is happening to the overall—and I want to make sure we've got these initials right—USOM?

Wehrle: USOM, yeah.

Breiseth: What is happening to that structure? We've got Charles Mann as Director, and then we have Don MacDonald, all under Grant. Is that correct?

Wehrle: I think that's right. I don't know when Grant came in. I guess we should say a word about the organization.

Breiseth: Right.

Wehrle: Dave Bell, who became budget director later on, David Bell, was the head of the AID at the time that I was out in Vietnam.

Breiseth: In Washington.

Wehrle: In Washington. He was a really wonderful person, very bright, an equitable person. He was the guy who would come out and check things out a lot overall. But he was in a frustrating position because so much of what was going on was controlled by the military. Under him were chaps by the name of Bill Gaud and Rud Poats. Bill Gaud was the deputy to Dave Bell on the top of AID, and Rud Poats was the assistant administrator for Vietnam.

Breiseth: Could you spell Poats?

Wehrle: P-o-a-t-s. Rud was a former journalist who had moved over into this and was really a very good leader. He would come out a lot. Rud Poats was in charge of Vietnam for AID in Washington, reporting to Dave Bell, who was in charge of the overall global operation.

We're going to mention, in not too long, Jim Grant. I'll say some more about him later, but he became the—he took Poats's place, in other words. He became the assistant administrator for Vietnam during this period, at some point, and we want to get clear what happened in Saigon. What happened in Saigon, as I've intimated, Charlie Mann

was running into increasing trouble. I don't blame Charlie Mann as much as I blame the agency for putting him there, because it should have been clear that that was not going to be his cup of tea, He was put in a position that he was not really qualified in many ways to run. I don't mean that in any arrogant sort of way, but I just think if you know Charlie, you know what he's capable of, and this was not his bowl of rice.

Probably, by fall of '66, it could have been the summer, I'm not sure, Charlie Mann was relieved of his position. He had been there about a year. Don MacDonald was appointed as AID director, and this time, we had an AID director who stuck, who got the job done. Don MacDonald was a handsome, black-haired, very well groomed figure, quite tall and a quite calm person. He had a fair amount of experience around the world. I would classify him, without being mean about, is that he was a good bureaucrat. He knew how to handle himself. He had some *savoir-faire*, as the French say, and he could move in these circles in the ways that Charles Mann and James Killen couldn't do; they were in a different realm. Don was in a realm that he understood. He was not the kind of person that would make a strong statement for something he believed in if he knew he wasn't going to get it approved. That's part of being a good bureaucrat, and I would say, overall, he did a really good job. He took over the mission then. I worked with him for almost a year out there, and I found working under him was good. He was helpful. He was not the kind of person that would give you new ideas or stuff like that; you had to get those other places. But, when you had a good idea and you convinced him, you went forward. There wasn't a lot of bickering back and forth in terms of status or who got this or who did that. I mean it wasn't that sort of thing. So, that's kind of the way the directorships went. Don was there when I left in the summer of '67, and served beyond that.

Breisetsh: You leave in '67, but you don't leave before you receive two rather singular awards; one in '65 and one in '66, the Jump Awards. Why don't you put those in some context. Indicate what they were for, as an example of how you were valued by the senior echelons of our government.

Wehrle: Well, it's always uncomfortable talking about how you were valued, so I'll just let these awards kind of speak for themselves. The William A. Jump award was started by a government official by, I think, that name quite a long time ago. The attempt was to recognize good public administration in the United States Government, people who gave service which was kind of beyond the ordinary. In 1965, I was given the Jump Award for work within the State Department and AID combined. It was the William A. Jump Memorial Foundation Meritorious Award for Exemplary Achievement in Public Administration. It's quite clear that that was given to me for work that I had done in Laos and the work that I had done early on in Saigon, in negotiations and other things. It reads as follows. It says, "In recognition of outstanding public service. For distinguished service and contribution to the economic analysis, including budgets, balance of payments, internal price and money supply, and the development of aid programs

designed to achieve U.S. mission objectives in Southeast Asia.” So that’s what was given to me. That was in 1965.

Then, in 1966, I was highly honored and flattered and humbled to receive the William A. Jump Award for the entire U.S. Government Service across all agencies of the United States Government. This was the award that was given to me on May 17, 1966. It’s “For outstanding service in analyzing, planning and negotiating complemented and unusual economic assistance programs.” Well, that’s right; they were very unusual in Southeast Asia. I couldn’t receive the award because I was out there, but Dave Bell, the administrator of the agency, accepted the award for me back in Washington.

Breiseth: Wow, that’s terrific. Now, before you go back to Washington as a new assignment, from September ’67 to January... Well, I guess there’s the summer of ’68.

Wehrle: Right.

Breiseth: You’ve got a major role back in Washington in terms of the Moss Committee, and we haven’t talked about that.

Wehrle: That’s right; we haven’t.

Breiseth: If you could say some things about the currency issues that really were things that, when I’ve heard people talk about your service, that is one of the things that they mention.

Wehrle: (chuckling) We almost forgot the Moss, and I was thinking to myself, well why don’t we just forget it. The Moss Committee, at that time and ongoing, it’s one of our important committees in the Congress because it’s an operations committee. What they are responsible for to the Congress is finding out where the government is not working very well.

Breiseth: Is it still called the Moss Committee?

Wehrle: No, no.

Breiseth: This was Congressman Moss, the chair of the committee.

Wehrle: Right, that’s right.

Breiseth: So what was its name?

Wehrle: I think it’s the Oversight and Operations Committee, or something like that, of the House. That’s what it is. Now, we talked about the radio program a little bit earlier, where I was, I would say, hauled up over it. That was the same committee, looking at what...

Breisetsh: Old friends.

Wehrle: Yeah, old friends. (chuckles) Now, we're quite a bit farther along; we're in '67, I think it was. Is that right? Yeah, I think so. The people who are watching this sort of thing are increasingly saying, why do we have a rate of the piastre at, let's say eighty, or whatever it was; I think it was maybe eighty. Instead of getting eighty piastres for every dollar we give them in aid, why don't we get 150 or 118 or something more, because that would finance a lot of our programs in Vietnam, and wouldn't that be a lot more effective? If we're trying to fight inflation there, why do people buy imports and only have to use eighty piastres, when they could use 150? That would be the same as a tax increase of almost a hundred percent. Now, the point there is that, when you're fighting inflation, you're trying to absorb purchasing power; you're trying to get rid of it, because if it stays out there, it's going to drive up prices. It's that simple. So, the exchange rate determines how much purchasing power is eliminated when you import goods, and the exchange rate is very, very important.

I mentioned the Jim Killen story before, where he got the exchange rate in South Korea changed, and that made exports on the world market fall in price by almost fifty percent. Well, that's going to encourage an awful lot of industry. Well, that wasn't true in South Vietnam because there were no rubber plantations that could produce much at that point. But it did work on the import side. That is, why aren't we increasing the tax on imports, because that's, in a sense, what it is; it's a tax. It takes away money from the people. They get return for it. They get value, but nevertheless, it's taking away their purchasing power. So, these criticisms of the USAID Program were valid.

Now, how do you change an exchange rate? You can have a free market exchange rate. Then it goes up and down, depending on what the supply and demand for the piaster is. You have no control over it. Most small countries really don't want that kind of a situation. Most of them don't have enough foreign exchange, that is dollars, in order to do it because if demand is strong you run out of dollars and you're bankrupt, like Argentina not so long ago. So usually the rate is negotiated, and then usually it's a pegged rate. So, let's say the central bank determines the exchange rate is going to be eighty. Now, if they pick the wrong rate, they're going to lose dollars because they're not going to have enough money to cover imports against exports. In this country, South Vietnam, you don't have to worry about that because the United States is going to put the dollars in.

So when we talk about all the negotiations that are going on, that's largely what those negotiations are about: how many dollars are we going to put in? What's the quid pro quo? What are you going to do? What are you going to do for these dollars?

Breisetsh: You, meaning the South Vietnamese.

Wehrle: Yes, you, meaning the South Vietnamese. So, the criticism, and it was becoming stronger and stronger, of too low an exchange rate of eighty, it was valid, and we knew that. We were working on it. Now, as I tell this short story, I can say well, you should have started working on it earlier. Well, I've given a lot of reasons here, without being defensive at all, of how difficult it is to negotiate with these merry-go-round or turntable governments that we had to deal with. And, of course, the Vietnamese wanted to keep it low, eighty. Why would they want to keep it low? It's pretty obvious, because it makes all their supporters happy, because they can import a new style of life at a really cheap price. So, they did not want to raise it, and we did want to raise it. The leverage we had was, you're going to raise it because we're not going to give you these dollars. Their answer, not spoken, but unspoken, to what I just said, would have been, ha-ha-ha, you're not going to not give dollars to us? You want to win this war worse than we do, and we know you are not going to break us by cutting back your dollars. You're not going to do that. You may talk that way, but you're not going to do it.

Now, I say that because that's what we were up against. We were up against a situation which, normally, the U.S. acquiesced. If they wanted more troops, they got more troops. If they wanted more of this, they got more of that. If they wanted more of this, they got more of that. So we had to break that.

The Moss Committee comes out, and they sent their staff out a week early. We had had the IMF out earlier. This was a really a tough time.

Breiseth: International Monetary Fund.

Wehrle: Yeah. ...to do consultation with us, and we had Dick Cooper come out. I haven't mentioned Dick Cooper since we talked about the Council of Economic Advisers. I mentioned that he and I worked with Jim Tobin to write the economic president's report that time, and I mentioned how highly I regarded Dick Cooper. Now, if I looked like a child shortly out of high school, Dick Cooper looked like somebody who wasn't ready for high school yet. He really, really looked young, and he was brilliant. The minute he opened his mouth, you didn't think he was a young whippersnapper at all.

Anyhow, he had been hired by Washington as a consultant on the economics of Vietnam. I didn't know that, but he had been because they wanted to make sure that this was going to go the right way. So, he came out with the IMF, and it turned out that his analysis was coincided with my analysis, so we didn't have any problem. Now, my problem at that time was very serious. I had to do all the analysis, and I couldn't even bring my staff into it because that's how secret exchange rate changes are. I think you can understand how dangerous it would be if it got out that the exchange rate is going to be devalued. The speculators will come in, and buy dollars like mad. So, you have to keep it very secret.

I remember going in on a Sunday morning one time. My head was hurting; I had a lot of headaches in those days. I was working at the blackboard that I had in an office, and working on the elasticities.

Breiseth: This is in Washington?

Wehrle: No.

Breiseth: This is still in Saigon.

Wehrle: Saigon, where I felt so lonely because I didn't have any top economists. I had some good people, but I didn't have any top ones. I had to try to figure out how much money would be withdrawn by different exchange rates and different elasticities. Elasticity means how much would be taken in by different exchange rates—and really being worried, thinking, am I getting this right? Who do I turn to? I could talk to Dick Crist. He was good, but he wasn't an economist in the same sense.

Anyhow, when Dick Cooper came out and I compared my projections and what I thought the exchange rate should be, the IMF and Dick Cooper both agreed. So I was really, really relieved by that, and the fact that we were all three together. So, then the Moss Committee came out. At first they sent their staff. They worked with us for a week on the whole thing. And here's the kicker. We could not tell them that we were negotiating on the exchange rate because, if we would have told them, the whole world would have known. So, we had to sit there straight-faced, and this was really a hard thing. We had to sit straight-faced, and they would be lecturing us on what we should be doing. Well, we hadn't done it in terms of having an outcome, but we were doing exactly what they were saying. But we had to sit there like school children and nod to the teacher, oh yes, that's what we should be doing; oh, okay. We had to play it kind of dumb, but play it very acquiescing so that they believe they're really making progress. That was a very painful week. I wanted to just blurt it out and say, darn it, we're doing this; we're in negotiations right now. We agree with you. But you couldn't do anything like that. So, then we had—they left after having educating us, as far as they were concerned, and we were in agreement. So, we had our negotiating instructions then, because of the IMF and Dick Cooper.

Then the job is to negotiate, and I negotiated with Nguyen Huu Hanh, who was the head of the central bank. I had worked with him quite a bit, so I knew him pretty well. He was a good person; he was a good economist. We went round and round. It probably took two months, I don't know. It took a lot of time. My departure was delayed, and the ambassador asked me to stay on until they were finished, which made perfect sense. And I did.

Then we finally had agreement. We met with President Thieu and Ambassador Lodge, myself and Hanh. We got together one evening and looked at it. Hanh had, of course, spent a lot of time with Thieu, and we figured it was all set. But Thieu still had a lot of

questions. Why do we have to do this? They were political questions. Hanh did a good job; he answered most of them for us, so we didn't have to be the combatant. We then said okay, what have we agreed on? Then we agreed on a certain AID level. We also agreed on the exchange rate. We agreed on this, how it's going to be done, we agreed on that. Then, we went home thinking that the World Series was over, you know. We were done; both sides had won, and we were in good shape.

So I walked into Hanh's office the next day with a big smile on my face thinking boy, we'll sign now, a document that both countries will sign and that will do it. So Hanh said, "I want to be clear on what we agreed on last night." I said, "Yes, so do I." And he said, "This is what we agreed on," and he went X, Y, and Z. Well, he had the exchange rate wrong, and I said, "No, we didn't agree on that." We were very clear the exchange rate would be—and I think it was 118 or something like that, I don't know, maybe a third increase or something. I was just shocked; I mean I couldn't believe that. We were so clear on that last night. We repeated it probably four times because it was so important. And Hanh said, "No, that's not what we agreed on. We agreed on"—let's just pick a number, a hundred. I said, "No, we didn't do that." And we both went back and forth to each other. He spoke very good English. There was no question of translation. He finally said something like "Mr. Wehrle, this is what we agreed on." At that point, I was not sure what to do. I just kind of had to act on instinct because our agreement was precise. So, I just looked him straight in the face and said, "No, sir, that is not what we agreed upon," and I stood up and walked out of his office. Well, you know, you don't do that to anybody in another government. That's really a miff, especially in Asia, if you do that, but I had to find a way of making it clear that we were not giving in. There was not going to be any question.

So, I went back and I couldn't eat lunch. I was really scared. I mean I didn't know what was going to happen, but I thought, it's going to come out all right because we had three witnesses there and we had the ambassador. Well, it did come all right. He called me back about two o'clock and he said, to Doris, and Doris said, "You know, the central bank governor wants to see you immediately." I said, "Good. I think that's good." And I went over there. Hanh said, "Now, I want to be clear on what we've agreed upon." I said, "Yes, so do I." He then said we agreed on A, B, and then, that time, he came out exactly with what we had agreed upon. Didn't mention the morning; didn't mention anything else. Nor did I. He said, "This is what we agreed on, right?" I said, "Yes, it is." The secretary typed up the documents. The next morning we signed them. I think we sent a special cable into Washington saying "Would you pass this to the Moss Committee please, and let them know that their mission out here was a great success?" They brought this to them, and it was a success. That was the biggest negotiation I had while I was out there.

Breisetsh: Wow. And how close was that to the end of your...

Wehrle: That was right on the end of my...

Breisetsh: ...tour of duty in Vietnam.

Wehrle: Yeah, that was right at the end of my tour of duty out there, yeah.

Breisetsh: Now, you go back to Washington. Tell us what your assignment was there.

Wehrle: Before I go back to Washington, the most important thing in my life happened, or one of the most important things. That is, our daughter Chandra was born out there, on July eleventh. There's a little bit of a story in back of that because wives were not allowed in Vietnam. So, we had been on home leave last year, and then when we came back. JoAnn went to Bangkok, and all these letters that I've quoted, a lot of them, were to her there. Then, right toward the end of probably April of '66, the ambassador asked me if I'd come back for another tour. I said, "Well, you know, I've been separated from my wife twice; first in Laos and then here." I'd been over in Southeast Asia for six years or so now, and "No, I don't think so. Yes, I'm dedicated to what I'm doing over here." Well, he said, "You know, I'd like my wife to come, Emily, to come over too." "But," he said, "the president said 'no'". He said, "I asked the president last time I was back." He said, "But, you know, would you come back if your wife could come back?" I said, "I'll check with her before I answer this." Then I told him that we would, for one year.

So he went back to Washington again, and he made a presentation to the president. He said we need some women over in Saigon for representational purposes, which is a joke. By that he meant the mission council at the highest level, and the president said okay. He said, "I'm not going to make a big talk about it. I'm not going to make a big announcement, but yeah, that's okay." So, when Lodge told me that, and then I had to extend my stay there to finish the negotiation, then I said to the ambassador, "Is it okay if JoAnn comes over right now, and then we'll go on home leave?" He said, "Yes, that's just fine." So, she came over, and so that happened. Then, a year later, of course, when I came back at the end of that year, that's when Chandra was born.

The end of our tour was really pretty exciting. We had to stay for one month after Chandra was born because of the rules on immunization and that sort of thing. When we left Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker, who was such a gentleman, he came out to the airport to see us off. There were a lot of people out there. A lot happened that next year, but that's a whole year away from where we are right now. Right now, we're leaving on home leave. We've finished the negotiations, and, because the ambassador allowed us to be together for the next year, we came back then, in September, for a whole other year of work in Vietnam.

Breisetsh: I think you should also describe the reception that was held for you when you actually left Vietnam for Washington.

Wehrle: Well, a year later, after Chandra was born, then in July, the ambassador held a reception for me, which is what they did for the high level people leaving. That was an exceptional night for me and a night that I will never, never forget. I've mentioned that I knew a lot

of people in Saigon by this time, which is not surprising, because as economic counselor, you deal with the business people there. You deal with the political people, all the different embassies. So, it's not surprising at all. I had also worked with a lot of people in the field and a lot of them came in that night.

So he gave the reception and the thing that was kind of—two things were striking about it. One was that you have a reception line and people come through, and it goes for about an hour and a half to two hours, and people eat canapés and drink. The reception line did not end until the end of the reception. That line just kept going on and on and on. I couldn't believe it. I never got out to mix with the people at all because I was in the reception line.

The most striking thing was something I'll carry in my heart all my life, the very, very nice things that people said to me, of how good it was to work with me, how fair I was, how dedicated I was, and a whole bunch of other things. They told me specific stories about certain instances that I didn't know about, that had worked out good, but I didn't know about it or it turned out to be good. That's part of, I guess, why the reception line went slowly, because they kept telling me these stories all the way through. Anyhow, my head was too big for itself after that night, but I'll always carry that with me. It was so wonderful.

Breisetsh: Now, who was the ambassador at that point, Bunker?

Wehrle: Ellsworth Bunker.

Breisetsh: Was he there at the reception?

Wehrle: Oh, yeah, oh yeah, he was there. The whole embassy crowd and all the rest of them were there. He was there when we left.

Breisetsh: General Westmoreland, there?

Wehrle: Yes.

Breisetsh: Quite a night, quite a night.

Wehrle: They were all there.

Breisetsh: And JoAnn was there at this point?

Wehrle: JoAnn was there.

Breisetsh: That's great.

Wehrle: She didn't stay in the reception line with me. I said "You don't have to stand here all this time; go and have a good time." The few American women were there. They got a lot of

attention. And Chandra got all kinds of attention, though of course not attending the reception. I mean gifts from the four or five ambassadors. Even Lodge sent a gift over from America for her, for the baby, because there weren't many American babies; there weren't many wives, and so that was rather unusual and interesting...

Breiseth: A great beginning for Chandra.

Wehrle: Yeah, it was a great beginning; she got off to a good start.

Breiseth: You take off and you go back to Washington.

Wehrle: Right.

Breiseth: But still part of the organization, now working under Grant, right?

Wehrle: That's right. Jim Grant takes over for Rud Poats, as the head of the Vietnam Division.

Breiseth: And what's your assignment?

Wehrle: I'm his deputy. So, in the chain of command, I am in the line from Dave Bell going down to Jim Grant; I'm his deputy, then going out to the field. Jim Grant was a renowned figure within AID. He was kind of above the ordinary. He had such a wonderful career. When we went in for orientation, which I mentioned, in the fall of '59, they would bring certain leaders in AID through to us, to talk to us and give us a picture of what they're doing. It was all brand new to us in those days. Jim Grant was one of the people that they brought in. He talked about whatever he was doing at that time, and he was a very impressive speaker. The thing that differentiated Jim Grant, when I think of it, from almost everybody else, was his enthusiasm and complete dedication to human improvement, whatever that means. He really believed in the mission, that using our knowledge and everything else, we could make other people's lives better. He was not a politician in the sense that he cared about the political so much, but he really cared about improving people's lives. Well, AID is a good place to be, because that was our mission, and he rose up through it and then became this administrator for Vietnam. He pushed me very hard to become his deputy. So, there have been certain people in my life that have helped me in the sense that they gave me responsibility, they had faith in me. Jim had all kinds of faith in me, and tried very hard to get me to go back and be his deputy. That's the reason I stayed in government.

So, he was my boss for a year. He followed the same pattern that I mentioned about Charlie Mann. At seven o'clock at night, he liked to have somebody sitting there, and he could kind of talk. It used to drive my dear wife, JoAnn, buggy because I wouldn't get home until eight-thirty or nine from the office. She'd say, "What were you doing?" I said, "Jim Grant, he wanted to talk." He talked sense. It wasn't like just going around in circles; he was talking serious stuff. But it still was the end of the day; we were tired and all that sort of stuff. He was a dramatic figure; he could speak very, very well. He was a

commanding figure. He later became head of UNICEF. He became the international chief executive of UNICEF. I always hoped that I could go back at some point and work for him in a consultancy there. But I couldn't because I was in business in Springfield at that time, and I couldn't do it. Then he died of a heart attack. I went back to visit him a couple times. He was a lovely person, a really, really wonderful, good person, Jim Grant.

Breisetsh: Now, in January of '68, just on the very eve of the Tet Offensive, Jim Grant sends you back to Vietnam.

Wehrle: Right. Jim sent me on a fact finding commission.

Breisetsh: And what facts did you find?

Wehrle: Well, there were facts lying all over Vietnam, lots of facts. Jim sent me back out and he said, "You've got a lot of political contacts." And he said, "I've been in contact with the ambassador, and he wants to have a political report when you leave." So, I went out. But they also wanted a military report. So, I had contacts with John Vann, who was down in the delta by that time, and I'd known General DePuy for quite a while. He was the commanding general of the Big Red One, the First Infantry Division, which is famous in the history of the American Army. DePuy said that he would help me, and John Vann put all that together for me.

So, I arrived out there. There's not an awful lot we have to say about it, except that people were really optimistic at that point. In the fall of '67, was perhaps our most optimistic time. The delta had been opened up again; the roads were open; the rice was coming in, not as much as we had hoped, but it was coming in; and all was quiet. We should have known it was too quiet, because the Viet Cong were infiltrating their ways into the cities, getting ready for Tet. But things were looking good from a superficial point of view, which is all we had.

So, I went—here's what happened. I went there right before the end of January. I went out to the headquarters where DePuy was, and he gave me a briefing of what they were doing. They were pretty optimistic. They were up in the rubber plantations. We had taken terrible beatings up in there. The next morning, he gave me a helicopter, and we went out. We were going to head down toward the delta, and then I was going to be with John Vann. So we were heading out of his headquarters, which was in the rubber plantations, pretty well camouflaged. We're flying along, going south in the helicopter, not very high, a couple thousand feet maybe, and I saw this red, funny kind of looking like dust in the sky. It stretched out in a straight line above me. It was north-south, in a straight line; there was kind of two or three of them. They looked like contrails, but they were red, and they were way too low. I don't know what they were, maybe five thousand. They were above us, but not that much above us, maybe five thousand feet, seven thousand. So, I asked the officer that was with me. I said, "What's that?" He said, "Well, that's from the B-52 bombings last night." When those big bombs hit the earth,

they pulverize the laterite, which is kind of a red rock that's got a lot of iron in it. The heat of those bombs is so terrific that they just pulverize and powder those rocks. Then they drift up into the air. They all drift at the same altitude because they're all controlled by the same wind currents, and they go up in the air.

Pretty soon we were flying over the bombing track. The bombing track below me it looked very much like an elephant had walked across the land with enormous big hoofs or whatever they are, the elephant's foot, down making flat, circles into the earth. They're just one after the other, each one is almost touching the other one. There's two tracks down there, and then there's another track over there. That gave me my first image of how deadly these 52 strikes were. They always said that, if you're an enemy and you're close to those, it will just blow your eardrums right out, the impact is just so incredible.

We went down there, and then we went down to John Vann's headquarters. . I spent a whole day with John Vann, going through the delta, and as I said, there was a lot of optimism. Crops were looking good; roads were repaired; bridges that had been out were back in operation; and John Vann was fairly optimistic at this point. We then came back to Saigon. The third thing I did then is I met many, many, many political figures, old friends of mine and others who were in the government. My question the ambassador was interested in, is what is the status of this government? It was kind of a new government. The elections were over, and Thieu had been elected by the parliament, maybe by the people. I don't remember how the election really worked, but we had a legislature. I went out and talked to all the people around; what is this government; how is it going to work? Are we finally going to have a government that can do something, that we can end this conflict?

Well, it turned out that Thieu and Ky were still battling each other. They had been doing this for a long time, to the detriment of their country. Ky was paying out a lot of money to the House members, and Thieu was kind of subsidizing the Senate. So, Thieu controlled the Senate, and Ky, through his money distribution, was pretty much controlling the House. Well, that was not a very good start for the government. That means it will be a continuing internal struggle. And then I asked them a lot of questions about what is the objective. They gave me the twenty-six points of Thieu, in terms of what he sought to achieve. It was a typical, almost French, list of things that were good, but no execution, nothing in back of them except these nice things.

The gist of what I found from all the people was that it was a government without a mission. That was the key thought that came out of most of them. It was a government, elected by the people. This is great; they were really happy. They had an election, and they had a democratic government. They now had a civilian government, led by a general, but nevertheless, a civilian elected government, but with no mission, with no objective, with nothing in mind that they were going to accomplish. That was the general feeling. So, I debriefed the ambassador with this and took off for Laos, where I

was supposed to go next to do some checks up there on some things they wanted. That night, Tet took place, the night I took off, when I was— By the time I got to Laos, and then the next morning, I found out that Tet had taken place there. So, then I stayed in Laos and did the work.

That was interesting, to go back to Laos, after a number of years, and see what was going on. Then, back through Russia, which I wanted to visit. I was going to Samarkand, but it was all snowed in. So, I went to Alma-Ata, over in Kazakhstan. That was interesting. Then back to Moscow. And then on back home, and gave my report To the State Department and Kissinger in the White House. So, that was just for this. The facts, mostly, that I found were obsolete by the time...

Breiseth: Because of Tet.

Wehrle: Because of Tet; that's right.

Breiseth: Interesting. And then you go to Harvard.

Wehrle: In June of that year.

Breiseth: In June of '68. Again, this is just on the eve of the presidential nominating conventions that will nominate Nixon and Humphrey, after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

Wehrle: That's right.

Breiseth: So you come back to a country that's in turmoil.

Wehrle: I come back to a country in turmoil, yeah. I didn't understand it. It was beyond my belief, what was happening. I was up at Harvard, and then I went out to Chicago for a conference. I got invited to a number of conferences on Vietnam. While I was out there, Bobby Kennedy was shot. It was hard to know what was going on in those days, but the year at Harvard was a good year.

Breiseth: How did you get to Harvard?

Wehrle: I thank Carl Kaysen for getting me to Harvard. Carl Kaysen is an economist. I mentioned him before; he was working with Forrestal in the Kennedy Administration. Carl worked it out that I would become a fellow up at the Institute for Politics for one year. He did it really as a way of thanking me for all the work that I had done for the government, and I was very appreciative. We had a wonderful year up there, just a wonderful year. And that was it.

Breiseth: Were you working on Vietnam issues up there?

Wehrle: I gave a course on it up there. Not a course for credit, but a course that students could come to if they wanted to. That was not a real serious course; it was just a kind of overview of what's been going on. No, that was a free year. I could do whatever I wanted to. I went and listened to history lectures and things I was interested in, and I wrote a few things. Wow, it was like heaven.

Breisetsh: Well, you know, I think we've done our deed, so now there's the time to do some reflection. First of all, are there any people that you haven't talked about, that you want to talk about?

Wehrle: Well, as we've gone through this, of course, it makes the mind come awake in different ways. There's a couple that I'd like to mention. I'd like to go back to a question you asked me when I was a "young'n." I mentioned Scouts really gave me the opportunity to find out that I liked leading and that I could maybe do something there. The person who really helped me the most was a guy by the name of Clarence Buddee, and I'd like just to mention him in this talk.

His name is B-u-d-d-e-e, Buddee. Clarence, he's like a Jim Killen kind of guy. You know, he's a guy that came up rough and ready. When I knew him, he was building motorboats during the war. But then he couldn't do that during the war, so he was out working with the fire department out at Scott Air Force Base, in their fire department out there. He's a guy that had done all kinds of stuff, rough and ready kind of guy, a tough, tough kind of guy, and big. When he took off his shirt, he looked like a bear. I mean there was hair all over him, big arms, and that's just who he was. He ran an outfit, which was called the Senior Scout Outfit 303, in which he wanted to bring Scouts in who were coming out of their regular troop, maybe fifteen years old. It was the Senior Scout Outfit that was a regular part of scouting. He wanted to do it in terms of Indian lore and respect for the American Indian. Learning to do the Indian dances, that was the thing he was into.

My father brought me up to have great respect for the American Indians. I heard Indian stories since I was little. He knew a lot about them, and that's what he inculcated in me. So, when Clarence started that, I wanted to be with that outfit. And I did; I was with it for about three years. We went around and gave Indian dances, and we did the Kiowa dance; we did a buffalo dance. We would do it for different conferences or something like that, right around the area of Belleville, Illinois, where I was. We did the whole thing. We put the colored paint on our skin, and we built our whole costume ourselves. I mean, he really got—it wasn't something that was just, you know, artificial. It was as far as he could, he got us into it. He brought us to St. Louis, and we listened to people who really knew the Indians. They would make a little campfire, and we would sit around it. They would talk about this, and I was mesmerized by the whole thing.

Well, the point of the story is that Clarence liked me for whatever reason, and he gave me special privileges in that group. I mean I was his favorite for some reason. We would go up to the boundary waters to go canoeing, and then we went up around Hayward

and took a lot of those canoe rivers. He would be down at summer camp. He was our pioneering instructor in summer camp, and we weren't going to go down there like everybody else. We were going to have teepees. He took us out in the forest, taught us how to use our axes, really use them, and how to take canvas, and then how to dye that canvas, and how to take that canvas and wrap it around these big teepees. We lived in there all summer. I was a Senior Scout on the staff during the summer.

Now, the point of that whole story though, is that Clarence gave me a view of the world that I had never had. I won't say I grew up protected, but in a sense I really did. I didn't know much about the rough and tumble life that he would tell stories about, where, if somebody comes at you in a bar, you have to take your beer bottle and break it over the bar and then go after the other guy. He would tell us all kinds of stories like that, that were completely outside of my realm. But he had confidence in me, and so he gave me leadership in that group. So, that's the second time now that I've been given leadership. He was very demanding on the Indian dancing and on the canoe work and in the summer camp. He really taught me a little bit of how to be a man. I guess that's what I would say about the whole thing. So, I owe him a great big debt, and I'm glad that I've got this chance to be able to thank Clarence Buddee for what he did for me and for a lot of other boys.

Breiseth: There's another relationship that you observed, that touched me a lot. That is the relationship between Averill Harriman and Mike Forrestal. You had an interesting evening in Georgetown, with Governor Harriman.

Wehrle: That was interesting. Mike Forrestal, as I mentioned before, was James Forrestal's son. I always wanted to talk to Michael a little bit more about that, but when we were working together all the time, I really never found time to do that. I know it was a sensitive subject, because his father, as you know, committed suicide. But I noticed, in going back to Washington a couple times, that Michael talked very, very fondly of Averill who was like a father to him after his father died. The tone of his voice kind of changed; like he'd say, "We're going to go over and see Averill." It wasn't quite the same. One time, when I into Governor Harriman's office by myself, and the governor brought me in and we talked. He said, "Would you like to talk to Michael?" Well, Michael was out of town at that time. I said, "Yeah, I'd love to talk to Michael," and he said, "Well, I'll get him on the phone for us." So, here's Averill getting on the phone and calling down to Florida, where Michael was vacationing, and Michael was single, vacationing down there, and said, "I've got Roy on the phone here." I got on the phone in Averill's office and talked to Michael for a while. So, it was clear there was a really—a relationship that was more than just business between the two of them. It was really interesting to see.

So, one time I was back there. I spent a lot of time debriefing Forrestal and then he said, "Tonight, we're going to go over and see the governor." I said, "Okay, whatever you say." We went over there that night. It was a time in which the government was trying to decide how far we should try to push in Laos, toward North Vietnam. Sam Neua

Province was the province closest to them. Averill Harriman and Michael were afraid that the CIA was pushing us, because they were running that kind of covert operation. They were pushing us too close to the border, and all we're going to do is going to have to lose the area. The North Vietnamese will come in and just whack us. So, what Averill was interested in that night, when I went over and talked to him, we went into his den kind of, and the fire was in the fireplace, and Averill was sitting there, and we talked right there. It was that question. So, he asked me a lot of questions about Pop Buell, that I've mentioned, and about the aid and how far we were going over and what kind of resistance were we getting. I knew a fair amount about that from being up with Pop Buell, and so I was talking and talking. After a while, I saw Averill reach over and take his hearing aid out of his ear and put it in his pocket, both of them. I thought well, I guess that's a pretty good sign. (chuckles) So, I closed off my talk fairly rapidly at that point and Averill nodded in his kind of Buddhist way and thanked me for it. Michael escorted me out, and that was the end of our conversation. I didn't get anything back from Averill at all, and I didn't really expect to, but it was funny.

I had a lot of respect for Michael Forrestal, and I regret to this day that he had to die such an untimely death, of a heart attack, in New York, in the 1990's or so.

Breisetsh: There's one person you just mentioned, and we've been at this for enough hours that my memory is foggy, but I don't think you've given the full discussion to Pop Buell that you wanted to do.

Wehrle: I think you're right. I think I mentioned him more or less in the context of what he was doing but not so much who he was.

Breisetsh: Right.

Wehrle: I would really like to do that because I had great admiration for Pop Buell. He was a short person and by this time a balding head, but bright eyes and full of vitality, just full of vitality. He was an Indiana farmer, been a farmer all his life, and when his wife died, he heard that they were hiring people to work in agriculture over in Laos. They were hiring people to work for AID, in agriculture, so he signed up for it, and he thought well, that's going to be something I do with my life. He went over there and just by chance, he got sent up to the northern tribes, and something magical happened. He was in an area that, of course, was entirely new to him, but he was a farmer, and they were farmers, and I'm telling you it clicked. They liked him and he liked them. He didn't want to ever leave that place, and he was there for years, up there. As I said, when you're up in those hills up there, beautiful hills, you're walking. You're walking all the time or else you're in a plane. The way they got resources up to these people was they had what they called STOL aircraft. That means "Short Takeoff and Landing" airplanes. They've got special flaps, and they were very interesting aircraft. When they come off the runway, they can kind of go right up and they just rise almost like—not like a helicopter, but they go up pretty fast. When they come in to land, they stall out right at the start, and then a

full prop wash on a reverse prop blows right into those flaps and stops it very quickly. It's a thrill to go into those airfields, because you're coming in fast. Sometimes you can't see the airfield because this is all canopy, all the way, hills as far as you can see. It's beautiful, the valleys and hills. So, you'd be coming along a ridgeline, and those pilots are something else, they fly right on top of the ridgeline. You don't see any place to land, and you're going across these trees, and they'd say, "Well we're going in." Where are you going in? And then they'll turn on their side and go right on the other side of that ridge. There's a little field, and they flop down; they hit hard and wham that thing in, and you're there.

So Pop traveled all over that place, and every day he was up in those planes. They didn't have helicopters; they just used the planes. Or he was walking. I've got trip reports in my things that I brought out of Vietnam, of Pop sending me a letter saying oh, thanks for getting us the corrugated roofing over at Ban Houei or whatever it is. I hit it off with Pop, because I thought he was just a great American. I thought, if you're going to celebrate an American, celebrate Pop Buell. He is a true American hero. We hit it off very well, and I went up there a lot. He stayed up there for years and years. He got along with the CIA very well. He'd tell them to jump off a cliff if he had to, to protect his people, and you know who his people were? They were the Meo and the Yao.

Breiseth: And you and JoAnn would go see him.

Wehrle: We went up twice. Most wives didn't get up there, but he invited us up for the Meo New Year, which was a big deal. We went up on this Caribou. That's a Canadian plane. It's a little bit bigger, but it's still a STOL aircraft. Where he was, at the site where he was, they all had numbers. It was a 2 level landing strip. I've never seen anything like that. It had a high part of the runway, and then the runway went down very sharply, and then there was the other part of the runway. So, when you landed, you came in, and you were going like mad. Then, all of a sudden, you hit that thing. You went up like that, and then you went in here. And when you took off, you're going along like this, and all of a sudden, your stomach drops out of you. You go down that incline and then pick up speed, and then you take off. Well, JoAnn thought that was really fun; she thought that was great. Then they introduced us to all the people up there. I knew not a lot, but a fair number of the Meo by that time. It was a great visit.

When I was over in Vietnam, Pop Buell invited JoAnn to come up to the north country and be his guest up there. He did not have guests, but he liked JoAnn a lot, and he invited her up. He had an IVS woman who was working up there with him, so she was able to stay with him overnight. She was tickled to death to go up there. That was really a nice thing for Pop to do. Pop is special. He's dead now, but he was—and I wish more Americans knew about him, because he was great.

Breiseth: This is not a topic that we talked about, but as I have been here these days and had lunch at one Lao restaurant and another Saigon restaurant. I'm aware that you did not

cut your relationships with the people in Indochina. I'm particularly interested in what role you and JoAnn have played in the refugees that have come out of this part of Southeast Asia, here in Illinois.

Wehrle: Well, there are a lot of refugees coming out after the communists took over Laos particularly. A lot of those were in refugee camps in Thailand for a year, two years. A lot of them went over in boats, across the Mekong. When JoAnn and I found out about that, we both agreed immediately, well we have a responsibility to help those people because we speak the language enough to at least give them something. We were members of the First Presbyterian Church here in Springfield, and our church has a lot of different missions, so why shouldn't this be one of our missions? Our church backed us immediately, particularly since we were going to do the work. They had a refugee commission here in Springfield. We worked with them, and they were quite good. They helped get people settled.

So, you have to have a sponsor. So we then, our church, become a sponsor for, I'd say, maybe twenty to twenty-five families, a large number. And not one family ever went on welfare. We started with the Lao, because we knew them the best, and what we would do is we would meet them at the airport, and then we'd find a place where they could live. Then we tried to help them find a job, an unskilled job. Most of those people—no, all of those people, could speak no English whatsoever. The first family that came over, we had, there were four in the family. The next one that came over, there were seven. It was just different like that, but the gist of the whole thing was that we then enlisted a lot of people in the church to help us. They would then take a family, and they would do the same thing, find a place for them to work. It was a lot of work, but it was very, very rewarding, because these people were very, very appreciative. They were no nonsense people. I mean, they wanted to make it in this country. That's been our history, and you see it in them.

I would go over to this one Lao house at night, and the kids would be down on the floor working, because see, they didn't have any special education for English. They were thrown right into the regular school system, and they had to pick it up as fast as they could, English. The one was helping the other, and the other was helping the others. There was no television on; there was no soda pop or anything like that; they didn't have money for that kind of stuff. They were very frugal, and most of them went into one business or another. A lot of them went into the restaurant business, and we still know those people and still go to their restaurants. We had a lot of Vietnamese come in.

We worked a lot with people from Africa, a few from Somalia, and then the others from Ethiopia. We worked with a lot of those. We brought some people in from the Hill Tribes. That didn't work too well; that was a hard transition. They came, got settled, and then they went on to where there were more of their people. That was a very rewarding period, to say the least. I'm sure glad we did it. Thank you for mentioning it.

Breiseth: Well, this is not to say we won't open this tape up again if we feel there are some other topics, but for now, we're going to sign off and say that this has been a unique pleasure for me.

Wehrle: Thank you very much, for what you've done.

(end of interview session #6)

Interview with Roy Wehrle

VRV-A-L-2013-098.07

Interview # 7: November 3, 2013

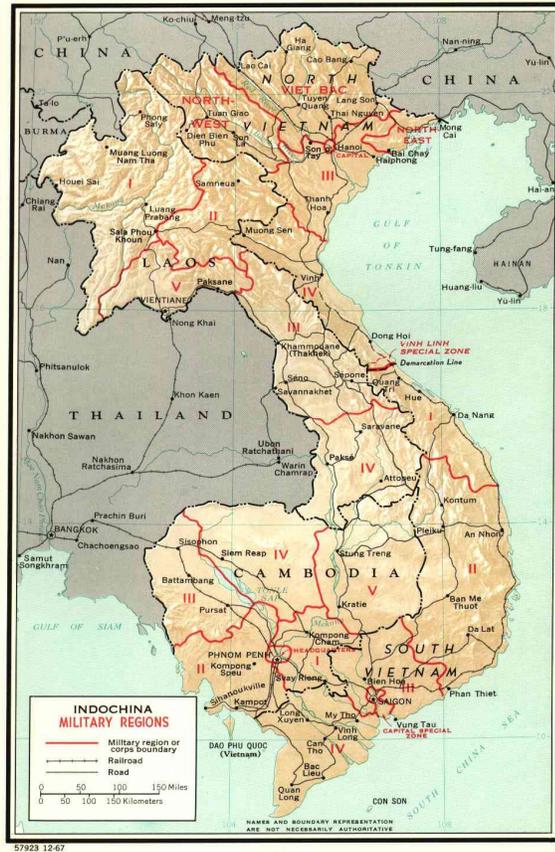
Interviewer: Christopher N. Breiseth

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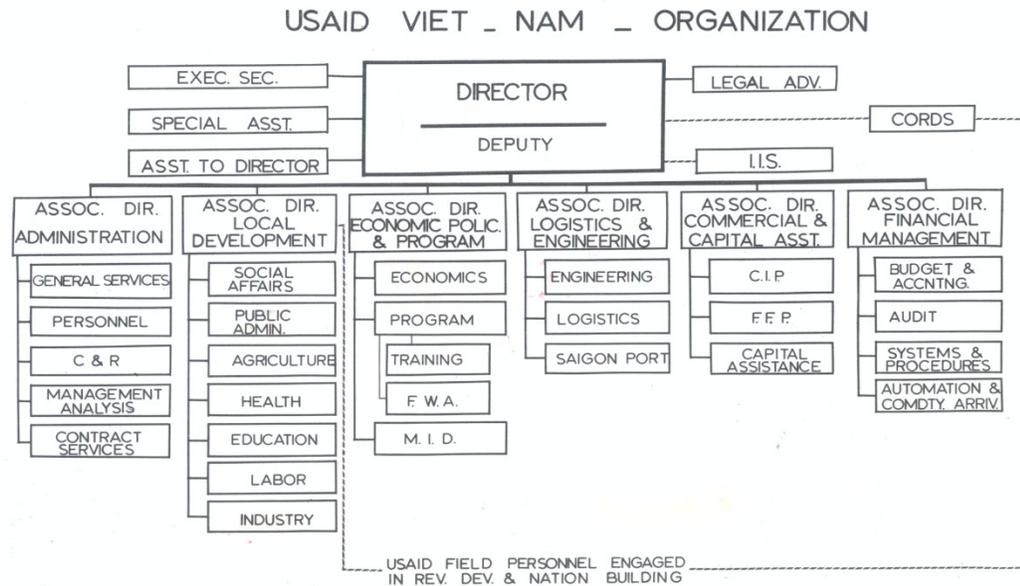
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Breiseth: This is Chris Breiseth again, with Roy Wehrle. It's Sunday afternoon, the third of November. This is an addendum to our interview; the purpose is to look quite precisely at the economic circumstances in Saigon, from the period '64 to '68, and to let Roy describe what actually happened economically, events that he helped effect by the policy responsibilities he had as the Economic Counselor to the U.S. Ambassador.

Wehrle: Well, I'd like to first say that I will be talking against the charts that will be in the transcript. The first piece is a nice clean map of Indochina. It shows the funnel, so-called, up in North Vietnam that abuts on China and goes over to Laos—which we talked a lot about—and which shows how those relate. It then shows the narrow neck of Vietnam, which is Central Vietnam, with the capital, Huế. Then it shows the bottom part, the highlands, and then that magnificent piece of earth, the delta, as fruitful as any place on earth in agricultural productivity.



For people who are interested in the AID mission that we've talked so much about in this interview, I'm going to put in an organizational chart which shows the organization and structure of responsibility within the AID mission, under the director.



It shows the commercial import program; CIP was under the director. That was a change that was made later in my time there. Most of the time it was under my responsibility as the associate director for economic policy and programs, which shows in the chart.

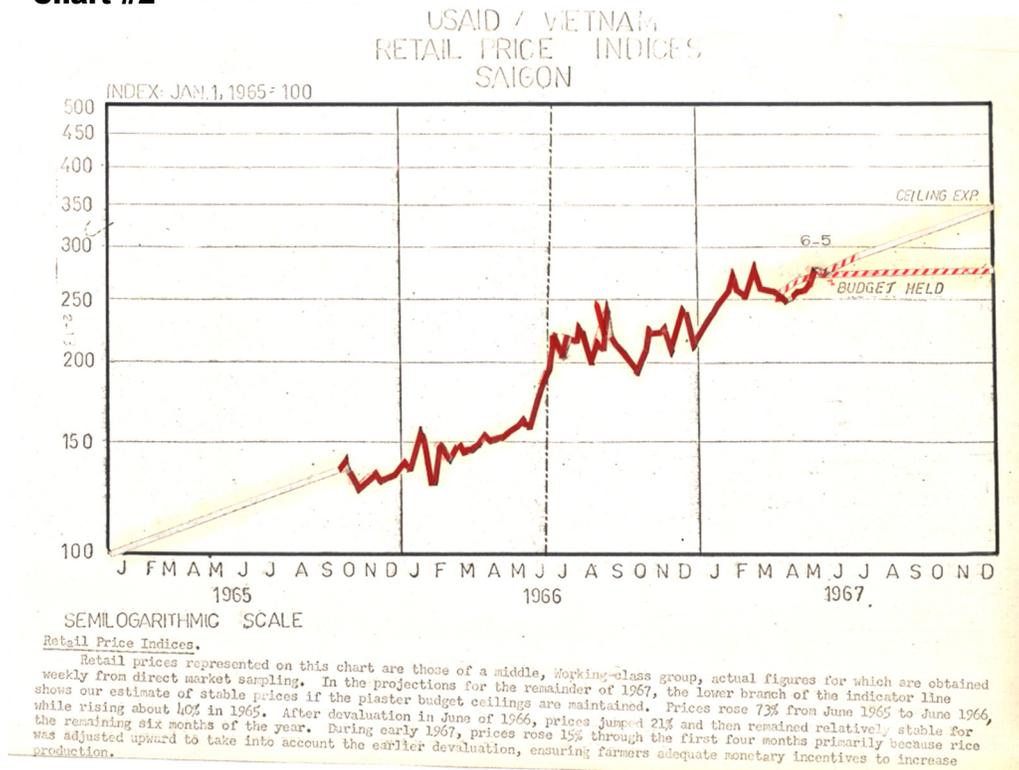
Breisetsh: Just to refresh memories, the director of the mission was who?

Wehrle: Well, it started out being James Killen, and then he was followed by Charles Mann and then by Don MacDonald. So I served under three different directors.

So, if we turn to the question that Chris asked, well all this fire and brimstone about the negotiations and the difficulties of working this out in a wartime period, between two governments, what happened? How did it come out? Well, the overall answer is that our prime mission was to prevent runaway inflation, and we did that. There was inflation; people's living standards went down, but it was wartime. The price increases were significant, I would say, but not out of control.

I will mention the big importance of the devaluation in fighting inflation, which we spent so much time talking about. We talked about how important that was in order to pull more purchasing power out of the economy, and we will see in the results here, exactly how that works.

So I guess we should start with the retail price index, because that was really the main center of interest. Chart #2 shows the Saigon retail price index, and it was going up significantly in '65 then between the fall of '65 and up to right before devaluation, which would be in June of '66, it rose another about 25 percent during that twelve months. You can see the index going from about 200, up to something like 250.

Chart #2

Prior to June 1966 you can see the sharp increase in the index, and that is the devaluation, and that brought an increase of something like 33 percent in prices. So, you recall that we said that no government likes to have a devaluation imposed upon it because it hurts the people. It does, they have to pay a lot more for goods, but in the long run it helps the people because it decreases inflationary pressure. It was the latter that was paramount for us, but also the fact that the higher the exchange rate went, the better it was for the American taxpayer, because that meant each of our dollars bought more aid. It meant that the GVN could do more self-financing of their needs, and we'll see later on, how that played out.

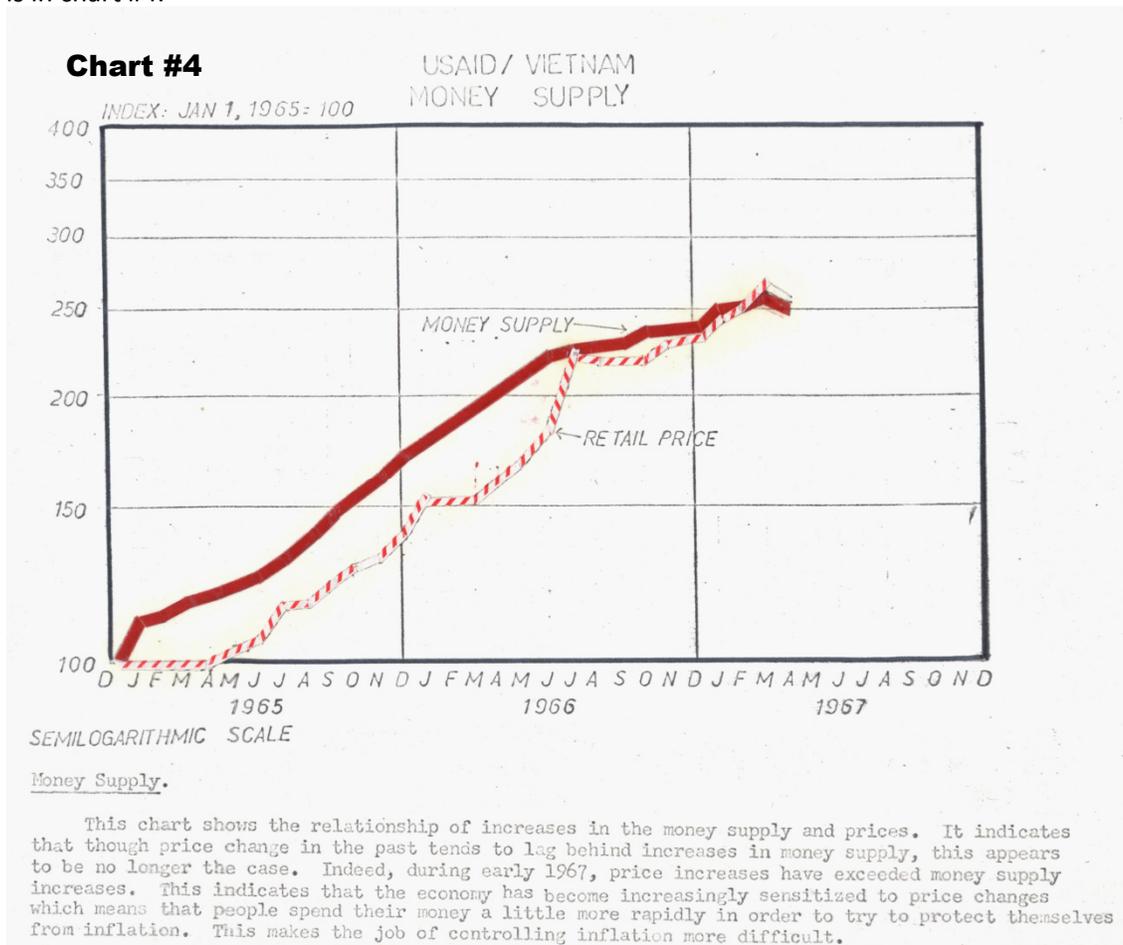
So after the devaluation, we had a price index that started with an index of 220, in January of '65 after devaluation. Then after that, you can see a fairly jagged, but nevertheless fairly level line. This says that the inflationary fire was essentially put out. It was put out because we withdrew through imports enough piastres from the economy to prevent an excess demand for goods and services.

Breiseth: Would you say that, in your overall role in Vietnam, that was one of the most consequential things you did?

Wehrle: Yes, I certainly would. That was our focus, and I think we took more satisfaction in controlling that than probably anything else we did economically.

Now there's another increase starting in January of '67, going up from about 210 – 220, up to something like 270, and that's another fairly good size increase, maybe 30 – 35 percent. That was caused by the increase in rice prices that we talked about before. We had to get the paddy price up in the delta high enough to make it profitable for the delta farmers to ship their rice north, to where it was needed in Saigon. So, that's primarily what that is. So, it hurt the domestic Saigon consumer, but it helped the paddy farmer, and it was really crucial in getting rice up to the urban areas.

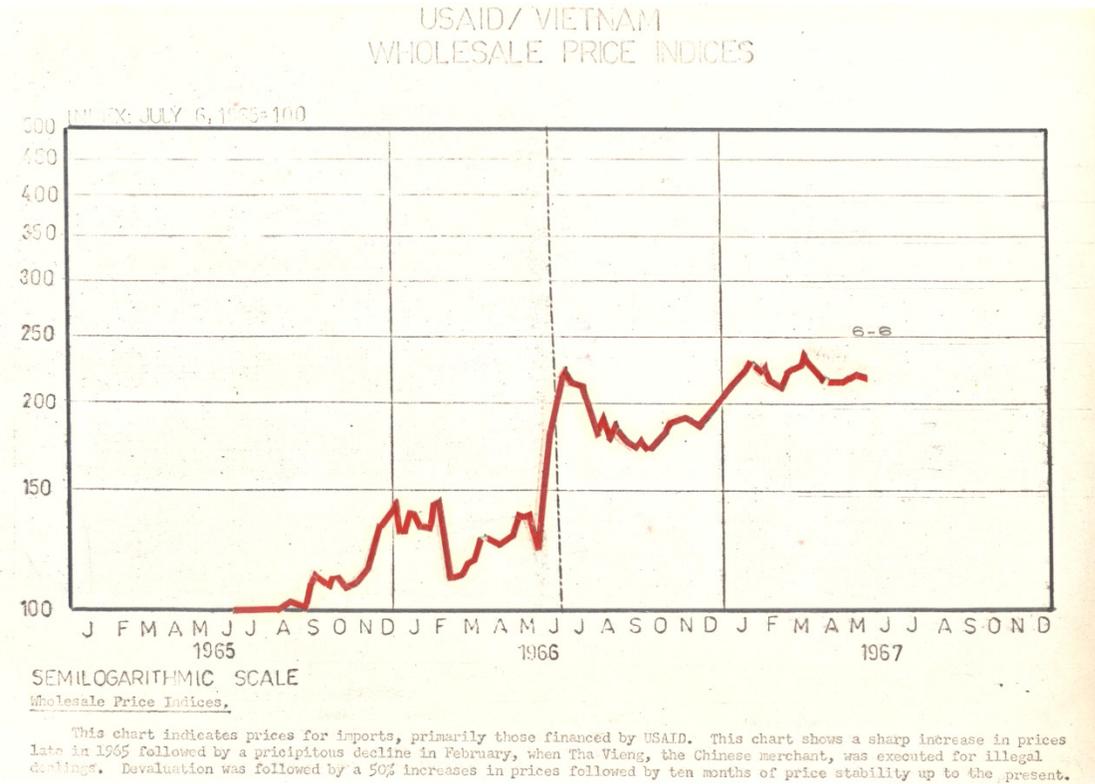
Now, the next chart we're going to look at is the money supply, and we all know that too much money chasing too few goods causes inflation. So here's a way to look at that, and this is in chart #4.



The heavy line going up is the money supply, and the peppermint line or the slashed line, is retail prices. All I'm going to comment on that is to say well, there it is. The money supply goes up; prices go up. The money supply goes up less steeply, then the prices go up much less steeply also. So there's an inflection point in the middle of 1966, and that is our familiar devaluation. After that, one can see the money supply goes up at a much, much reduced rate, and the retail prices don't level off, but they also go up at a much, much reduced rate.

Another way to look at this is to look at the wholesale prices; that is largely the price of imports. That is chart #5.

Chart #5

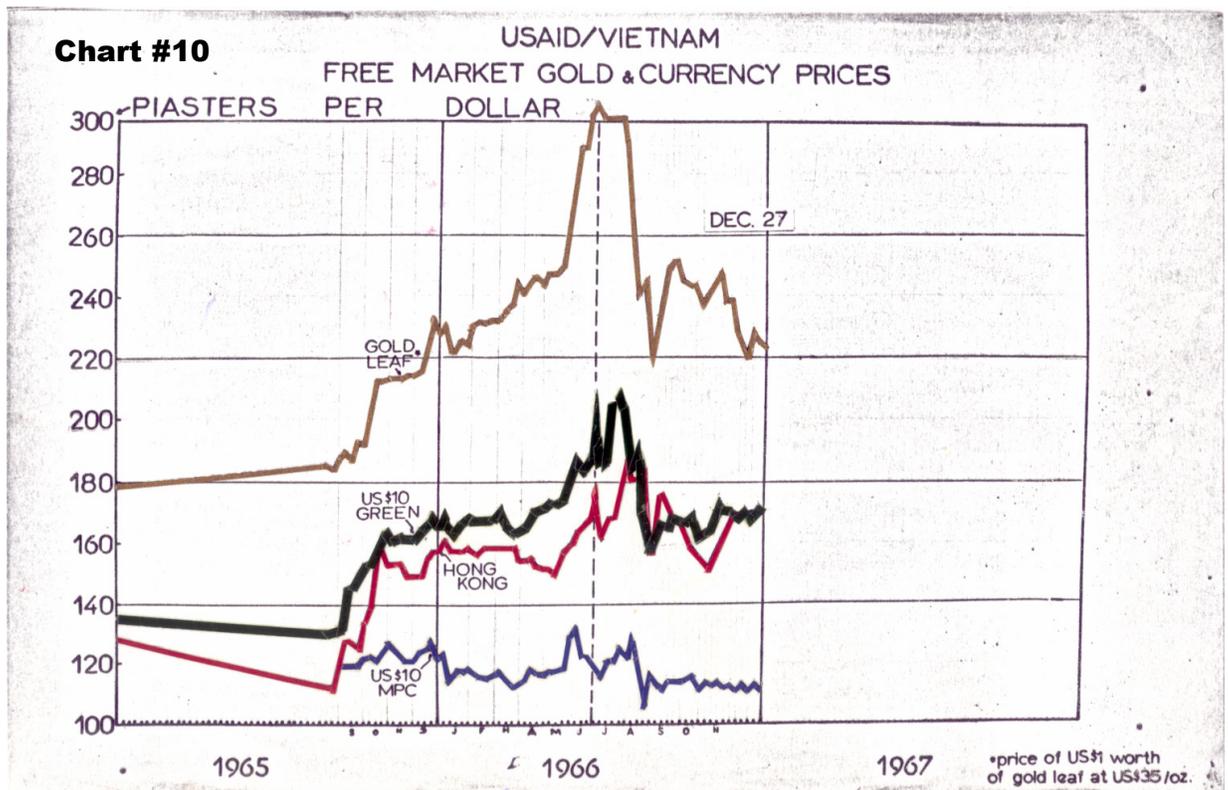


So, this is the wholesale price of imports essentially. It shows the price from '65, '66, '67. I'm not going to comment on that very much, except to say that here the prices change is exaggerated because here we're looking at the full impact of the devaluation. This is the full impact, whereas in the others, the difference is diluted, because you have domestic goods and services which don't go up the same amount as the piastre exchange rate, so you get only a partial expression of that devaluation on the consumer price index in the statistics we looked at before. But now we turn to the wholesale price index, and lo and behold, when June '66 comes along, you can see that there is a precipitous cliff of price increases to climb. You might notice that right after that, then prices decline fairly significantly. That's a normal thing that takes place in a big devaluation. After the shock has worn off, the people back up in their consumption and then prices increase a little bit again, but it's relatively under control.

The economics underlying what we've just talked about was what we called a gap analysis. That's what we presented to Washington and to the ambassador. The gap analysis is simply the difference between (a) how much purchasing power is put out into the market, which is primarily spending by the American troop construction program and (b) the GVN budget

expenditures, how much income they create, and how much is absorbed back and taken out of circulation through imports. Absorption or decrease of piastres is primarily through imports. So, we looked at the gap to see how much we were balancing the demand and the supply, based on the monetary numbers. That gap analysis allowed us to tell Washington and the ambassador and the Vietnamese government how much price pressure was building up. That's a rough and ready index, but it worked fairly well.

The next chart I'm going to mention is chart #10, which shows the black market and the gold prices.

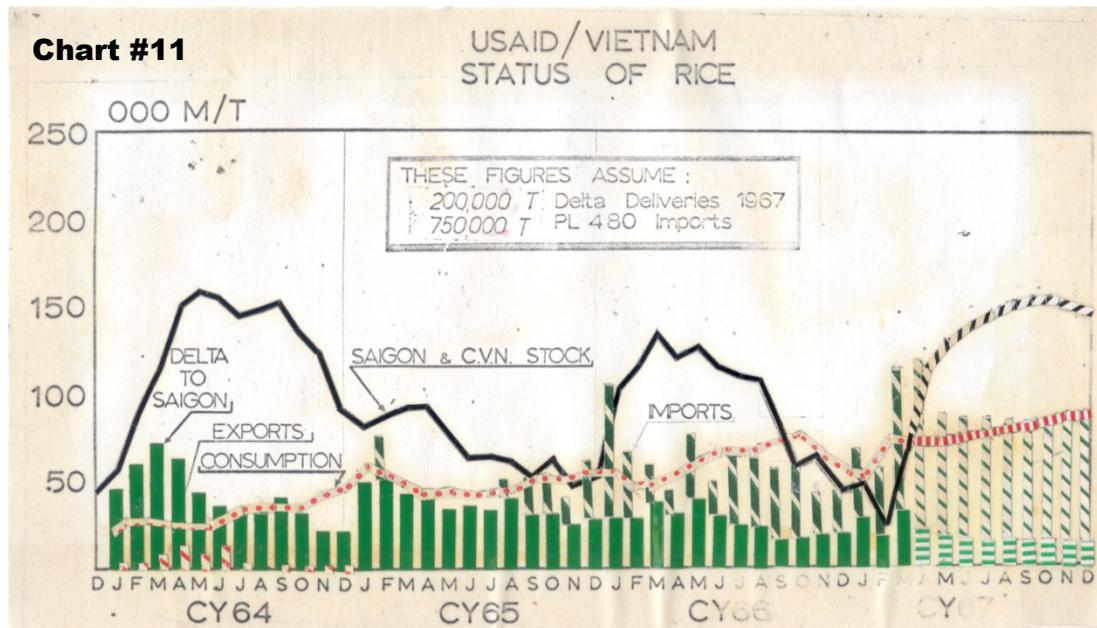


Now, why do we look at these? Well, these are interesting because again, they also show pent-up spending pressure. If there's too much purchasing power building up in the pressure cookers of the economy, then it will steam out expressed as the flight of capital. That is shown by the black market exchange rate which will rise very sharply as income gap increases. So, the degree to which we are reaching balance between demand and supply can partly be seen by the black market exchange rate. The top line measuring the price of gold is really the mountain in the center of '66, and again that is the devaluation. So, the black market gold rate is going up, '65, '66, and then goes up sharply. But, then the good news is that right after that, the fall is precipitous; speculators are blind-sided and jump ship. The black market rate goes up to almost 330 piastres per dollar for gold, so it had gone

way up from about 180. Then, right before devaluation, to 240, and then fell way back down to just a little over 200. So, it fell almost 100 points. Again, this is a chart that we would have liked to take back and shown to the Moss Committee, because we took a lot of grief over this, because they saw only the left-hand side of this chart. They didn't see over the mountain, where the black market rate went down continually after this.

Right underneath the gold black market rate is the black market price for the dollar. Then the black market price in Hong Kong is right below it. These had the same kind of fluctuations, but the peak is not so high. These indicate the inflationary pressure. It gets up to 200, and then it falls all the way down to 150. So, to economists measuring the temperature of this economy, that tells us that we had reduced the excess pressure. We took that as a measure of economic price stability. But in some sense all this is not the key.

The key was always rice. We knew it was rice; we had to live and die by rice. Chart #11 gives a fairly complex, but comprehensive, picture of how rice supplies played out, both looking at stocks and flows.



I'll spend just a little time on this. This takes us from calendar '64, all the way through calendar '67, four years of dealing with this rice question. The exports disappeared by the middle of '64. In Chart 11 there's a barely visible tiny peppermint line on the bar graph right on the bottom which shows this. Those other bar graphs that are going up all the way along represent the flow of rice from the delta to Saigon. Much of the central highlands was self-sufficient. The demand and supply up there tended to balance out. In other words, the local rice matched the need for rice.

But in the Saigon area, that wasn't true. In the Saigon area, the key was the rice coming out of the delta. So, those bars going seasonally up and down give a pretty good picture of a continued decline in rice coming from the delta, from as much as almost 70 million metric

tons coming out in March of '64, falling to only 40 million metric tons by March of '65, falling in March '66 all the way down to something like 30 metric tons,, and falling even farther down, to something like 20 million metric tons coming out of the delta in March of '67.

So, although we talked in our previous discussion about how '67 looks successful, the results did not show until '68. Then in '68, we were hit by Tet,² and that tended to knock that off. So, looking at terms of getting a flow out of the delta, this is not a picture of success. It is a picture of getting enough out of the delta that we were able to stabilize consumption with imports. How can we see that? Well, the key is to look at consumption. We've looked at supply coming out of the delta, now we want to look at that rising hatched line. That measures rice consumption, a steady line going up from '64 at something like 25 on the left scale, and then rising almost steadily and going off the curve on the right at over 60 or 70. So, consumption went up significantly. Is that because the population went up so much? No, it's not. It's primarily because the living standards in many parts of the country went up a lot due to increased income. People here eat rice three times a day, and if you've got more money, you're going to eat more rice, sometimes as much as a kilo a day, which would be over two pounds for a working person. That's a lot of rice.

So, the gist of this chart is that the declining vertical bars going across, which we said were the shipments of rice from the delta, are complemented in the middle of 1965 by shipments of imports coming in, shown by the peppermint bars placed on top of the solid bars depicting Delta rice shipments to Saigon. So, the thing to look for is: does the bottom rectangle, plus the top added-on rectangle of imports, equal the consumption line that I just mentioned going all the way across. And you can see in '66, fairly clearly, that even though delta deliveries went down, the imports filled in that gap that was left by the increasing consumption.

Breiseth: Roy, just to review what you talked about before. What role did you and your colleagues have in increasing the imports of rice?

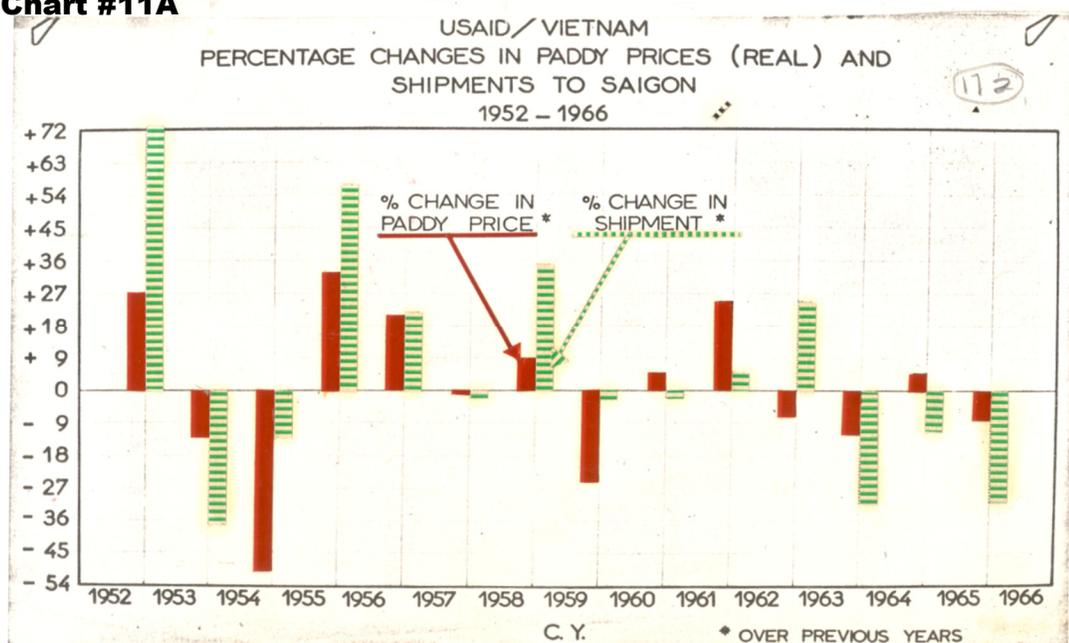
Wehrle: Well, that's a policy decision, so in some sense we had everything to do with it, because it got mixed into a lot of politics in Vietnam and what we should do. We had big debates, as I mentioned, in our discussion with Secretary McNamara and with Director Jim Killen, of what is the right policy. I want to make clear that, for all of the economic staff, the idea of bringing rice imports into one of the great rice surplus areas of the world was a big "hurt". But the reality was that the war was going poorly and we couldn't get the needed rice out of the delta. There was really no choice but imports.

So, the last piece of this chart is the heavy, heavy black line that goes up and down—riding up above all this other stuff that we've been talking about—which measures the stocks of rice. The net flows (consumption – delta shipments + imports) = the changes in stocks. Thus the change in stocks for a month = demand – supply, or use minus deliveries. You can see

² Tet was the Vietnamese New Year military offensive.

there was a good stock in '64. It was way up at 150 million metric tons. Then you can see that it declines fairly sharply, all the way down to right before the middle of '65, and then we start imports. It got all the way down to 50 or maybe 40 million metric tons. When you think of it, and compare that to the monthly inflow from the delta, which by that time was about 30, that's not a very good situation. That means your stocks would last for about a month. That's how it's often measured. What are your stocks? How long will they last? Well, they'll last just as long as you've got enough to cover the consumption. You can see the difference there. We were running a deficit by April of 1965, and the stock came way down.

Then you see the big imports that took place in late '65 and what happens to stocks? Well, they go way up again. They get up into a very healthy situation. Then, hoping that we get more rice out of the delta, that those bottom rectangles would rise and shine. But they didn't, as you can see; they keep on declining. Then our stocks went down, and we had to adjust and bring in a lot more rice. You can see those rectangles. The rice imports are way, way, way up at that time. We'll talk a little bit about that later. And, of course, this caused stocks to go way up. That means we could control prices. We kept the paddy price pretty much constant. We kept the price in Saigon, even during tumultuous years, fairly constant. Chart 11A shows how that was done.

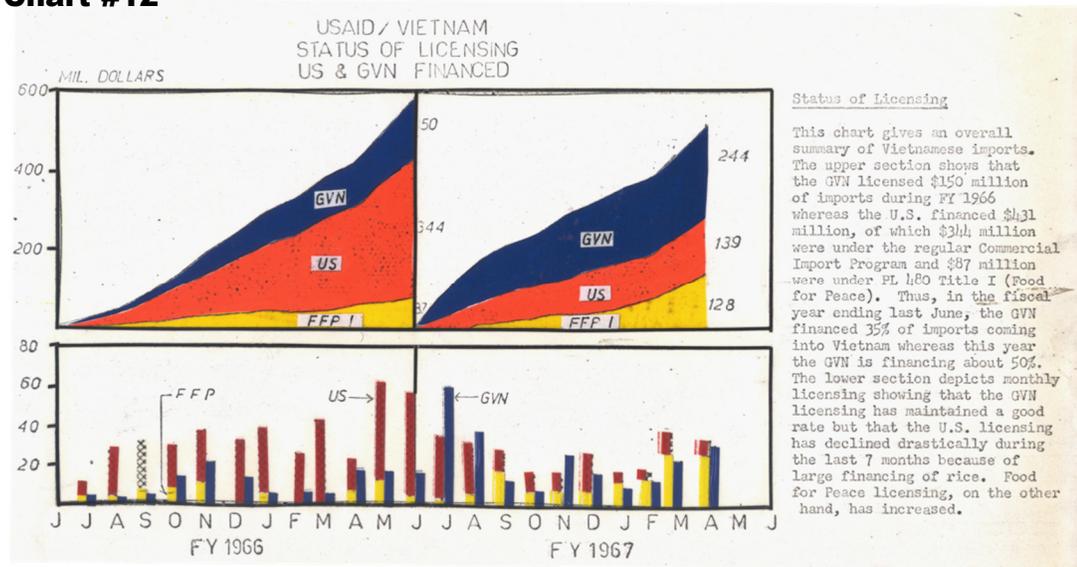
Chart #11A

I just would like to put this in because it's a very nice example of how price change causes supply response. The free market does work: the dashed bars going up are the percentage change in supply. The solid ones are the change in price. So you would expect to find a good correlation or a relationship between a change in price and a change in supply, and this is not what happened. Way back in 1952 here, it shows a big response to that positive price change of 27%. But then the next year, prices fall 18%, and the supply goes down 45%. And

then, of course, when we get up to the war, '64, '65, '66, we see the picture of what we just talked about: very small price decreases, but major decreases in supply related more to war than anything else.

Now we have just a couple more charts that we'll look at, that will show overall aspects of the economy. Let's look next, at Chart #12, which shows the overall USAID levels of funding.

Chart #12



The bottom bar chart shows exactly what the chart on top shows. The top is like a time chart on the overall costs. This is about licensing imports. So you see on the top dark GVN segment for their financing of imports. The year 1966 illustrates the GVN financed \$50 million of imports—not very much. The U.S. financed \$344 million. This is 1966 when many U.S. troops came in, and when big American construction programs took place. There was enormous purchasing power flooding the market at this time. It was the commercial import program, the \$344 million, that essentially financed this.

In fiscal 1967 the tables are turned, I would say, because this is the year when we had the devaluation. The GVN imposed higher taxes that year. Both countries were able to get many more piastres for every dollar that they sold. In this case, the GVN financed over \$244 million worth of imports, while we were down to financing about \$140 million. So, we went from 344 million down to 140 million. That's a decrease of \$200 million, which was a savings to the U.S. taxpayer because of devaluation.

The next chart is #14 and this simply shows the overall cost of the economic program.

Chart #14

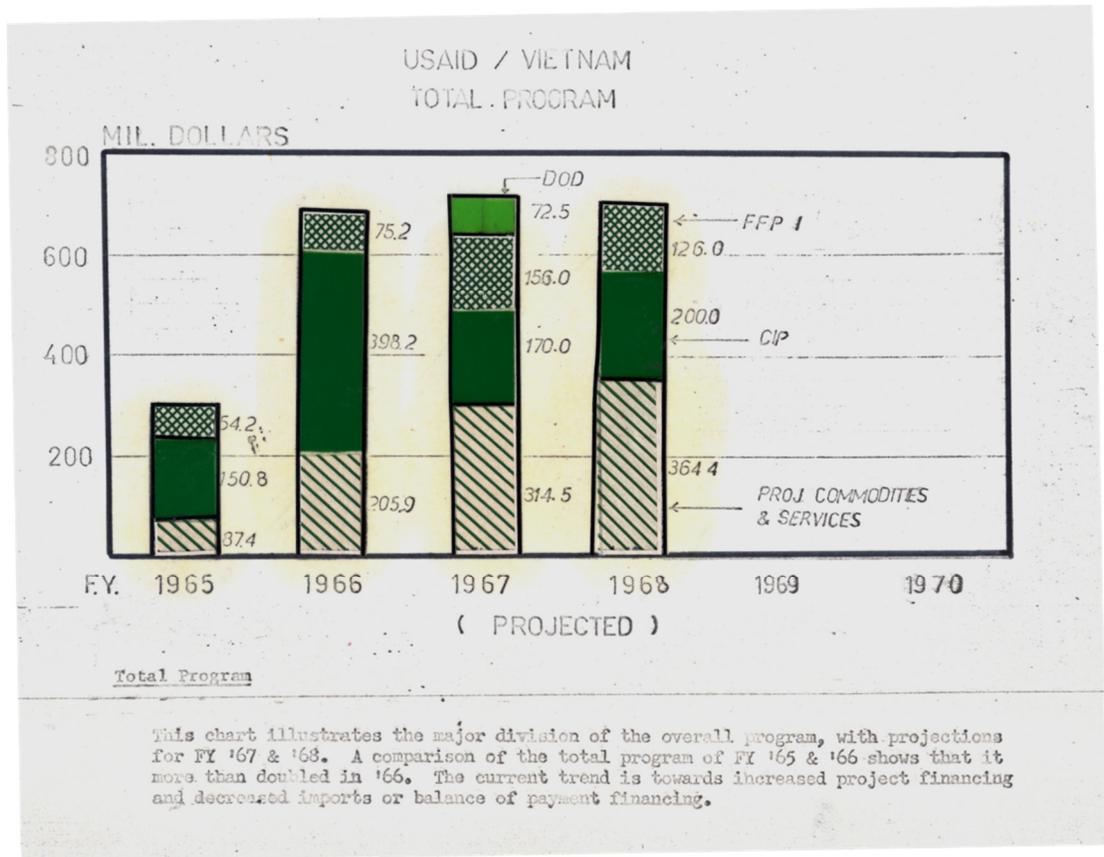


Chart #14 shows an interesting switch. It shows that although the overall cost went from 1965—around \$300 million, up to close to \$700 million, in '66, it stayed flat, at about \$700 million, through '67 and '68. However, the components changed markedly. The Commercial Import Program, CIP, during the \$700 million total aid program, went from \$344 million down to \$139 million, and then stayed at about that level, a big decrease. But, instead of saving the U.S. all those dollars, the cost of commodities for supporting our program activities in the field went up sharply, from \$205 million to \$314 million, up to \$364 million. That's all the programs for chicken and hogs, refugees, fertilizer, cement, etc. We mentioned before that we felt that the U.S. was increasing that program too much, that the GVN had a hard time staffing and managing so many projects. But our dollars went way up on those programs.

Chart #16 shows where the money went for those programs, the regular aid programs. Charts #16 and #17 show four years of U.S. aid to Vietnam. What they show is the amount

for each program, like agriculture or refugees. What happened to refugees? Well, you can see over this four years—from '65 through '68—you can see that the refugee cost went way up. And you can see what happened in agriculture and others. But, not only can you see the dollar amount, you can see the number of personnel that the U.S. had involved in all this.

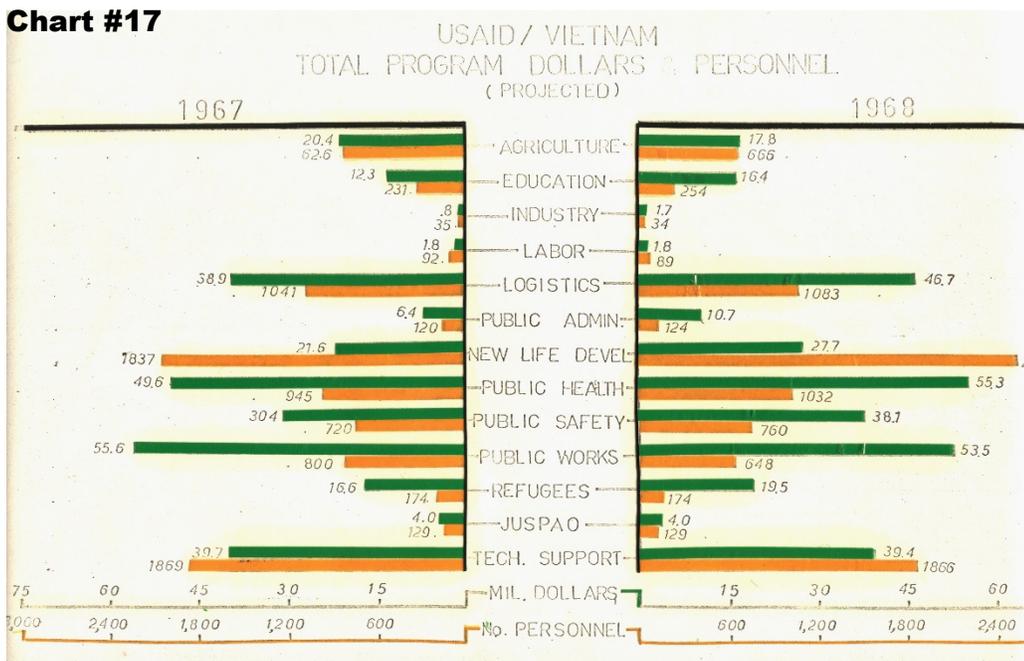
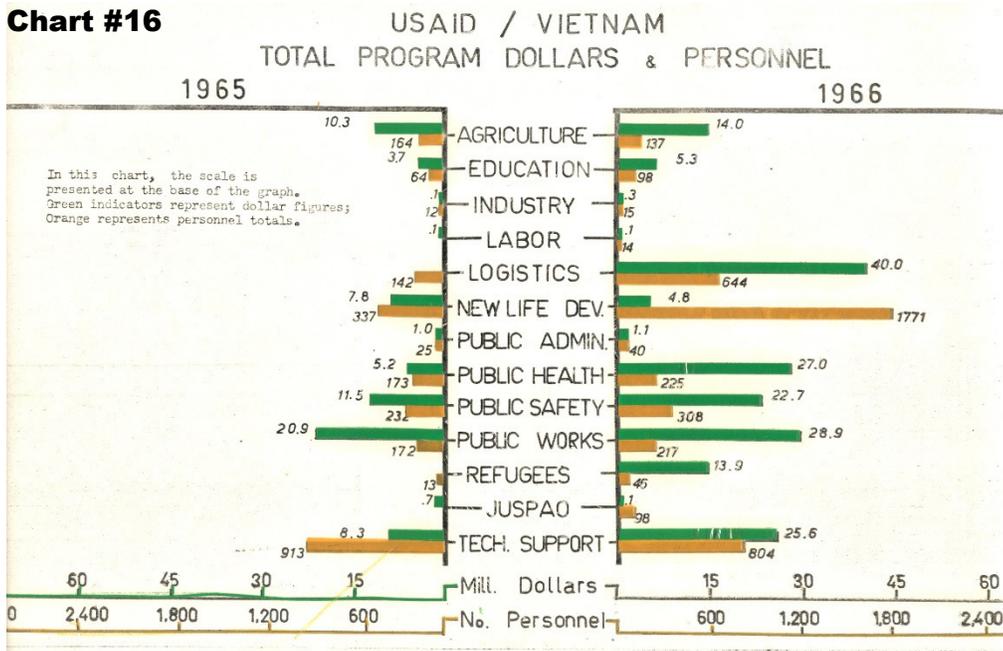
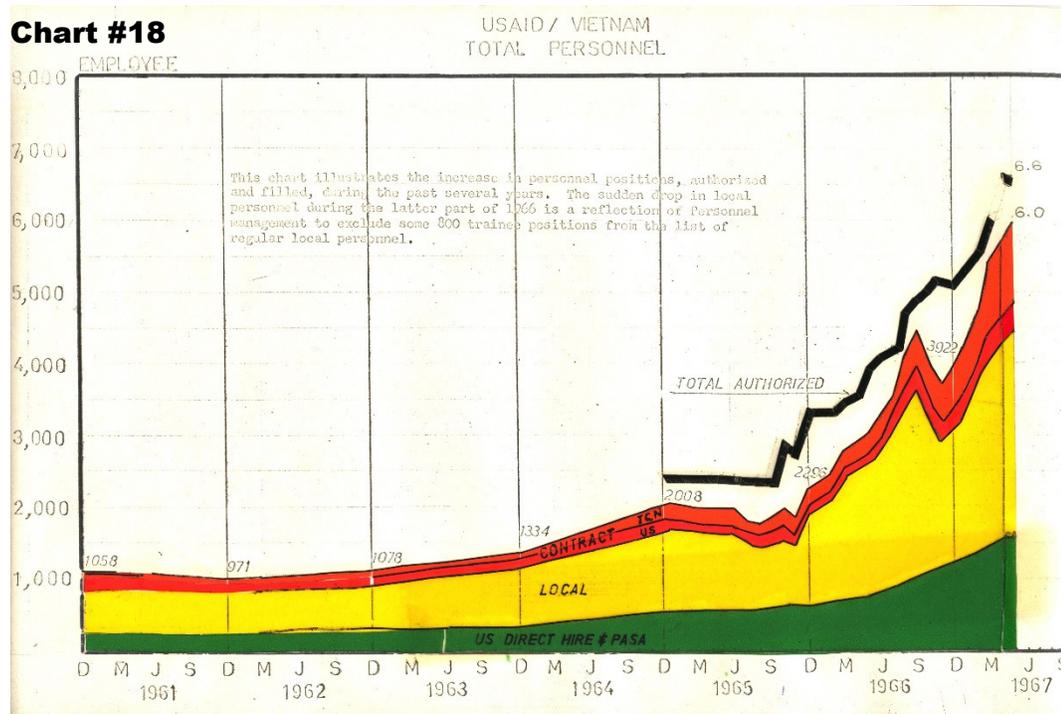


Chart #18 shows the total U.S. personnel that were at work in Vietnam for the United States Government.



This shows the dramatic increase in personnel that we brought over to Vietnam. Similar to the construction program of the military, this also imposed a burden on the economy that had to be offset. You can see the authorized personnel rising sharply from '65 on up. This also measures the number of personnel that were coming into Viet Nam; the total went from something like 2000, up to something like 6000, all told, including U.S. contract personnel and Vietnamese employees. The U.S. is represented on the bottom wedge, and then the locals are the next big slice.

So, I would say in summary, again this shows the burden we placed on the Vietnamese by contesting for the use of scarce resources—human and material—to carry out our projects and construction. Even so, we kept the economy pretty much under control over that period of time.

Breisetsh: Can you say, in very general terms, what happens in the years immediately following your time there, when things really go...?

Wehrle: The economy generally gets much better. But I have never researched it, so I can't really answer your question.

Breiseth: All right. Besides the kind of disagreements you had with Killen over rice, did you find yourself swimming upstream on the policy issues with any of your major superiors, either on the military side or on the ambassadorial side?

Wehrle: Well, I certainly didn't interject myself very much on the military side, and I wouldn't want to suggest that I did.

Breiseth: No, but did they attempt to have an impact on the economic side?

Wehrle: Well, they had a tremendous impact on the economic side through construction, but I had no impact on their impact. In other words, I didn't have anything to say about what that was. They decided what was necessary. Once the president gave the approval for so many thousands of troops, and they arrived, we simply had to deal with their economic impact on the community. The second major impact was that both the U.S. military and our USAID economic program contested for controlling policy in the rural pacification program. Generally the military view was dominant. There was bitter controversy over "free fire zones" where the U.S. military advised all civilians to leave the area so the military could use artillery and bombing anywhere in the designated region. This caused thousands of civilians to flee and become refugees. Many of us felt that causing Vietnamese peasants to leave their ancestral homes and graves was no way to "win the hearts and minds" of the rural people. Most of us on the civilian side felt strongly about getting pacification right, but could argue our case only at lower levels. At top levels generally the military determined the policy. People like John Vann carried the message forcefully, but it never was accepted by higher echelons in our government.

In terms of policy—and I think this was a blessing for myself and for all of our staff—we generally received very good support from both the director, when Don MacDonald came, and from the ambassador, which made an enormous difference. When there was weak leadership in the USAID, then it's much harder to work because you get crosscutting currents all the time. But once leadership is unified in Saigon, all works well. The big complaints were always with Washington. Don't do so much; don't ask us to do so much; we're drowning out here. You know, the other part would be, Washington would say get a tax increase of so much; get a tax increase on this; get a tax increase on that. And, as I said, there we had lots of disputes. And with the Vietnamese government, it was often so weak that they couldn't do anything. They were so involved in other stuff, and a lot of it was corruption. It was sad, but you had to make judgments on what you can do. That's one of the hardest parts of these jobs, is deciding how much you can push a government and still have effective relations with them and get along from day to day.

Breiseth: I want to make some summary comments. Roy's intention is to share the documents that he has, as part of an archive that goes along with this oral history. And I would just say, by way

of anticipation, I have read two memos that he wrote in the last year he was there, that are crinkling with good advice and analysis of what were some of the real tension points for the United States government to consider, as between the military and the economic civil part of the responsibility. They are just superb, and for people who read the transcript of this interview, they will bring almost everything that he's talked about into sharp focus, as he is preparing to leave Vietnam. I think you will realize what a remarkable servant Roy Wehrle was for our government and for the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, at this period.

So, let me take this opportunity to thank Roy for what has been a remarkable journey for me, through this pivotal period in a war that was of enormous consequence to this country. There's a kind of pre-Vietnam War and post-Vietnam War America. Roy was kind of right in the middle of the warm-up to the real collapse of our efforts in Vietnam that so affected our domestic politics, as well as our approach to military adventures after this war was over. So, let me turn it over to you for any final comments.

Wehrle: I would like to add two points to what we've talked about. The first is a very heartfelt recognition of all those people in Vietnam, on the United States' side and on the Vietnamese side, many of which, on the Vietnamese side, after the collapse, paid with their lives or paid with years and years of confinement in detention camps. I've known some of those. I've talked to them, and their life was terrible, just awful. They paid their price for having supported both their country and the United States.

The second point I would like to make is to thank the many dedicated Americans who worked tirelessly and selflessly to bring our American mission to success, not least of which were the soldiers who served and suffered, but especially those who paid the ultimate price for all of us and our country.

Breiseth: The Vietnamese or Americans?

Wehrle: Americans. Americans all over the country, out in the provinces; they worked so hard and gave everything they had for what they believed in, our cause. It didn't turn out the way we hoped, but we should never forget their self-sacrificing service they gave to our country.

When I was bitterly discouraged, it was always trips to the countryside seeing Vietnamese and Americans at work together that bucked up my spirits. I saw Vietnamese who were heartened and inspired by the Americans they worked with. I have to tell you, they were not inspired by their own government. Their own government was simply not there in many cases. But a lot of these young Vietnamese were really inspired; they were going to bring a new day to their country, and probably many of those also had to pay a high price for their loyalty to the wrong side.

The other thing I'd like, of course, is to thank and celebrate my own staff and the people in USAID working back in Saigon. Even if their names don't come up, they should get credit for their work of data collection without which we couldn't have done the economic analysis or kept on top of the rice situation. The staff went down the market every week and did the

sampling of prices, which gave us a true indicator of what the price changes were, which the Vietnamese government did not do. So, all these people were wonderful: they worked without complaint, they worked long hours, and they worked under difficult conditions. I sure would hope that all Americans are proud of what they did.

Lastly, I'd like to thank you, Chris Breiseth, my long-time friend, for suggesting this, because I never had any plans to do any of this. I'd long ago forgotten about that episode in my life. You suggested in March of this year that we cover this. You are the historian; I'm not. I said, "Well, okay, if that's a good idea, let's do it." And now we have done it. Thank you, Chris.

Breiseth: You're welcome, and thank you.

(end of interviews)