

Interview with Frank N. Burnet

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

FRANK N. BURNET

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Frank, I wonder if you could give me a little of your background before we get into your career. Where did you come from? Who are you?

BURNET: I hail originally from New York State.

Q: Upstate?

BURNET: Pretty much downstate. A little town called New Rochelle, New York, which gave rise to that old song. Stayed there my early years until I went off to college.

Q: Where did you go to college?

BURNET: Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. This of course was 1939. I was able to finish up by virtue of joining the Enlisted Reserve and skipping my last semester and graduated, actually, in June 1943. By that time I was already in the military and off to World War II.

Q: What were you doing in the military?

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BURNET: I was an enlisted man in the Air Corps. Had six months in the US, training, and then went off to Italy for two years. There I joined one of the two American Army Air Corps fighter groups which flew the British Spitfire. I joined the 31st Fighter group in Naples, Italy in October 1943 and stayed with it through the Volturno and Anzio campaigns. Eventually we switched over to different aircraft, the American-made P-51 Mustang, and moved to the Adriatic coast to provide long range bomber escort.

I was lucky when the war ended. We were being transferred from the European theater to the Pacific. The war ended in August, '45, and at that point we were about to land in Boston, so I was discharged almost immediately.

I worked for a couple of years in New York City for an investment advisory company (Moody's Investors Service). I'd always had in the back of my mind the Foreign Service, so eventually I took the exam in '48. Passed it and passed the oral. The Department didn't have any money for a while, and I had to wait a couple of years before I was commissioned, but the Department offered me an assignment as a Diplomatic Courier and for a year I traveled all over Latin America, Europe and Africa. I was finally sworn into the Foreign Service in December, 1950.

Q: Did you get any training when you came into the Foreign Service? Were you in a group, or did they sort of throw you out?

BURNET: I had the usual basic officer's training course, a three-month course.

Q: Could you give me an idea of who these people were who came into the Foreign Service in that group, characterize them?

BURNET: I think in general they were pretty much my age, maybe running a little bit younger, two or three years.

Q: So you were about what, twenty-...?

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BURNET: It started in 1950, so I was 29. Most of them, I would say, had been in World War II. Many of whom had spent the years after they had done their military service getting a graduate degree. Most seemed to have had an interest in the Foreign Service, and like I did took the exam and passed it.

I remember the day I took my oral examination, I was number two on the list that day which was the first day for orals in 1948. I guess BEX had called us alphabetically because Harry Barnes was before me, and he did very well.

Q: Harry Barnes later was Director General of the Foreign Service and Ambassador to India.

BURNET: That's right. We were an eager bunch of guys.

Q: What were your motivations? Was this a job? Was this a mission?

BURNET: You mean my feelings about being...?

Q: Yes, your feelings, and perhaps what you think the other ones' were. How did they feel about being Foreign Service officers?

BURNET: You know, I think there was a very healthy feeling of competition, that everybody wanted to do as well as he could do. And we realized what we were up against: we were going to go God-knows-where, anywhere in the world and we were going to have to put up with some difficult times and places, and who knew what demands would be made of us? But we were proud and ready for the challenge.

So I think we were anxious to learn as much as we could about Foreign Service in this course. And I think it was a very stimulating experience for me and for everybody. Very well run in those days, too, even though the old FSI used to be in what was formerly an

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old brick apartment house on C Street where New State now is. So it was pretty grim surroundings but that didn't make any difference, really. It was the spirit of the group.

Q: Your first posting was to Manila. You went there in '51 until '54.

BURNET: March of '51 until February '54.

Q: What were you doing?

BURNET: Well, this was a routine kind of basic training assignment for me. It started out in the consular section. And what could be more basic, working on citizenship matters.

Q: Particularly in the Philippines, and particularly in those days when we were sort of cleaning up.

BURNET: It was still physically kind of beat up and was to remain so for some time. And of course we had all of the legacies of an American presence in the Philippines since the Spanish-American War, 1898-99. And not only did you have American soldiery who had been there, but you had the great influx into the Philippines at the turn of the century of American teachers of English. They were recruited largely from the Midwest. Many of those people who came, particularly the men, stayed there, married (and some did not), and raised families, which produced all kinds of complicated citizenship problems. It was not easy, but applying our citizenship laws was a challenge for a new FSO. I enjoyed it.

Q: So your contact was a positive one as far as how you felt.

BURNET: Very positive, I think, and I enjoyed making friends with a good many Filipinos.

Q: Did you have any contact at all with Ambassador Spruance?

BURNET: Yes, yes I did. He was one of my first Ambassadors.

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Q: He was an Admiral, of course, during World War II, a famous one.

BURNET: That's right.

Q: He was the victor of Midway, wasn't he?

BURNET: Yes. He was a joy to work for. We had a very hard-charging Ambassador before him.

Q: Who was that?

BURNET: I can't think of him at the moment. Spruance was really a wonderful guy to work for. I will never forget...

Q: Myron Cowen.

BURNET: Cowen, yes; he was a political appointee. Anyway, as a junior officer (and I couldn't have been more junior) I didn't see much of him; he was in another world completely.

But Spruance was totally different. Here was someone who had already made his career and he was still working for the US, trying to be helpful as an Ambassador to the Philippines.

Later on, when I got out of the consular section and was in the political section for a year, I did have some direct contacts with him.

I remember when I had to go down to his office with a piece of paper or something, I would go down there and inform the secretary that I had to see him on such and such, and she would let him know that Frank Burnet was here to see him. And I could see through a little window that was in his office, he said, "Oh yes." He nodded his head. (Very distinguished looking man. Not very tall, and rather slight. But very thoughtful and soft-spoken.) And as I

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looked I would catch sight of him getting up from his desk, going over, putting on his jacket to receive me.

So I went into his office. He didn't sit down. He would greet me and say: What's on your mind? or What is it? And then I would start to tell him what the problem was. And we walked back and forth, as if he were on the bridge of his ship. And he'd say, "Yes, yes, yes. I think we should do that. Yes, yes." Pretty soon the interview was over. He went back to his desk, and I went out the door. And I guess he took his coat off!

So he made a very strong impression on me. I enjoyed that brief association. He and Mrs. Spruance were very kind to my wife, Mary, and me (then my fiancée) as they gave us a reception at the Residence in honor of our forthcoming marriage (in Manila in February 1953).

Q: What was your impression of the Philippines? And not only just your impression, but the junior officers. How did you look upon this? It was newly independent, yet America had tremendous influence. Did you see this as a democracy that was going to go anywhere? Did you think, "Oh my God."?

BURNET: It was a great mix of feelings. You couldn't help but admire the people. But on the other hand (coming out of the United States this was the first time that I'd been in Asia), you couldn't help feeling how disorganized it was and how irrational things seemed. I think that the other junior officers too often stressed the latter.

Of course you had to make allowances. There had been a very bitter war. Bitter for the Philippines, bitter for Manila, which was still badly beaten up. But yet they were so friendly, so outgoing that you couldn't help feeling that this country with our help really had a future.

It was a rich country which seemed to me to be highly endowed in raw materials and so on. There should be a place for it. But there were negatives. There were too many guns around and they were used too often to settle scores. There was also the Hukbalahap

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problem and incipient revolution in the bush with overtures of class conflict and anti-Americanism.

Q: These were the guerrillas.

BURNET: These were the so-called Leftist, Marxist guerrillas of that era. I think they were pretty much the home-grown variety, but it was something you had to think about. What were the causes? I began to think that maybe we were not as anti-colonial as we thought we were.

I remember the week before I arrived, two Americans who had started a dairy farm, were shot and killed just about 20 or 30 miles outside of Manila near the road to Clark Field. And this would happen from time to time, so you had to be careful about moving around. Not so much in the daytime, but certainly at night outside the city of Manila. For instance, you were advised not to travel by road from Manila to Clark Field (about 40 miles) in the afternoon and evening hours.

So it was a mix of feelings. But, I enjoyed it. I was of course single for most of those days, and there was a large group of single Americans working in the embassy, and we all had a pretty good time. Including the young lady who was to become my wife, Mary McDevitt.

Q: Well then you went, really for just a very short time, to Paris, didn't you?

BURNET: Yes, after Manila, just a short assignment.

Let me go back a moment in my career. When I was in the basic officer's training course, I was drafted into sort of an experimental Chinese language course.

I don't know whether you know Sollenberger. He used to be the head of the FSI. Anyway, he had a deep China background, and he had gotten some oriental linguists together

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to teach a course in a dialect of Chinese, which was a southern Chinese dialect, not Cantonese but the Amoy Hakka dialect.

Anyway, I did this five days a week for six weeks. And so, without any written materials, we had all of this spoken Chinese thrown at us, and we learned a certain amount of it.

In my case, the theory behind drafting me was that this dialect of Chinese is the one spoken by overseas Chinese in the Philippines. So I had that background. And Sollenberger and Nick Bodman (the linguist) encouraged me, at the end of that six weeks, to apply for long-term training in Mandarin, which I did do later on. So I had applied for it, and six months after I arrived in Paris, this approval came through. After the loss of China mainland in 1949, the new Chinese language school was organized in 1955, and I went to Taiwan with the first group to attend this school.

Q: Could you describe a bit about how this first group that you were with felt about China and all. What did you expect when you were doing this?

BURNET: Well, let's see this was way back in 1955. When I was finally brought back from Paris, it was the end of '54, and the course started in January '55, as I remember.

We were a small group, six or eight of us, and we all thought it was possible, within five years, maybe, at the most, ten years, China would be opening up again. (And of course it was far from that. Our time scale was off by at least ten or 15 years.) So we were all enthusiastic.

Most of us did not have any background in China. We were sort of starting out fresh. We realized that whereas you could study many Oriental languages which would have very little applicability outside of the country which speaks them, but studying Chinese could prove useful almost anywhere in the world. That's indeed the way it turned out.

Q: In the first place, it was Mandarin, is that right?

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BURNET: Yes.

Q: How did you feel, because you hear about all these different dialects, and people in the south don't speak Mandarin and all that. Was that a bone of contention with the officers who were being trained or not?

BURNET: No, this is what you would want to do, because Mandarin is the official or national language. Any Chinese with any education is a speaker of Mandarin. It is the lingua franca of all of China, so that wherever you run into Chinese people you can turn on the Mandarin and you can make yourself known and feel comfortable doing it. Also, those Chinese who are not native-speakers of Mandarin look up to anybody who speaks the national language, so we automatically, if undeservedly, got their immediate attention and respect.

Q: Your first assignment then was where and when?

BURNET: Following the language training?

Q: Yes. Could you explain a little, what did the language training consist of?

BURNET: We started off. In Washington, about three months of really basic Chinese, learning the patterns of the language.

But, when we were sent out to Taiwan to this small town in the center of Taiwan, called Taichung, where the American Language School was set up (this was the very first class), we spent about six hours a day in classroom work and two or three hours at home at night.

The drill, of course, in classroom in those early months, was largely spoken. But, at a fairly early stage at the language school we started learning Chinese characters. And that took an awful lot of just bone-work, just memorization, and doing an awful lot of writing of characters over and over again, like a child.

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The FSI system which we used is to try to replicate what a child does when he learns the spoken and written languages, by repetition, by “internalizing” sentence patterns and through drills. An awful lot of class work was involved in drills. It was sort of fun. We had five or six people in the class. You have, I'm sure, been exposed to this.

Q: I went to the Army Language School for a year, taking Russian.

BURNET: So you know the method that's used. It's the drill method, the basic sentence method.

You have to stay on your toes. Because, if you've got a good instructor he goes right around the room, sometimes not even in order, taking a sentence pattern through a substitution drill, and if you haven't paid attention to what the guy before you has said, you could be quite embarrassed if you forgot — “What was that, sir? What were we doing?” So you have to stay alert.

Q: How did you feel when you came out? Did you feel pretty good about the grasp you had of it?

BURNET: I felt very good about it. I think that they had done a good job in training us to use both social and political Chinese. We were able to do our job.

Q: Your first post was then to Bangkok from '57 to '59. What were you doing there?

BURNET: I was in the political section, and we had an assignment there which was called the Chinese Language Officer slot. There had been several incarnations before me.

So my job was to get in touch with the local Chinese communities. Something that I very quickly got into, because my predecessor was being given a number of farewell entertainments by members of the Chinese community, and those were usually large affairs.

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I remember when I got to Bangkok, it was six, seven, eight nights in row, feting my predecessor's departure and my arrival. And, as you know, at these Chinese affairs there's an awful lot of drinking and eating.

One thing you'll have to say about the Chinese is that they don't believe in drinking without eating, so that nobody really gets into trouble. But you have to have a cast iron stomach for all of the ganbei-ing, the chug-a-lugging of warmed rice wine—or even Scotch—that you'd do.

It was kind of hard on me physically, but I quickly got to know who the leaders were in the Chinese community.

Q: What was the importance of the Chinese community in Thailand to us?

BURNET: You see, this was in the period of the Cold War. And Southeast Asia and Thailand, being among the dominoes, we were interested in at least keeping the status quo.

We were worried about the Chinese community. We thought that this was a group of people who could easily be used by the mother country for subversion, in all kinds of ways, to bring about a change of allegiance in this part of the world. And we were there to try to see that Southeast Asia would hold together.

So we were interested in the way China, the mainland, Beijing, was working on the Chinese community to make some headway with them. Taiwan, on its part, was trying to do a little bit. And our job was largely to try to work with those Chinese who were more or less favorably disposed to us and keep them in our camp. So we had to know them, know what was going on, see who was making the inroads and to what effect, and report this back to Washington.

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Q: Well, how did you view the Chinese community there? Was it a strictly business-type community, really had very little connection with the Thai community, and did it play much of a role in Thailand?

BURNET: It played a very large role. All of the Chinese, even the formal community leadership, were deeply involved in business, and deeply involved with Thai Government officials.

They sort of wore two hats you could say: they had their Thai hat and their Chinese hat. I think the bigger and the fancier hat was the Thai hat, because this was where all their money was made.

All the Chinese knew each other and they monopolized trade. They were also connected by networks all the way back to China. There was a symbiotic relationship between the Thai and the Chinese as they needed each other.

The Chinese, being the superior businessmen, knew how to do business with one another, but they all had partners or associates who were Thai. So they could do business with one another in a way which really had nothing to do with the formal Chinese organization but be protected from arbitrary acts of the Thai Government.

But yet it was in the Chinese associations, the communities, that you got to know these people. My language and area training gave me easy entrance into that, but you had to know both sides of these Chinese leaders' lives.

Q: Well, did you feel at the time that the Peoples Republic of China, the Communist Chinese were making serious inroads into this group one way or another?

BURNET: They really weren't. There were not too many positive signs that they had any great effect on the general Chinese population. But yet you never knew for sure which way they were going. There was always the fear that they could get an inroad, maybe take over

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a newspaper or a Chinese school, so that we weren't too comfortable-feeling. Washington put a lot of time and effort into devising programs to keep the overseas Chinese lined up with the free world. But the attitude of the Thai Government was by far the most important factor in determining their loyalty.

Q: Well how did the political section view the stability of the Thai government? We're talking now from '57 to '59.

BURNET: Well of course when I arrived it was very unstable, because you had a very strong and powerful leader, who was long since past his peak, Pibul Songgram. And you had younger people coming up in the military, more ambitious and very powerful in the number of troops they commanded.

About two months after I got there, there was a coup (called a "coup de repos" because it was peaceful) which overthrew Pibul, and Marshal Sarit and his group came in. So there wasn't a feeling of stability when I arrived. There was a very definite feeling that a coup was coming, that there were going to be big changes in the works. So we were very anxious to report this to Washington.

There was a problem in that the then-Ambassador, having been there almost two years by that time, had become very close to Pibul.

Q: Who was that?

BURNET: This was Max Bishop. I remember one of the first things that I heard when I arrived in the political section was: Look, we've got a problem. We can't really report what's going on, because the Ambassador won't approve any reporting which is critical of Pibul or suggests he's on the way out.

The way we were to get out the story of what was going on in Bangkok and elsewhere in Thailand was to write memcons, because no one interfered with getting your memcons

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back to Washington. So the chief of our political section said, "I want you to get out lots of memcons and get the word across as to what's going on."

Q: The idea of a memcon, you're making no judgment. This is, you're talking to somebody, this person said we've got a problem here, and so you're just reporting the facts, ma'am, type of thing.

BURNET: It's legitimate reporting; however you hoped that there were things said in these conversations that would obviously lead to a conclusion of some sort.

Q: And you would be picking the people, too, to some extent.

BURNET: Oh, yes. You picked them, and then of course you knew what you wanted to ask them. So you pointed them in the direction, perhaps, where you were seeking information.

Q: Well now, often when you have an Ambassador who you feel has gone so committed to almost one side as you see another situation, there is not only the memcon route, there are other ways. When the desk officer comes to visit, or... Did you find there was much of this going on, too? Were people going on home leave and would...?

BURNET: You know, I don't remember that there was much contact back and forth in those days. I don't know just why there wasn't. I remember the chief of the political section had just returned from home leave, and... But still things were very unsettled in Bangkok. We were all concerned about what was going to happen, although in the event it went fine.

A continuing embarrassment for the political section was that up to the moment Pibul fled Bangkok in his sports car (to Cambodia) we could not send any reporting cables to Washington. By that time we should have sent many "Flash" cables! Finally, the Ambassador sent one which said simply, "Trust Department has seen reporting in other channels." A further irony was that a prominent US-financed facility in Bangkok—widely

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believed by the Thai press to be a CIA activity—was attacked and wrecked by elements of Sarit's coup group. This was because it was a symbol of American support to the national police which was led by Sarit's arch-rival for power, Colonel Phao.

Q: How about when Sarit came in. Did that make much of a difference?

BURNET: Well, it certainly did. The Ambassador at that time realized (I think he realized) that he had made a mistake in not giving us a little more head in our reporting. So there was really no problem after that. Of course it was a totally new situation. There was lots of work for everybody to do to get to know the new crew. So we had a free hand. It was not long before Bishop was replaced by U. Alexis Johnson.

Q: How did you view Sarit and company when they came in?

BURNET: I think we had no particular animus against him. And we were certainly disposed to burrow in and to get to know him and the people behind him. Of course the Chinese were doing a lot of shifting of ground in the same way. I was interested to see how the Chinese were viewing Sarit, and how they were making their accommodations and so on. So it all fit. Every Thai leader certainly had his Chinese who associated with him, a whole group of people who had sort of made his money for him. The new military leadership were also involved heavily in business and had their Chinese associates.

Q: You left there in 1959 and you came back. What did you do when you came back?

BURNET: I went to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) and eventually got assigned to work on Korea, which I knew nothing about. Korea, in time, became a very interesting situation, because of the fact that in the spring of 1960 was the overthrow of Syngman Rhee. So there was a lot of demand for intelligence on Korea in those days. That was very interesting and I enjoyed that.

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Q: Did you have the feeling that there was sort of a major establishment in Washington, particularly the military but maybe others, that had put their money on Syngman Rhee? Or did you have the feeling that everybody was sort of glad to see him go? He'd been a thorn in our side.

BURNET: I think it was a little bit of both. But I think that the group that saw a future for Syngman Rhee was dwindling and was definitely on the wane. There was a feeling afoot that we've really had it with Syngman Rhee, and it is high time for him to get off the stage and make way for somebody who was not as blind and hidebound as he was. In general, I think that we welcomed that change in leadership.

Q: I realize this is going way back, but basically Syngman Rhee was put out because of student revolts.

BURNET: It's very interesting that you should mention that, because I have often thought that it was the Korean students who really kicked off the decade of the '60s by taking matters into their own hands. You look around, in the years before that, and there really isn't much revolt there. But the Koreans, in April of '60, really did it. And they kicked off the whole decade of the '60s and a lot longer even.

Q: Because I saw Korea two times. I was there in 1952 as an airman in the Air Force, just an enlisted man, and it was leveled. And I came back in '76, and Seoul was a bustling metropolis. The whole country was just booming, and it has continued to do that. And it was the '60s that did it, because it was considered a basket case before that. I realize we're looking back at a very small time, but was there any feeling that this was potentially going to really be something, or was it thought that this was going to be sort of a vassal state of the United States and a problem from now until eternity?

BURNET: Boy, in those days we certainly had no idea that Korea would become one of the four tigers as it has become today. I would suppose that we were more inclined to think

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that it would be sort of an American dependency than anything else. I thought, perhaps from my Philippine experience, that it would become another Philippines. And that's about as much as I thought about it.

Q: Well then you moved from there to the Far East Bureau. Was the division called the Bureau of the Far East then? When did you move out of INR? I have you going as Staff Assistant to Governor Harriman in the Far East from '61 to '63.

BURNET: Yes, I went to the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. We then called it that instead of East Asia and Pacific as it's now called... Jeff Parsons was Assistant Secretary. Dick Ericson, who was sort of a chief of mine in INR, had become his Staff Assistant. In those days, the Assistant Secretaries had only one Staff Assistant, as opposed to today when they have several. He told me that there would be a vacancy after Jeff Parsons was replaced by Walter McConaughy. Then Dick went off to become a special assistant in one of the Deputy Secretary offices. And so there was a vacancy there, and he said, "How would you like to be Staff Assistant for Walter McConaughy?"

And I said, "Sure."

So I went and had an interview and eventually got the job. And then Averell Harriman replaced McConaughy. I was there for the two years that Averell Harriman was the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs.

Q: In two of our interviews we discussed from two points of view the situation in Korea in '61. I have an interview with Marshall Green in which he talks about being left without instructions of what to do when there was a coup that overthrew the government that succeeded Syngman Rhee. It was a democratic government, and Park Chung Hee took over. Then we have an interview with Donald McDonald, who was the Korean desk officer, and talking about, as it was termed, almost the near-paralysis of the Bureau of Far Eastern

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Affairs about what to do to our man in Seoul when there was a rapidly changing situation. How did you see it?

BURNET: I, of course, was kind of a little bit off on the side there, but I was reading all of this traffic back and forth. And I had the feeling that Seoul, or rather the Charg# or whoever was writing the cables, felt that they were kind of left a little bit high and dry.

Q: That was Marshall Green who was Charg#, because actually McConaughy had gone back to Washington and had not been replaced. Sam Berger eventually was sent out there.

BURNET: That's right. I had forgotten that. I think there was sort of a softness in the leadership back in the Department. I can't give any specifics, though.

Q: I was wondering whether you had any feeling for this initial period, because the Kennedy Administration had just taken over, and it was often at that time sort of the Foreign Service contingent was waiting to find out what their new masters want. And it was unclear to begin with, because Harriman was Ambassador-at-Large, or was not in charge of Far Eastern Affairs at that first point.

BURNET: No, but he was heading the negotiations going on in Geneva over Laos. He left Bill Sullivan in charge [Only a few months before the Governor had rather suddenly made Sullivan his deputy chief of delegation, replacing John Steeves. We heard that the Governor was very displeased when told that Steeves had given the Soviets a tongue-lashing when he was Acting Head in Harriman's absence.] and came back to become Assistant Secretary in FE. Of course I became associated with him when he came aboard since I was in place as staff assistant under Walter McConaughy. McConaughy leaves; John Steeves is Acting for a while; Harriman arrives. I stayed on as the Staff Assistant. By the time Harriman came in I think we were pretty well settled in for this new Administration in Seoul. This was before Park Chung Hee. I can't remember now exactly when. I think it was about a year later, well after Rhee was thrown out, that Park pulled his coup. I'm

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a little bit... [Rhee resigned April 27, 1960. Park took over as acting president March 24, 1962]

Q: I think that was it, but they had a democratic, but a very weak democratic...

BURNET: A civilian, John Myon Chang, headed the new government, I remember.

Q: And then the coup came. And for about three days you had Marshall Green, who was saying, "We support democracy." But he was getting no particular support from Washington, because there were those who thought: Maybe they need a strong military dictatorship there. Although Park Chung Hee was an unknown factor. It was a lack of instructions from Washington. This was before Harriman was in there. It was McConaughy.

BURNET: Yes, it was before.

Q: Did you have any feeling when Harriman came on board, replaced McConaughy, that he was coming in to sort of sweep things clean or to really take charge? How did you feel about this?

BURNET: I think there was a feeling that at last we had somebody who had some political clout, particularly vis-#-vis the White House. So there was this feeling that at last we'll be able to get something accomplished and we will get things done, because Governor Harriman could really see that these things were done. Laos was a bone of contention with the USSR and it was thought that the Governor, knowing the Russians, could work out a compromise.

Although it's funny, this is in the period when we were worried about dominoes falling in Southeast Asia, and the Geneva Conference on Laos (1961-62) was ongoing. Harriman was trying to compromise with the USSR in Geneva and McConaughy was Assistant Secretary with responsibility for the ongoing negotiations. Bill Sullivan, who later on

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became our Ambassador to Laos, used to joke around the Bureau that we had two choices at this point in our history: We could either “falter with Walter or cave with Ave!”

Q: “Walter” being Walter McConaughy.

BURNET: So there was the changeover, you see, between the two. That crack was just for our own amusement. There was a good feeling about Harriman's coming in. Of course he was much too senior a gentleman and, really, to take that job. He had once been Governor of New York and was Secretary of Commerce in Roosevelt's cabinet after all.

Harriman, I think, really thought that here we were in a struggle with the Soviet Union over a little corner of Asia and that he, Harriman, knew the Russians and knew how to deal with them. And he knew how to strike a bargain. So that was his job.

Q: Of course he had been Ambassador during most of World War II.

BURNET: Yes, he said, “The President [Kennedy] has given me this job, because we can get along with the Soviet Union and we need to buy some time in Southeast Asia.” This is what he set out to do. He succeeded, eventually, in achieving modus vivendi with the Soviets on Laos at the Geneva Conference of '62.

Q: There was a tremendous concentration on affairs in Laos in that period, wasn't there?

BURNET: Yes, because this same view of Laos was seen from Moscow. Moscow was putting in a lot of effort, a lot of material, and a lot of people into that scene too. They had a supply line going into Laos, just as we did. They were flying things in: ammunition, equipment, and God knows what. Prestige was engaged on both sides.

Q: At that time why did we think of Laos as being so critical?

BURNET: Well here you had a situation on the periphery of China. This is where the Free World sort of rubbed up against the Communist world. And we thought that if we showed

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any sign of weakness we were going to lose out and bring the domino theory into play. And if we didn't show some strength, stand up to the Russians some way, we were going to lose the whole area.

Q: So it wasn't Laos per se.

BURNET: It was not so much Laos per se. Laos, you might say, was sort of the point man in the group of countries out there.

Q: You were around when people were thinking about things there. How did we see the Soviet Union and China? This would be '62, '63. Did we see them walking in lockstep?

BURNET: I'm afraid we saw them pretty much as a Sino-Soviet Axis. That they were working in lockstep, as you say. That they didn't make many moves without consulting the other, and that there was such a thing as a monolithic view of Communism. So I don't think that we really understood the long adversarial history behind these two great powers.

Q: In a way, after all, we'd gone through the process of Tito, back in '48 or so when Tito broke off. Here was the equivalent to Mao Zedong and a world leader. Obviously a much smaller country, but still. We have a good example of the forces of nationalism coupled with Communism. America has a long history in China, and studies and all. Were people talking? If not in the State Department with the China experts, were we talking about this, or had we sort of been fixated or something?

BURNET: I think we were fixated. I mean here's Governor Harriman, who had an intimate knowledge of the Soviet Union. He loved to talk about his wartime relationship with Stalin. He also knew something about the Chinese, although academically speaking he wasn't an expert on China.

But he had, after all, been there, I think before World War I, maybe, with his father. His father was in the railroad business. So that he was just a young man in that period.

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But I don't remember Harriman's making a pitch that there are good reasons why China and the Soviet Union should not get along together. You know, Stu, they're ancient enemies, they occupy parts of the same huge land space, and so they're natural adversaries. I think that the idea of a Sino-Soviet Axis was very deeply imbedded in our world outlook. It was a convenient way of looking at the problem and it also reflected our fears.

Q: Well this continued, despite all evidence to the contrary, in our whole involvement in Vietnam. Inability to realize the enmity between the Chinese and the Vietnamese, which was the same...

BURNET: That's right. The same phenomenon there. Absolutely the same phenomenon. Despite lots of evidence to the contrary, which had been accumulating since about 1960 when the Soviets pulled their aid, lock, stock, and barrel, out of China. There were beginning signs of friction, but that didn't seem to make any difference. We kept to our view. Once you've made an investment in the opposite view, it's very difficult to change your mind in the middle of this process.

Q: Again, you had taken Chinese studies. Were any of these ideas perking within the Chinese group?

BURNET: They were. And the seeds were certainly planted early on in my Chinese training in the Foreign Service Institute. We were in touch with academics there who said, "Now look, you don't hear much about it now, but there are great sources of friction between China and the Soviet Union."

And they went back into some of the problems in history in the areas along the Manchurian border, where there are great unresolved border issues. The fact that they share the same land mass creates a natural kind of enmity between these two people.

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So we were exposed to these ideas from the very beginning in my Chinese studies. But I'm not so sure that it made a very strong impression on many of us.

Q: What was Harriman's operating style, from your vantage point within the department and elsewhere?

BURNET: He's not a man of words. I think he's pretty much a man of action, in the sense of getting hold of the person who was vital to a particular problem or job that you had to do. Getting the right word to the right person at the right time. He's very good at that. He, of course, is extremely well connected all over Washington.

As part of the job, he made it very plain to me that I was going to be asked to do certain things. He didn't say so in so many words, but when he wanted something done, it was to be done.

And if it meant sneaking a piece of paper outside of the normal chain in the State Department directly to the White House, he'd say, "Frank, I want you to get this over to so and so in the White House right away." And he said, "Don't mention this to anybody in S/S."

Q: "S/S" being the secretariat which normally covers the distribution of papers.

BURNET: The paper chain would go from the Assistant Secretary level on up to the Secretary in S/S, where it would be properly recorded and reproduced, and then sent in proper fashion, in their own sweet time, to the White House.

Well, lots of times in a fast-breaking situation there wasn't enough time for that, so he would ask me to take this over to Brom Smith, or whoever, in the White House right away, and I'd do that.

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But he was frequently on the telephone to the White House, or telephone to God-knows-where. He was quite a doer. Lots of meetings held in his office. We'd have people coming in almost every day from CIA, certainly from AID. In those day, Laos took up an inordinate amount of time. That was the hot spot and involved all of us quite a bit.

Q: Well then, you went to the hot spot, didn't you?

BURNET: Following that, that's right. It was '63. I was coming up for an assignment again. Governor Harriman was moving up to Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and it came clear to me that whoever came in to succeed him would bring in his own staff. So it was a natural time for me to go. I was interested in going back to Asia. I kind of thought that Harriman had the right idea in what he was trying to do. And I thought I'd like to go to Laos. I had the French language background, so that it seemed to me a good assignment.

Q: So you went to Vientiane from '63 to '66. What did you do out there?

BURNET: I went out there to replace Patricia Byrne, who had what we call the ICC slot in the political section. This referred to the International Control Commission, which was established first by the Geneva Accords of 1954, and they were reconstituted following the Geneva Conference of 1961-62 on Laos. That conference attempted to set up a coalition, a tripartite government in Laos, with the Pathet Lao, the neutralists and the right wing. On the ICC you had the military groups or delegations from three countries: Canada, Poland, and India, representing roughly western, eastern and neutral viewpoints.

So Laos, then, was a little piece of territory that was in contention between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the ICC was there to attempt to keep the peace, to be kind of a benign police force. And it was my job to report back to Washington what was going on in the ICC.

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We had a very close relationship with the Canadians. They were sort of “our man” in the triumvirate of the ICC. There was a lot of contact between our Ambassador and the Canadian Commissioner, who was the chief of the Canadian delegation in the ICC.

But I had a lot to do also with the Russians and the Poles. As in 1954, the Russians and the British still had responsibilities and roles as co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference. The British Ambassador in Laos was the representative of the British co-chairman and in the same way the Soviet Ambassador was the representative of the Soviet co-chairman.

So all of these people talked to each other; we saw each other almost every night. Vientiane is a very small place, and you got very familiar with all of the characters. The Beijing Chinese were there too but we were not allowed to have any intercourse with them.

Q: What was your impression of the various delegations, what they were doing and their effectiveness?

BURNET: Oh, sort of a combination of bemusement and interest. It was at times almost funny, because here we all were in this very small town on the muddy banks of the Mekong River, and yet none of us was really as interested in the Lao as we were in each other and what each other was up to and doing.

And so there was a lot of spooking, and trying to keep from being spooked, going on. It had its funny side. It was the grist in all of our mills, and the subject of all of our conversations at cocktail parties and in the post-mortems the following day and so on.

The Poles had a large delegation and worked hard at gaining intelligence from western Embassies. Some of its members appeared to be targeted on some of us. For a long time it was common knowledge in that small town that one of the handsomer Poles had befriended and was perhaps sleeping with the Canadian Commissioner's secretary. One

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day she was sent back to Ottawa very suddenly. Thereafter we irreverently referred to this episode as the Polish “penetration” of the Canadian Delegation.

So it was an interesting time. I enjoyed it. And everybody, I think, more or less felt the same way about it. We all had a job to do, so why not enjoy while we're about it?

Q: You were saying you considered the Canadians sort of our representative. What were they trying to do on this?

BURNET: The Canadians were trying to be a counterweight to the Poles and a sort of a gadfly to the Indians. In their role as the neutral Chair the Indians were fence-sitters, and the less they did the happier they were. Their idea was to keep the warring factions separate, I suppose, and to bring the wisdom of the Indians to bear on this situation which they hoped would allow them, in effect, to prevail over the Lao and the other participants in this international effort. And as long as no one did anything very rash then the ICC could keep the peace out there. But the less the Indians did to stir the pot meant that they could be friendly with all sides. This was the role of the Indians and they played it very well.

The ICC was supposed to investigate and to report to the two Co-chairmen, the UK and the USSR. And of course there were all kinds of reasons why you couldn't investigate anything in Laos. First of all, you had transportation difficulties, and then you had to take care of the people who were going to do the investigation, and then you had to get approval by all sides. But whoever wants to be investigated? So there were endless opportunities for spinning wheels and not doing anything.

We were pushing the Canadians, and the Canadians were pushing the Indians and tugging a tug-of-war with the Poles to try to get something reported. The Canadians worked very hard at this task.

We knew, for instance, that there were North Vietnamese in Laos. They were not supposed to be there. As you know, by the terms of the Geneva Accords of 1962, the

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American and all foreign troops were to get out of Laos, and it was to be neutral and hopefully peaceful so that the three factions with neutralist Premier Prince Souvanna Phouma could run the show.

But the Vietnamese, as we all know, didn't entirely leave Laos. They were certainly in the northern part and the eastern half of Laos. So there were occasions when a Vietnamese soldier would be killed or might even be taken prisoner in the sort of low-level, low-scale kind of warfare that was going on in those days.

We would say, "Aha, here is our chance. Let's get the ICC cranked up and out there to investigate, and we'll prove to the world that the Vietnamese never left Laos." And this would be good for our side. So this was our objective, and the Canadians' too, to try to get the ICC to really investigate something and put the blame where we thought it belonged — on the other side.

Q: You know in retrospect it sounds like a pretty futile exercise, because nobody really cared in a way, did they, as long as this rather peculiar monster that had been created had at least stopped tensions at that particular time from boiling up between the two super powers.

BURNET: That was the main thing. And if the ICC just did that, that was enough, as no one really wanted or expected us to be cited in the press.

But of course this did not mean that full and replete reports of: Who shot John (and I mean everything) didn't have to go back to Washington. Certainly Ambassador Unger took this responsibility very seriously. He reported everything, in extenso, so that if he would have a half hour conversation with the Canadian Commissioner on ICC matters, this would have to be reported back to Washington.

Q: There must have been an awful lot of repetition after awhile.

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BURNET: Oh, there was an awful lot. A lot of talk and very little action. Some of it could be rather amusing. I remember when we got a new Indian Commissioner. Of course the character of the Indian Commissioner was very important, because he was the chairman. Whatever he decided pretty much went.

Well, we got a new Indian: his predecessor we had done very well with, because there was a period when China and India were having a little war on their common border. During that period, we just sailed along. We got good investigations out of the ICC because the Indian Commissioner wanted to strike a blow against the Chinese who were helping the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh. There were a few good reports that were sent back to the Co-chairmen. Of course after these reports went back to the Co-chairmen, they were just really lost. But there was a certain amount of publicity which came out of them, and they made a few good news stories occasionally.

But I was talking about the new Indian Commissioner, Ashoke Badkhamkar. Quite a name, the British Military Attach# used to refer to him good-naturedly as “Bad Jam Jar” all the time.

Anyway, poor Mr. Badkhamkar. Either he was sick when he arrived, or as soon as he saw Vientiane he immediately became ill. And pretty soon he just didn't venture out at all. He became a real bed patient and yet he wasn't sick enough to be sent home. Or at least he didn't want to go home and anyway I think he began to enjoy having the moral edge on us this way.

He would receive official visitors in his bedroom in the one hotel in Vientiane. So that Ambassador Unger, when he had to go see the Indian Commissioner, had to call on him in his bedroom in this hotel. And I went along as the note-taker. Oh, it was really something. He stayed there for about four or five months, a patient, in effect, in his own bedroom.

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Of course as far as the ICC was concerned, it didn't make a hell of a lot of difference. There wasn't an awful lot for him to do, but he made a big thing out of it. Actually, at the end of his assignment (I was still there when he left) he finally let his hair down in one great fling.

It was a party given at the palace in Vientiane, and it was a very stately occasion. He proceeded to get royally drunk. And who rescued him? The Canadians and the Australians came to his rescue and said, "Now, now, now, that's all right, I think we'd better go home now." I mean, here was this very social setting in the royal palace in Vientiane, with the whole diplomatic corps there and all kinds of official and royal Lao and the Indian Commissioner, one of the dignified leaders of the diplomatic community, getting royally plastered. That was funny. Particularly for those of us who in line of duty had been subjected to his hypochondria.

That was the setting as far as the ICC was concerned. A lot of ado about nothing much, but yet a lot of work. It all had to be reported back to Washington.

A related but separate job I had was to look after the interests of one of the first American POW's in Southeast Asia. Charles Debruin was a "kicker" for Air America (he literally kicked sacks of rice or other cargo out of the rear door of a C-47 on air drops to Meo in remote areas) whose plane had been shot down by the Pathet Lao in early 1963. Every month or so I called on our only contact with the "other side," the head of a small unit of Communist Pathet Lao guards encamped in the middle of Vientiane, Sot Phetrasi, to inquire into the well-being of our one American prisoner. Occasionally I handed over food packages which his family in Wisconsin had sent. I always received bland assurances from Sot that Debruin was well but we know now that the prisoners of the Pathet Lao were held under much worse conditions than those of the North Vietnamese. I kept up a regular correspondence with the distraught family for nearly three fruitless years. Later, I learned

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that Debruin had attempted to escape with a fellow prisoner, a Navy pilot, but unfortunately was caught and shot while the pilot, probably being in better physical condition, got away.

Q: You mentioned about Unger reporting things in great detail. How about Sullivan, what was his operating style? This is William H. Sullivan.

BURNET: Well they couldn't be more different in personality and in operating style. Sullivan was sort of a hip-pocket kind of Ambassador, who was never at a loss for words — and I mean the right word at the right time. He was a good man with a bon mot, like Marshall Green.

Sullivan (this was his first post as Ambassador) well knew his own strong points, and he wrote a very good telegram. His telegrams became notorious. Later on in other assignments, I had people tell me how they loved to read Bill's telegrams. Well, Bill wrote the best of them there in Vientiane. And he would write them all out on yellow foolscap — very little editing, very little fretting and fussing over his wording.

Ambassador Unger, on the other hand, carefully crafted each word. Yet he was never at a loss for words, either, because his telegrams went on and on much to the vexation of the Desk Officer who had to read them and respond to them.

But Bill was very succinct. He cut right through to the heart of the matter very quickly, and also had very little difficulty making up his mind which way he wanted to go on a particular issue. He was a lot easier person to work for.

With Ambassador Unger we were often in the office until 6 and 7 o'clock. Whereas under Bill Sullivan, we got out of there at five or earlier and he let it be known that there was no need for us to stick around as long as we had done our work.

Q: Did you get much of a feeling about what we were doing in Vietnam and the connection with Laos?

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BURNET: Of course we shared a lot of the cable traffic with Saigon. We were aware as we moved into '64 and '65 that tension was rising as the American commitment in Vietnam increased; and as we stood up to North Vietnam, we raised our profile in Laos.

Laos was very much a part of the struggle in Vietnam, because I think our strategists thought of it as: This is the other side of Vietnam, this is the country through which most of the Ho Chi Minh Trail passes. And so, if we were going to tighten the noose around North Vietnam, we had to be just as tight in Laos as we were in Vietnam.

It was very interesting from my point of view, because here I was working with the ICC, which was there to keep the peace, but things were changing, things were moving far faster than the ICC had ever imagined. And pretty soon, the ICC became irrelevant.

And my job changed as the ICC became irrelevant. I became Bill Sullivan's first bombing officer, which as we started the air campaign... Actually it started in Laos, I think, a little bit before it started in Vietnam. Bill saw that I was having less and less to do as the war heated up, so that he needed somebody to keep an eye on the military. And we had all kinds of military running around, though they were in mufti.

Q: You're talking about American military.

BURNET: American military, oh yes, just American. We had a huge Air Attach# office, a huge Army Attach# office, and there were a lot of programs and a lot of opportunities for somebody with his own agenda to go off on a tangent. And Bill was mighty good about keeping everybody's nose clean, and keeping them from getting into some of these things. Although there were a lot of things going on that we didn't learn about until they had gone too far.

Q: Can you think of any examples?

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BURNET: Well, you know this was a period when we had a program of building up the Lao Air Force, and we had provided them with the T-28 propeller aircraft. In the beginning the Lao didn't have enough pilots, so we had a program where we used "sheep-dipped" Thai pilots who had previous training in this particular aircraft. And the Thai and the Lao, of course, look much alike. I think the planes were based in Thailand and flown into Vientiane where they loaded bombs and took off on a mission, supposedly as part of a Lao Air Force strike against the insurgents somewhere in Laos. But many of those planes were flown by Thai pilots.

Well, I learned that some of our over-eager American pilots serving with the Air Attach#'s office would slip themselves into the cockpit of some of these planes, or maybe a different plane, but fly along with the mission.

I told the Ambassador that I thought there was some hanky-panky going on, and he said if he could get the evidence, "I'll get that guy's ass out of here, but quick!"

Because we were still in the period when we were ostensibly observing the rules as far as the Geneva Accords were concerned, we wanted to keep our nose as clean as possible, even though many of the things we were doing were contrary to the Geneva Accords. We were also anxious lest any word of this should get into the press. But I suppose that some of the Air Force Personnel felt they were striking a blow for freedom by such acts of derring-do, no matter what the consequences were for our public posture.

Q: As a bombing officer... You know this became a fancy term in the Foreign Service to have a diplomat actually sort of plotting out missions and all. What did you do?

BURNET: One of the Air Attach#'s jobs was to develop what they called targets. And this involved taking a lot of aerial photography. These photographs would be read out, and people who knew what they were looking at could pick out certain buildings, maybe, or certain areas where they felt they could see Vietnamese military activity and so on. They

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would spot these targets all over Laos. And then these would be developed and numbered and catalogued, and kept in reserve for use when strike missions came up, and would be used for briefing the pilots.

Our job, as the Ambassador saw it, was to make sure that US planes did not hit civilian targets, hit civilian populations or anywhere near them. So he wanted somebody on his own staff to check on the targets that the Air Attach#s office produced. I would look at these photographs with targets marked on them that the Air Attach#s personnel had developed and try to make sure that there were no habitations anywhere near them, or any civilian aspect that we wanted to protect, and thus to make sure it was strictly a military target. And as you can imagine, there were many cases where I felt there were signs of civilian activity somewhere nearby.

But the Air Force's job was to try to convince me that no, they had looked at this very carefully and this was purely a military target and could be approved. So I had basically to approve or disapprove the targets as the military developed them in Laos in the name of the Ambassador.

Q: How did you feel, was it that the military, particularly the Air Force, wanted just to go... Did they understand what you were trying to do, and were they trying to put something over on you? Or were you working in conjunction?

BURNET: I felt that it was a game, that they were trying, as much as they could, to get as much by me as they could. Because they were looking for hotter and hotter targets. The Air Force had a way, I felt, of wanting to level everything that was vertical.

I knew there were certain areas that they simply could not get into. And I made it plain to them, I thought, time and again, where the Communists in Laos had their headquarters in Sam Neua, also in a place on the Plaine des Jarres called Khang Khay, and a few other areas, which were sort of sacred to the Communist chieftains and their organization. Also,

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the ICC would officially visit these areas from time to time. The Ambassador felt strongly that we should not get into that, otherwise it might erupt into a much wider war in Laos.

Q: It wasn't just because these were civilian places; these were political centers.

BURNET: Yes, centers of Communist political activity, Pathet Lao activity in Laos. But yet intermixed with them would be a civilian population. So the idea was we simply couldn't get anywhere near them. It would have immediately resulted in heated complaints to the Co-chairmen of the Geneva Accords which we still ostensibly observed, and attendant bad publicity.

Q: Did you feel that sometimes missions were slipped over that you never knew about?

BURNET: Yes, I think there were. I think there probably was a lot going on that I didn't know about.

Q: Because you had to depend on the Air Force to supply you with the data in order to...

BURNET: Well, I had to depend on their good word. It was a kind of a gentleman's agreement, because I had no independent means of checking on these things. So I had to make up my mind based on what these guys were telling me — did I think this guy was telling me the truth? in effect.

Q: This is an interesting study. I hope some day we can do a greater one, and that's the interfacing, or whatever you want to call it, of the military and the State Department at various levels. Did you have the feeling that they were laughing at you? You were the guy who was trying to stop something, whereas yet they had the answer, which was air power, and you were kind of, in a modern term that's used today, a wimp. Not you, personally, but as a State Department person, that you didn't really understand, and you were trying to be too good about something that could only be answered by force.

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BURNET: Yes, I think there was a lot of that present. Yet I felt that because I represented the Ambassador I got a lot of respect. So they were not too brazen about it. I felt more put upon by the working staff, not the Air Attach# himself, who was a great guy.

I'm sure that I could have gone to him and said, "Look, you know, I hear Captain so-and-so flew on a combat mission." And he probably would have stepped on the guy or shipped him out. But it was hard to be sure of your information. And let's not forget the Attach# was under pressure from his headquarters to get results.

The Air Force was wanting to strike a blow to make it look good. The Air Attach# was interested in getting as much accomplished as he could, but yet he had to be very careful not to overstep the mark and incur the wrath of the Ambassador, which would happen occasionally.

Q: A little bit about how things worked. Were you getting any instructions, or at least the Air Force, and were you monitoring them from our military headquarters in Saigon at MACV? Did MACV play much of a role in this bombing business?

BURNET: Well, I think that was quite true as MACV regarded it as all one war. There was also great rivalry between (it seems incredible now) Ambassador Sullivan and General Westmoreland which was reflected mostly in the back and forth of message traffic.

Maybe you've heard of this before, but Bill regarded Laos as sort of his territory. And Westmoreland was wanting to do more and Bill to do more. Bill was very, very watchful and very careful to see that he stayed in control of whatever happened in Laos.

Bill's fallback, of course, was: Well look, you can't do this, because of the Geneva Accords, for one thing, if this thing become public. For another, I can't do anything in Laos, or give my approval to anything, unless I get Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister's, permission.

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And he's got to know about it before this thing happens. So Bill could sort of slow things down with Westmoreland, and Westmoreland would get very frustrated with this treatment.

Q: Was the checking with the Lao authorities a sort of a card that was used more in terms with dealing with the rest of the American military establishment?

BURNET: It was a card.

Q: Did he really do this very much, or was this just something he said?

BURNET: No, Bill actually did it. He would have real conversations with Souvanna, and I think he told the Prime Minister exactly what was up. But at the same time, it was a card that Bill played, and he played it to the hilt, I think. He was very effective. And there was a lot of rivalry, as I said, and joshing going back and forth between General Westmoreland and Ambassador Sullivan.

Q: Wasn't Sullivan called "The American Field Marshal," or something like that?

BURNET: Yes, Westmoreland called him "Field Marshal Sullivan" in cables.

Q: But you were picking up these vibrations then of this rivalry?

BURNET: Oh yes. As a matter of fact, we would have meetings periodically, usually across the river in Thailand, in Udorn. Westmoreland would come up from Saigon, and Sullivan would go across the river, and I would usually go along with him, and Ambassador Graham Martin would come up from Bangkok. And the three heads would get together, and there was lots of joshing and putdowns and carrying on at these sessions.

And I can see Westmoreland shaking his head: We can't win the war this way, or we can't if we don't get some of our troops across the border into the Ho Chi Minh Trail area, etc.

Q: So he wasn't just interested in the bombing, he was interested in putting troops in.

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BURNET: Yes, I think he was also interested in doing more and more on the ground. Of course, my impression was that, slowly, Sullivan had to give way, and so did Souvanna.

I'm sure that Souvanna probably would have said yes to almost anything that Sullivan asked for. But I'm sure there were occasions when he said no, sort of put a hold on whatever the operation was.

So there were two things that we had to consult with the Lao about: there was the air war and then there was the border war, with lots of teams of special forces who were slipping across the border from Vietnam into Laos, and having a very rough time of it. There were heavy in these cross-border operations. Of course all this time the CIA-directed guerilla war against the PL and the North Vietnamese in north Laos was going non-stop.

Q: Why weren't the cross-border operations doing well? Were these American troops?

BURNET: These were usually American-led native forces, tribespeople from the mountainous areas in Vietnam and Laos.

Q: Montagnards, I guess.

BURNET: Montagnards, that's right. One tended to lump them all together as one but they were: Meo, Nungs, and a number of other groups.

Q: Well, why didn't they do well? I mean they would be in their environment and all.

BURNET: It was very rough terrain for whomever was involved. And they were far from any base of supply. They were off on their own for weeks on end. They couldn't use radios and things would go wrong. Resupply missions by air often went awry. And, I don't know, I think that they had some very rough adversaries in the Vietnamese, who had after all been fighting in this area since God-knows-when. They were some of the world's best guerrilla fighters. They had learned well. So it was a very difficult kind of operation going on. Really

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rough. US forces invading Cambodia and GVN forces invading Laos later on found this out.

Q: What about Washington? Were you getting many instructions from Washington on the bombing and all, or were they allowing Sullivan and Westmoreland to pretty well call the shots?

BURNET: Except for major operations, they arranged things between themselves. When Westmoreland really wanted to get something new accomplished in Laos, his route was through CINCPAC to the JCS, and then Secretary of Defense to the Secretary, and the Secretary on back down the line to Sullivan. That's the way it came, or sometimes through Bill Bundy, who was sort of running the show as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. So that's the way it came. Westmoreland eventually got what he wanted.

Just to fast forward on the machine a little bit. After my assignment in Vietnam, I went back to Laos, briefly, in 1970, I checked in with the Ambassador there, who was Mac Godley, [G. McMurtrie Godley] and with our Air Attach#, and I looked at the current photos of some of these old targets. I looked at the towns of Sam Neua and Khang Khay, which were sacrosanct in my day in '66, and '65. I simply didn't recognize them. Absolutely leveled.

So you see the nature of the war had changed and had gradually escalated, until the Air Force was allowed, presumably, to bomb most anything as long as it was in enemy territory.

Q: You left Vientiane then in 1966. How did you feel about what we were doing? Did you think we were ahead, behind, holding our own, or what?

BURNET: I think, holding our own. But in those days I still thought that we were going to come out of it all right. Yet I could see a bit of the hugger-mugger involved, this nasty war going on, in which the Meo and other minority groups were doing most of the dying. In Laos the war was just the reverse of what it was in Vietnam: the guerillas were on our side

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and the North Vietnamese held the LOC's and deployed conventional forces against our friends.

Q: Meo being one of the hill tribes.

BURNET: Tribesmen in Laos. That was the part of the war that the CIA was running. The Meo were getting kind of chewed up. And that war flowed back and forth across the Plain of Jars and surroundings. There was certainly a very frustrating element about it all. But yet I thought eventually we were going to clean it up.

Q: We've talked about relations with the military, how about with the CIA? Did you have much to do with them, and how did you find them operating?

BURNET: In Laos, of course, this was a big operation for CIA, and so we got along very well. I think that they sent some of their best people out there. We never had any real problem. Very little friction.

Upcountry Laos was pretty much the preserve of the CIA, and AID would sort of try to get in there a little bit. But there were certain areas that even people like myself couldn't go in Northern Laos, secret areas where training or whatever was going on.

Even some Congressmen weren't shown a few places there. Although I, in the course of events, saw quite a bit of Northern Laos in the areas where we were operating, escorting Congressmen and so forth. So I felt fairly good over our prospects; yet I had this nagging feeling that it was carrying on too long, bleeding our friends white.

Q: And there didn't seem to be an end.

BURNET: There didn't seem to be an end, a little bit of that feeling.

Q: You came to a really rather unusual assignment, but very pertinent to what you were doing. You were transferred to CINCPAC in Honolulu from 1966 to '67, where you were

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the Deputy Political Advisor. Could you explain what this meant and who were some of the personalities you were dealing with at the time?

BURNET: CINCPAC had a vast military staff. There must have been thousands. I've never been in such a place before. It was kind of a mini-Pentagon. All of the G-numbered staff, the G-1, G-2, G-3, all the way up to G-7, -8 and so on. All presided over by the Commander in Chief Pacific, whose name, at the time I was there, was Ulysses S. Grant Sharp.

I arrived there in 1966, and the air war in Vietnam was in progress. And one of Admiral Sharp's roles was to run the air war for the various staffs back in Washington. He took it very, very seriously.

Of course, I was kind of on the periphery of it, because, after all, I was the Deputy POLAD. But yet I regularly attended the briefing sessions that were held in the big briefing room daily for Admiral Sharp, so that I could see what was on his mind, what he was trying to accomplish, and perhaps finding out what we had accomplished.

You're right. It was more exposure to the counter insurgency type of conflict which I had seen on a smaller scale in Laos. But here is where it was being planned and especially the intensive air campaign in North Vietnam. And the interface, I think, between the diplomatic and the military was something to be observed here.

These briefings always included reports on the bombing of North Vietnam. US planes inevitably flew up toward the China border. We had a really good Foreign Service officer, an old-timer, in Hong Kong, whose name escapes me at the moment. I'll think of it in a minute. He was Consul General.

Q: Was it Ed Rice?

BURNET: Yes, Ed Rice, an old China hand.

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Q: He's a real old China hand.

BURNET: He's written a book about Mao Zedong. As a matter of fact, I saw in the recent months he's come out with another one.

In any event, he knew China. And of course he knew the whole history of Korea and what had happened there when US forces wandered too close to the border. So he was, naturally and understandably, concerned that we were getting a little bit too close, too often, to the China border in our air operations over North Vietnam.

And so he would weigh-in, in his messages back to Washington, which always were tagged "CINCPAC for POLAD" or "CINCPAC," so that Admiral Sharp read a good deal of the messages coming out of that part of the world.

And one day, after several of these messages in which Consul General Rice had warned about flying too close, what might happen if there were an incident on the border involving our aircraft, and I suppose Admiral Sharp was under a good deal of pressure from Washington, he said, "God damn it, I hear about all I want to hear from Mr. Rice. You guys who are doing this briefing, now I don't want to hear any more of this stuff. Just keep it out of your briefing." He just laid down the law that he did not appreciate having to take advice from a diplomat at his own briefing. That made quite an impression on me and on members of his staff, too.

I would get a good idea from the back-and-forth between him and his staff at the briefing sessions what his role was, how he saw his role, and what he was trying to do and so on. It was a fascinating assignment.

Q: Who was the Political Advisor at that time?

BURNET: Bob Fearey.

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Q: And how well did he work within this context?

BURNET: He worked very well indeed. I think Fearey enjoyed this. He saw his role as being very close to the Admiral and told me when I first arrived there that an awful lot of the work was going to be shoved off on me, because he, Bob, had to devote himself almost exclusively to the needs of the Admiral. And whenever the Admiral took these long trips through East Asia, he had to go with him, and that I would have to run the office by myself then.

There is an awful lot of staff work that goes on in a place like that. Every operation had to be planned as a staff paper, each one having at least two officers to bird-dog it. They had to get a chop from all the offices concerned. One of the chops was almost always the POLAD chop, particularly if the operation or project impinged upon an Asian country.

So many papers, and these included some of the intelligence missions that we were running in Korea, came across my desk. I would have two guys from the staff sit down in my office with their piece of paper, and their one job was to push that piece of paper through each office concerned. They had to tell me what the paper was about, what the operation was about, what it was trying to accomplish and so on. As I think about it I remember putting my chop, my OKAY, on the ill-fated mission of the USS Pueblo.

And I was supposed to see how it would fit as far as our foreign relations were concerned in that part of the world, whether there would be any problems with countries that we had good relations with and so on. That kept me pretty busy. There was a lot of this paperwork, beside, I was running around to meetings and attending briefings.

Q: You say Sharp was focusing on the air war. Talking about a worm's eye view, I was the equivalent to a Corporal in the Air Force in Korea during the war there. And actually my job was to listen to Soviet Air Force radio transmissions during the Korean War. But I was a college graduate, I looked at this appendage, which is Korea, with high mountains,

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not much forest, the American Air Force had complete dominance over the thing and yet was unable to stop some very massive Chinese armies from being resupplied. And, as a Corporal, I said, "Gee, this Air Force really doesn't work very well as an instrument." And having known about the strategic bombing survey in Germany, which showed that the Air Force with all the impression of destruction, German production went up rather than down during this period.

BURNET: And it didn't destroy morale as they hoped it would.

Q: And you saw what we were doing in Laos, and you flew over and you saw this jungle and all. Wasn't everybody saying: "You know, this isn't working."?

BURNET: You just couldn't put that down. The problem came up again and again and again as to how effective we were with our air power. These things made some very deep impressions on me.

I remember how, to go back a moment, in Laos in the early years of the air war, we heard from our Air Attach# and from people who came up from Saigon, again and again, in messages coming out of MACV in Saigon, that what we had to do was to cut a particular LOC as they called it.

Q: Line of communication.

BURNET: Line of communication, Route Number Seven, which comes right straight in from North Vietnam into Northern Laos by the Plaine of Jars. We had a beautiful choke point, they told us, by a little village called on the map, Ban Ken. If we could get permission from Souvanna to bomb that bridge, we would create a choke point. Then the Vietnamese would not be able to bring their supplies and men into Laos, as we would cut their line of supply. It sounded reasonable.

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By 1964 or so the relations between the US and North Vietnam had gotten to the point where we were steadily increasing the pressure. Finally, MACV got an approval to bomb this bridge in the little village of Ban Ken in neutral Laos, which was going to cut the main route from North Vietnam and got permission from Souvanna. So the mission came along.... And Yankee team, or what was it called?

Q: Yankee Station.

BURNET: No, Yankee Station was where the Navy was in the Gulf. But we had another name, this code name misses me at the moment.

Q: Something about Tiger?

BURNET: No, this was before "Tiger Hound," which was a free bombing zone along the Ho Chi Minh trail in the Laos corridor. So they bombed it. They did a pretty good job of bombing this bridge. But do you know that within 12 hours the North Vietnamese trucks were successfully going around it, and within 24 hours they had started to rebuild the bridge. And very soon that LOC was right back in commission again.

That made an indelible impression on me, that air power ain't gonna do it in this part of the world.

Q: It really doesn't do it most places.

BURNET: It didn't do it in Germany. But of course that happened again and again.

Q: But you're really talking to true believers, aren't you, when you're talking about proponents of air power.

BURNET: Absolutely. You haven't convinced them even to this day.

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Q: Well then in POLAD, in the time you were there, were there any incidents that made Admiral Sharp pay more attention to the diplomatic warnings, or were there no responses from China?

BURNET: Fortunately nothing more than an endless series of "serious warnings." I think that Admiral Sharp probably got most of it when he went back to Washington. I'm afraid he didn't get much from us, from the two members of the State Department. Fearey was very, very... As a matter of fact, there was the story going around the staff at CINCPAC that the biggest hawk in the whole staff was Bob Fearey, who was a diplomat who should not have been a hawk but was. Some very responsible members of Admiral Sharp's staff told me they were greatly bothered by this.

Q: This often is the case. We had one interview with somebody who I think served under Sullivan and Godley and was quite unhappy about these... I can't think of his name, he was on the National Security Council at one time, I think.

BURNET: Not Holdridge? But Holdridge had a lot to do with the war in Laos under Kissinger on the NSC.

Q: But anyway who was really unhappy serving under these two men because he felt that they... I just looked it up and I think it was Lindsey Grant, but I'm not sure.

BURNET: He wasn't in Laos.

Q: Well, maybe it wasn't, it was somebody else in our interviews, but who really felt uncomfortable because he felt that diplomats became, and this had been noted other times, often become accessories, almost infatuated as by war, which is true often in Washington, by William Bundy and...

BURNET: You have those who are and those who are not. Those who are seem to forget they are diplomats and often defer to the military. My impression is that a good example

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of those who are would be somebody like U. Alexis Johnson. And somebody who is not — Marshall Green. Marshall Green was very much his own man anyway. I remember attending Foreign Service Day several years ago which featured an address by the new chief of the NSC, Colonel Bud McFarlane. He made a strong pitch for continuing covert operations. A large part of the audience applauded. I noticed Ambassadors Green and Johnson sitting together as they are old friends. Only Ambassador Johnson applauded. But I think a strong case can be made that over the years since WWII, the State Department has not served the country well by its policy of working so closely with the military. In most cases, we would be far better off if the Department had stuck to its own diplomatic, peaceful, proposals for consideration by the White House instead of serving as the handmaiden of the military as we have done so much of the time.

Q: Is there anything else about the relations within CINCPAC? Did you find that there was a difference dealing with the Air Force and the Navy on matters you were concerned with, particularly on the war?

BURNET: Let me go back to Laos. There was a great deal of difference. Most of our difficulties were with the Navy. I don't know what the problems was. Was it training? Was it inadequate briefing? Whatever it was, we had constant problems with Navy aircraft bombing the wrong targets in Laos, and bombing, in particular, one village.

You could almost spit from this village to the Mekong River. And anybody who knows anything about Laos knows that any population living within sight of the Mekong River, certainly, and even beyond that, is in friendly territory. But the Navy planes were forever bombing this friendly town.

And we had to go down there several times to give some compensation to poor villagers who had been bombed by US aircraft. The Navy, as we would say in those days, “screwed up” more often than the Air Force did. So it was a problem with the Navy. I recall that in

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one of his famed cables, Ambassador Sullivan wrote, "Tecumseh weeps..!" referring to several of these Navy screw-ups.

Q: How about in CINCPAC, did you see this?

BURNET: We saw an awful lot of the Navy, but I didn't have that impression. You were asking to what extent Sharp was impressed by or listened to the diplomats. I think that the visitors who came through there, and there were many, I think he gave them a good hearing, and I think he was impressed by them. And of course he read most of the diplomatic cable traffic.

He was always very friendly toward me and didn't show any impatience which he exhibited with his own staff in that one instance that we talked about. My impression is that he wasn't totally out of control as far as civilian control of the military was concerned.

Q: Well, for a Chinese language officer, your specialty... I'm talking about your next assignment. You went to Bien Hoa from 1967 to '69. Didn't you feel you'd had enough of this? Or did you have any choice in the matter?

BURNET: Well, I didn't really like the assignment, for one thing, in CINCPAC. I was there for a year, and it had its difficulties, mostly personal. And, I guess I thought that there was a contribution I could make in Vietnam. They were putting pressure on us, as you know, to go to Vietnam, and there were inducements. So the totality of it convinced me that I should go out there and have that experience. So I went and got to Saigon just a week before Tet.

Q: What happened to you during Tet? This would be Tet, January '68.

BURNET: I got there just before our new year, in December of '67.

Q: Where were you, and what was your experience during Tet?

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BURNET: You know there was a holding hotel for US civilian personnel there, the old Oscar Hotel on Nguyen Hue Street in Saigon. I arrived there with a group of other FSO's who had been in training with me in Washington. We were awaiting assignment. In the meantime, we were sort of getting acquainted with Saigon, going out to see friends, or out to eat, maybe, in a restaurant.

But to get back to Tet. I remember very distinctly in the days before Tet eating in the so-called mess hall, and as we went through the line, seeing notices up on a bulletin board saying: We've received intelligence that there are enemy forces trying to penetrate the area. We expect some activity over Tet, and we should all be very cautious and careful. We all read it, commented a little bit about it, then forgot about it.

Went to bed that night, and I was awakened early in the morning. I don't know whether you know this particular hotel. The Oscar had a wonderful roof on top. You could see the whole city of Saigon.

Q: Yes, I think I used to go to movies up there.

BURNET: Yes, like the Brinks had movies on the roof. I don't know, maybe they did at the Oscar.

Q: Well, maybe not. Maybe it was the Brinks.

BURNET: Well, anyway, it was a great place to see Saigon. Every night you'd see the flares hanging in the sky and an occasional burst of something or other. So we had been up there as usual the end of the evening to see the sunset, talked to one's neighbors, and then retired.

I went to bed and, realizing this was Tet, awakened about two or three in the morning to one hell of a racket. I thought, "Oh, this is just more of the same fireworks going on in celebration of Tet."

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Then I heard it more and more, and it sounded more persistent. And I said, "My God, there's a coup. There's a coup."

So I put some clothes on and went up on the roof. And it seemed like a good part of Saigon was ablaze, with tracers being fired all over the place, and loud explosions — just all hell breaking loose. And I thought to myself, "Coup. No question about it." You see in Laos we had had two full-fledged coups in three years.

Of course I didn't know until the next day what had actually happened. In the morning we watched reinforcements landing by helicopter on the Embassy roof. We were told to stay in quarters. Nevertheless, we slipped out and went up to the Embassy a few blocks away just to see what had gone on. And it was a real mess, really torn apart. I could see where the VC blew the wall and forced entry and got the gist of what had happened from some marines on guard. Were you there in then?

Q: No I wasn't. I came a year later.

BURNET: About a day or two later, I got a telephone call from somebody, I had no idea who he was. He said, "This is John Vann. I need somebody up here in my provinces. Would you like to come up and work for me?" Did you ever meet Vann?

Q: I think I met him very briefly.

BURNET: Well, he talked just like this [in a high-pitched, commanding voice]. And I said, "Sure, I'd love to. I want to get out of here and get to doing something."

He said, "Okay, I'm coming down tomorrow, and I've got an appointment or two in Saigon. I'll see you at such and such a place and we'll get together." So we met and we talked, and we went to his girlfriend's restaurant. Did you read *A Bright Shining Lie*?

Q: Yes, I did.

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BURNET: That's quite a book.

Q: *By Robert Shaplen. [NEIL SHEEHAN]*

BURNET: No. This is *A Bright Shining Lie* by... It's a name like that, but it's not quite the name. He got the...

Q: *Pulitzer Prize.*

BURNET: Yes, and a national book award. In any event, his girlfriend, Lee, was running a restaurant and we went over there and had something to eat. And we agreed that I'd like to work for him and he'd like to have me work for him. So he said, "I'll send my chopper down such and such a date." So he did. Vann was then Deputy for CORDS [CORDS stands for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support. This was a civil-military pacification army formed in November 1966, headed by Ambassador Komer, who was officially "Deputy to COMUSMACV for CORDS."] for Military Region III.

In the midst of all the battle in Saigon going on, air-strikes and all, his chopper flew into the Free World Compound where I met Vann's pilot and, without stopping the engine or the rotors, took off with him for Bien Hoa. What did they call that place where the military headquarters was located in Saigon? Free World Compound? Something like that.

John Vann's usual procedure with a new man was to send him to the four provinces surrounding the province that he was going to be assigned to, to live with the Advisory Teams there for a few days and see what their problems were and so on.

Well, this was the period a few days after Tet. Everybody had just been hit and they were just groggy. Each province I went to was the same story. These guys had just been knocked over by the Tet attack, so they were in kind of rough shape. I heard all of their experiences and learned a lot about this kind of war in a short time. I also learned the

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fellows in these outposts are uncomfortable if you are not carrying a weapon. Later on, I kept an M-1 carbine in the back of my car for only this purpose. I never had to fire it.

Q: Bien Hoa, for the sake of this thing, is located where?

BURNET: It's about 20 miles northwest of Saigon. So I stayed a few days in Bien Hoa, in John Vann's headquarters, and got assigned to the province of Binh Duong, which is still further to the northwest of Bien Hoa, toward the Cambodian border.

I went to four or five provinces around Binh Duong Province, including Loc Ninh Province, which is right up against the Cambodian border.

A good friend of mine, a Foreign Service officer named Tom Barnes, was the Province Senior Advisor (PSA) there. (This is what I was being trained to become, a Province Senior Advisor.) I visited with him for several days.

Tom was an intrepid sort of guy, who was in Saigon at Tet, and he had managed to get back to his own province after Tet broke out. He was a Vietnamese-speaker and he decided that he had to get himself back where his Advisory Team was.

I think he drove. He drove through all of that fighting between Saigon and the Cambodian border. He drove by himself and managed to get back to his own province. It took him several days, but he did it.

Anyway, as I was saying, he's very intrepid. He showed me around his province, including a trip, just the two of us, up to the Michelin plantation, which is a rubber plantation on the Cambodian border. I don't know what he expected to see there, but we just went up there.

We saw absolutely nobody, but yet he had said, "Frank, whenever I take these trips, I just take all my personal ID off of my person. If we get captured, we will pretend we are French and not American. The chances are the VC will then let us go."

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So we got into his Jeep, which I noticed had sandbags on the floor, and drove over terrible roads almost due north of the capital of his province to the Cambodian border. Just to look around.

Of course I thought, "Good God, are we going to get ambushed? Are we going to get blown up by a mine? What's going to happen?"

Well nothing happened. I don't know whether he was testing me, or what, but there was something rather scary about going up that lonely road with not a friend or foe in sight. But I wasn't going to let him get me. That was probably a dumb thing for me to do, but I did it.

I got assigned to Binh Duong and became the Deputy Province Senior Advisor to Colonel Bud Kitts who had been there a year or so. Eventually I got reassigned, after about six months there, to Bien Hoa where I became the Province Senior Advisor.

Q: Well let's talk about Binh Duong a bit. What did you do? You talk about Province Senior and Deputy Senior Advisor, what does this mean?

BURNET: Well, we were running a combined American military and civilian staff comprising an Advisory Team. What we were doing was trying to backstop the Vietnamese provincial military forces and civilian administration. The Vietnamese military's job was, of course, to protect the people of the province. All under the leadership of the Province Chief, who was a Vietnamese military man. Under the Province Chief, you also had all of the usual civil services of government: utilities, transportation, police, welfare, you name it, the whole gamut of services, which people need to survive.

So we were to backstop the provincial military forces and the local government, down to the village level in all areas: security, agriculture, home economics, information programs, even CIA. We had all these. It was a polyglot mix of personnel from various agencies. In

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Binh Duong I worked for the PSA who was a full Colonel. In Bien Hoa, I was the PSA and my deputy was a Lt. Colonel. This was part of Vann's idea to interlard civilian and military.

With the American input, particularly material input, the idea was to try to turn the situation around, provide some security in the villages and the hamlets, create a zone or area of security, and gradually push the VC out. Of course it was a losing proposition from the word go. But that was, in effect, what was going on when I arrived in Binh Duong. I soon learned that this province had been the scene of heavy fighting in the Iron Triangle, part of Michelin, and the village of Ben Suc.

It was an eye-opener for me in many, many ways. On the one hand it seemed like: Hey, there doesn't seem to be a war going on here. Then the war would suddenly erupt, somewhere in the province, usually at night. We had to get out quickly and see that the Vietnamese took care of casualties, provided sheltered, distributed food, etc.

I remember one night, about two or three weeks after Tet, the Province Chief got intelligence that we were going to be attacked that evening. We were, what, 30 miles maybe, from Saigon, and we were going to come under attack. The Province Chief, by the way, was Colonel Ly Tong Ba whom John Vann tried unsuccessfully to get to attack the VC with his APC's in the disastrous battle of Ap Bac in 1963 and who later committed suicide when surrounded by an NVN division in the final days of the war.

The intelligence was that there was a VC unit that was going to attack the Province Chief's headquarters. Word went out to all of the members of his staff and our advisory team to sort of circle the wagons. We were going to go to the Province Chief's headquarters, which was a pretty solid French-built house, and set up a perimeter defense and slug it out.

I thought, "God, how, Frank, you in the Foreign Service, a diplomat, did you get involved in a situation like this?"

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We were there one whole night. And the attack did come. It didn't amount to much, but I remember in the process some heavy firing coming in our direction. It seemed like it was pretty big stuff to me. I was told it was .50-caliber.

I thought, "I'm at the receiving end of this. What does this guy want to shoot at me for?" A .50-caliber machine gun barking at you from out of the blackness of the jungle sort of concentrates your mind pretty quick.

So that was one of my early experiences as a Deputy Province Senior Advisor in Binh Duong, in a situation where we felt we were going to be broadly assaulted by the VC. Fortunately, they didn't really come very close. But they did come into other parts of town there. Well, there were a few occasions like that from then on, even in Bien Hoa. We had an assault by a large VC force right in the main streets of Bien Hoa during the time I was there.

Q: Looking at this the first time, were you concerned, because you came out of — not just looking at this as a military problem, but a political problem — that duplicating this, you really sound like you're describing a colonial situation. I almost can see you in your pith helmet and your swagger stick, going around and hoping the natives will do better, but you can always intercede to take care of it. And of course all sorts of things go with this. We're trying to make these people stand on their own and all this. But are we cutting them off at the knees by doing this type of thing?

BURNET: I must admit that at that time I really thought that what we were doing was the right thing and would work. I thought that if we could get all of these economic processes going, this thing might just survive by gathering its own momentum. That the VC and their effort would sort of fall by the wayside, as security improved and people began to have an investment in their homes, business, schools, etc. That this whole mechanism might just sort of slowly creak forward. But it never really worked out that way. It never did. Even when I left Vietnam in '69, I remember thinking that on the long haul it just might catch on.

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Q: I came in '69, and I felt we were kind of making it. Things seemed to be jelling. It wasn't that bad.

BURNET: Well, I think it's a question of the spin you put on it. I mean, after all, there are lots of people looking at Tet: those who say that it was a terrific defeat; others who say that it was a great victory. Which was it?

Q: And you can argue it either way.

BURNET: You can argue it pretty well either way. But I would argue that it was a great defeat, because it was a watershed and a turning point. I think that they achieved a great deal in that effort, and certainly on the home front it had a tremendous impact.

I left Vietnam thinking that it was an awfully bloody way to do things and awfully expensive. And I just hated to see the civilians chewed up the way they were being chewed up. But you accept a certain amount of the inevitability of all this.

Q: How about when you went to Bien Hoa, what were you doing there, and what was the situation there?

BURNET: It was my job to run the CORDS program, the counterinsurgency program in Bien Hoa, under John Vann's overall leadership in MR III, whose headquarters was just a half a mile or so down the street from mine.

I took over a team [Advisory Team 98] of about 200 individuals, who were both military and civilian. You had AID civilians, CIA civilians, Agriculture, USIA, you name it, and US military. I think I had one Foreign Service officer—a junior officer on his first assignment—with me who was a District Senior Advisor in Nhon Trach in the south.

We all had our assignments. Most of us had Vietnamese counterparts to “advise.” We had a daily military situation briefing and a team briefing; I would take over on the latter. If there

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were assignments for the day, or some new guidance from Vann's headquarters, I would brief them to the whole team, most of whom would attend these daily briefings if they were in town. We were running this program under the general guidance of the Assistant for CORDS (in Vann's huge headquarters) in all of these various fields. There were a lot of administrative tasks involved, and I had to do a lot of moving around the province to visit all six District headquarters under my jurisdiction or to look at projects, often with the Province chief. Sometimes we slept over night in a hamlet to “prove” how safe it was.

Q: I wonder if you could talk a bit about John Vann — how you observed him and his operating style. He's a figure of some interest to anybody dealing with Vietnam.

BURNET: John Vann was a phenomenon, no question about it. I knew, as soon as I met him, that he was a very high-powered guy, who was very dedicated, who thought we could win this damn thing if we could just get everybody pulling in the same direction and get the Vietnamese to fight their own war. That was his prime objective.

You couldn't help but be impressed when you heard him because immediately upon hearing him speak you felt his dedication and conviction. What he said, as far as that was concerned, seemed to me to make a lot of sense.

Yet he was, let's face it, a military man — he'd been bred into the military, he lived and breathed it — so that he barked. He didn't have anything like a conversational tone, like you and I are conducting here. He spoke in a very high-pitched voice, and you were very clear and had no question as to what he was trying to communicate. He was then a civilian working for AID, for CORDS, and at times he was very critical of US and GVN military and the way they were fighting the war.

Every month he would have an in-gathering of Province Senior Advisors from all over III Corps, which is the center section of Vietnam down toward the Delta covering areas north

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and south of Saigon. How many provinces would that be? About 11 or 12, something like that.

That was a very interesting session. It usually lasted all day and into the evening. Vann was very much in the fore and very much on the podium giving us the word: What we were doing right and what we were doing wrong, what we were going to try to do in the months ahead, and how we were going to improve this and improve that. And it was all very stimulating.

We had a very good get-together in the evening. Had a buffet dinner at Vann's house, sitting out in the back yard, lots of tables and so on. Here was a mix of mostly Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels, who were Province Senior Advisors in the other provinces, other civilians, Foreign Service officers like myself, maybe half a dozen or so. So it was an interesting mix of individuals.

There was a good feeling of morale and #lan, we felt we were being well led and we knew what we had to do, and all we had to do was go out and do it. We felt what we were doing was at least as important as the main force war.

Q: How did you feel about reporting from the various provinces and all? Because there was this very fancy reporting: Is the village subdued? Is it friendly? Unfriendly? and so many points in between. We got very report-conscious, and we felt that if we made the right report, the war would be won. You always had to show progress. How did you feel about that?

BURNET: It was bad. I think I approached it with a certain amount of skepticism. This numbers-counting and head-counting, and counting the number of latrines that were dug and school houses that were built, and how many medical forays were made into this village and this hamlet and so on, and trying to add it all up and put a grade on it from A

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through D or F, according to the HES or Hamlet Evaluation System requirements, and measuring your security that way.

I was skeptical, but yet I went ahead and did it, and did it to the best of my knowledge. Where I saw things bad, I reported it bad. And when in doubt, I settled it in the direction of my doubts.

Q: Were you getting any feeling that there was pressure from somewhere to show progress? And if there was, where was it coming from?

BURNET: There definitely was that feeling that wanted you to show progress, particularly in these monthly sessions that we had, in our oral reports. We all had to make an oral report in front of Vann and the whole crowd and then there was a general discussion. I think there was a general tendency to make things look good. And maybe I was guilty of some of that, too. Probably was. Also on the monthly HES, as we called it, the Hamlet Evaluation Survey, do you remember that instrument?

Q: Yes, I do.

BURNET: Later on, when [William] Colby was the head of CORDS, through '69, he made a big thing of that. And there was a tremendous amount of pressure to get reporting from every hamlet in Vietnam. It wasn't so blatant that we would bend things in the direction of showing how we're winning the war. I never thought it was that blatant. But it was an undertone, it was there, it was present.

Of course we were just fooling ourselves. When you get down to it, when you finally turn to the peasant and ask him which way things are going, he will tell you what you want to hear. He will take a measure of you. You want it bad, you get it bad. You want it good, he'll give it to you good. So how good is it?

Q: This is how peasants survive through the centuries.

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BURNET: Yes, it's survival, of course.

Q: How did you feel things were going when you left?

BURNET: I guess I thought that we were holding our own, and if we're lucky, this thing will catch on. And the sheer natural acquisitiveness of mankind is going to prove the edge, that the free Vietnam is going to win out over the other side, just through man's natural instincts, as this economy got developing. This is what I really thought.

I remember seeing Bill Colby at MACV headquarters in Saigon. We all had to have an exit interview with him when we left. And this is the way I talked to him about it. And he sort of nodded his head: yeah, yeah, yup. I think maybe he had other more immediate concerns on his mind.

Q: Well, I think this very much reflects an American approach to things. If you try hard enough and work hard enough, you can do it.

BURNET: That's right. But we were up against something quite new for us. Still, we should have known better. The French experience for one thing. But I was feeling pretty good about it, as I look back.

Q: Well, we're moving on now. You served on the Laos desk in East Asia from '70 to '71. How did you see the situation? You had been away from Laos for awhile. You had seen what we were doing both from the CINCPAC view and then really down on the provincial ground. But looking at Laos at that time, what was the situation '70 to '71?

BURNET: As I was saying earlier, I had an on-the-ground view of Laos, because when I left Saigon they said, "Well look, you're coming back to the Department to go on the Laos desk, you should go up to Laos and get a feel for what the situation is there now, before you come back to Washington." So I did do that, and had been in touch with the Ambassador's staff and said I'd be coming up there.

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It just so happened that when I arrived was one of the first days after all of these years that the Plain of Jars finally had become LAO Government territory, friendly territory. So Mac Godley, the Ambassador, wanted to get up there and take a look at it, because he hadn't seen it, and I hadn't either.

So we got in the Air Attach# plane and flew up to, I forget the name of the place on the edge of the Plain, where you can land a plane, Muong Phanh I think it was called, and then took a chopper around the Plain of Jars, and saw the actual jars.

But what a mess. It was just pockmarked with great B-52 craters. I had mixed feelings about that, particularly when I had just seen the pictures in the Air Attach#'s office of some of these old targets that I used to know back from years before, in '66. This was now '70, four years later, where the targets that I had been so careful to keep protected from American bombs had now been flattened by American bombs.

I wasn't feeling too good about Laos in general, the situation there, when I got back to Washington following my tour in Vietnam. I felt more and more that the military had really taken over, and that we were becoming sort of a bit player in events which were well beyond us.

There was also somebody else on the desk who had served in Laos in all the years in between, and so was extremely familiar with all of the personalities and the situation. I felt like I wasn't really able to make much of a contribution in that situation.

In '71, I transferred to INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research], where they offered me a good position as Chief of the Southeast Asia branch, which I think suited me more. I could put some of these things to use that I had learned on the ground in Laos and Vietnam.

By that time, I felt that the war was really going badly for us. I was also getting exposed to a number of people in CIA and some of the people on my staff coming back from Vietnam, who by that time had even fresher experience than I had, saying that things were really

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going badly. So we wanted to report this in our various products that we were putting out, intelligence briefs, etc., that things were going badly.

Q: Were you under any restrictions on your intelligence briefs, or could you report...?

BURNET: I had the feeling that we definitely were. It was mainly the spin or the slant. They couldn't argue with us too much about the nuts and bolts of something we were talking about, but we'd see our stuff edited so that the overall effect made it look better than it really was.

Q: So you would write it and then it would go up to be condensed and all to go to the Secretary.

BURNET: And sort of polished up.

Q: So-called polished up, which would usually...

BURNET: Put a better spin on it. Our cries of alarm were muffled. They weren't really turned upside down, but they were certainly muffled. I had the feeling that some of our people desperately wanted to make us look better than we were. This is getting into the early years of the Nixon Administration. So it was kind of tough sledding there for awhile, particularly with the young men working with me, who were even more convinced than I was that we were losing.

Q: These were usually people who had served there. Because at that time, when you're talking about Vietnam, you had a huge cadre of people who had Vietnamese experience.

BURNET: That's right, that's right. So I had several, all of whom had been in Vietnam.

Q: So thinking positively was not always the... It's easier to do it from the vantage point of Washington, instead of having had field experience. Were you there during the peace talks? Was this of any concern to INR as far as supplying information to...?

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BURNET: We were pretty remote, it seems to me, because, don't forget, there was a Vietnam task force, which was run, as a matter of fact, by Bill Sullivan at this point. So the center of activity, the focus was on them. And they were running the show. But we would get tasked (to use that lovely phrase) to produce various pieces of paper, or bits of intelligence, or whatever, as was needed.

Q: So really you weren't as much a separate think tank as almost a staff job of supplying information for specific points.

BURNET: Yes, but we churned out an awful lot of stuff, particularly later on as Cambodia got hot and the war came to sort of a close there. There was a pretty heavy demand for information on what was going on, or what our opinions were.

Q: How much was our opening to the Peoples Republic of China coloring the way we were looking at Southeast Asia, at least from the intelligence point of view? Was this changing our attitude do you think? Were we beginning to rethink China at that point?

BURNET: I think that move was certainly afoot, but it really wasn't perceptible to us in the Southeast Asia branch of INR in those days.

Q: Were you there during the peace accords? I can't remember exactly when they...

BURNET: When Harriman went to Paris and so on, was that in '71? Yes, I was in INR then, sure. We were pretty much out of it. Although, as I say, we would, through the task force, get assignments laid on us for this or that.

Q: Well you left INR in 1975. What was the situation? Do you remember how you saw things when you left there? Had it fallen apart by that time?

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BURNET: It hadn't quite, because, don't forget, this was January of '75. You see, it didn't fall apart until June. But I had an official trip back to Vietnam in February '72, when we were expecting a big offensive. Were you there then?

Q: No, no, but I...

BURNET: Well anyway, you heard about it. And so I had an extensive trip going all through I Corps and II Corps. By that time, Tom Barnes was sort of a number one assistant to John Vann in II Corps, and he took me around with him on a visit by helicopter to all of the large western provinces in II Corps, like Kontum and Pleiku. Things looked Okay then. But Vann, a few months later, had command in a terrific battle in Kontum and held it together for a little while before he was killed in a helicopter crash.

But when I went out to China and left Southeast Asia branch of INR, I felt that the dominoes were falling and things were slipping out of our control. I didn't think that our Vietnamese could hack it under the conditions in which we had left it, the Vietnamization and so on. I really didn't think it would hold together. But not for lack of equipment but for lack of will and leadership.

Q: Was this feeling pretty well shared by those that you were working for?

BURNET: No, it wasn't. I think my chiefs wouldn't have shared it. But the working level shared it, and our counterparts, too, at CIA, we all felt it — kind of an underground feeling.

Q: Well then you went to Taipei as Political Counselor from '75 to '78.

BURNET: Before, of course, we changed our recognition to Beijing in '79.

Q: So you were there really at our last full-scale mission.

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BURNET: That's right, but yet we had already made our opening to China in '72. So it was an interesting twilight period.

Q: What were your concerns, and how was the embassy functioning at that time?

BURNET: I think the embassy functioned very well. Leonard Unger was the Ambassador, he was doing a good job I thought. It was really a hand-holding operation to ease the GRC, the Republic of China government into accepting what was inevitable even at that time: US recognition of the communist regime on the mainland. We didn't know when, of course. But I think our main job then was to say: Look, it isn't going to be that bad. You aren't going to fall apart. The sky isn't going to fall when we shift our recognition to the mainland.

Q: But it was clearly understood that this was going to be happening sooner rather than later.

BURNET: It was understood by us, and we tried to make it clear to our counterparts. Sometimes I think that the Ambassador didn't talk that directly — he couldn't, really — to his counterparts.

Q: Well you can't come out with a policy statement when the policy hasn't been made.

BURNET: No, that's right.

Q: You have to work around it to say: Maybe the tides of history are moving in this direction. But it requires a Presidential decision, and a very difficult Presidential decision at that point.

BURNET: That's right. But in my own conversations with counterparts and talking to the media and so on, this is the way we would talk, that, you know, really it isn't going to be

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so bad. Of course they never realized how good it was going to be when the economic situation really took off.

Q: What was your impression of the Chinese officials on Taiwan that you dealt with? Who were they, and how did you feel they were at this particular period of time?

BURNET: I, of course, had most to do with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the head of the American desk there. I felt that they were professionals and that they were doing their job. I wished, many times, that they could have let their hair down and leveled with me a little bit more than they did. They kept up a pretty good front of official policy. Of course, their views were pretty orthodox, that China was one, and that eventually they hoped to regain the mainland, although that was quite remote at that point.

But it wasn't bad. It wasn't very busy, either. We didn't have an awful lot to do (after all, Washington's focus was elsewhere), as long as we kept things quiet and made sure that the two Chinas didn't get involved over the Straits of Taiwan. That turned out to be one of my major tasks, to keep an eye on the Chinese Air Force and their activities, and to monitor our military's relations with the Chinese Air Force.

Q: Tell me, how does one keep an eye on an air force?

BURNET: Well, you have this island of Taiwan just a hundred miles or so off the mainland which had its own air force. They were flying daily patrols over the Taiwan straits. And the Peoples Republic of China had its air force and they were flying patrols too. Occasionally these patrols met.

We didn't want any flare-up or any exchange of fire, so there were places that we thought these patrols shouldn't be going, and that they should observe a certain restraint and caution.

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When there was a contact of some sort, this had to be reported to Washington in great detail: How it happened. Who did what to whom. What was the upshot of it and What steps taken to prevent a repeat performance. Of course the military would make its report, but naturally the Ambassador wanted his own complete report of what happened that day in the air over the China Sea. So it was that kind of a situation. On those days I was quite busy.

Working with the Chinese officials was okay and it was enjoyable. They were dedicated people, professional people. I had a lot to do with certain parts of the Chinese military, but mainly the Foreign Ministry people.

Q: Were you there at the time that Saigon fell?

BURNET: That happened in June of '75. Yes, I was there.

Q: I was wondering whether you were feeling any reflections of this. Were the Chinese saying: Well, here you had an ally and you let them down. Were they throwing this in your face?

BURNET: Not too badly. I think the Chinese were very careful about that. They don't like to lose face, and therefore they can understand somebody else losing face. That was not thrown up to me. If it was not part of our business, it just didn't come up. If it did, it was minor.

Q: Were you feeling a sense of confidence in your contacts about: No matter what happened, we're doing a good a job, and it doesn't look like we're going to be taken over, and we're setting up and...?

BURNET: You mean as far as Taiwan was concerned?

Q: Yes.

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BURNET: Yes, I think so. I think there was a sense of confidence in the mission, that we were just biding our time and holding the Chinese hands while they went through this trial, this bad period, when we were going to transfer recognition. So there wasn't anything that we were downcast about; it didn't bother us in particular. We were able to go about our job.

Your mentioning the fall of Saigon reminds me that we had a lot of flow out of Vietnam, as it fell, through Taiwan. A lot of people came by to pick up the family that was safe-havened there during the time that the husband was serving in Vietnam. And then, you remember that General Thieu, when he left Saigon, spent his first days and nights in Taipei.

Q: He was the President of Vietnam when it fell, and left.

BURNET: That's right. And his first stop on his way to London, where I think he settled eventually, was Taipei. He flew in with a small retinue and lots of gold bars, rumors had it, on the plane.

I was selected, since I had been to Vietnam and so on (actually, I had even met Thieu at some big function or other), to be the go-between, between the Ambassador and Thieu. Whenever we had some message to give him, I went to his quarters. He didn't feel like talking, I could see that. So I could just sort of take a look at the man, give him the message, and get out of there. That was about it. But anyway, he was there for a few weeks, I believe, before he moved on.

Q: This was just about the time Chiang Kai-shek died, wasn't it?

BURNET: As a matter of fact, Chiang Kai-shek died in the spring of '75, shortly after I arrived. Reminds me, when he died, one member of the political section thought of a short, one-sentence telegram to report this grave event back to Washington.

I don't know whether you remember the period in WWII under Stilwell in the China-Burma theater. Stilwell's word for the Generalissimo was the "Peanut." We wanted to send a two-

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word telegram: "Peanut planted." But we decided the Ambassador wouldn't appreciate this, even in jest, so we never sent it in for him to sign. But we kicked it around a while for fun.

Anyway, he had a vast, very fancy state funeral which the entire diplomatic corps had to attend. We were taught how to go up by threes to the podium and bow from the hips to his portrait in a gesture of sympathy or respect. The whole diplomatic corps was lined up and had to go through this: click, click, bend at the hips, bend twice and move off. And from then on it was Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kai-shek's son, who was running the show.

Q: What was the impression at that time? You, of course, had not seen Chiang Kai-shek in full bloom, but when his son came on, what was the feeling about the situation?

BURNET: It was a very good feeling. A feeling that here's a good, pragmatic, business-like Chinese who was going to take over from the doddering old man. And that things would be a lot easier for us and a lot easier for our relationship under him. Everybody felt the same way — people in the agency, people in the economic section, my section, the Trade Center — we all felt good about it.

Q: Speaking of your section, were you all pretty much of one accord as far as our change to the Peoples Republic of China, or did you have some vestiges of: We're selling out?

BURNET: Fortunately, we did not. Everybody was of more or less the same mind. The reason being, I suppose, that almost all of them were Chinese language trainees and had been through the same program in Taichung that I had been through. And they were looking forward to getting to the mainland someday.

Q: So in a way it was a career enhancement program.

BURNET: That's exactly what it was. So, there was none of that feeling. Everybody thought that it was inevitable and that it was just a matter of time.

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Q: How about when President Carter came on board with human rights and all. Did this have any particular impact on you?

BURNET: It made a big impact, particularly on me. I thought that I had never seen so many instructions coming out of Washington about our military aid program, and I thought that some of the features of that were really excellent.

The idea was to try to keep this thing of acquiring weapons tamped down, thereby minimizing regional competition in arms. The more we sent military aid and built up some country, the chances of their getting involved, either with their own people or with a neighbor, were that much better. So if you could keep the arms transfers down, everybody was going to be better off.

You remember the guidance we used to get out of the Carter Administration about how we were to treat and handle representatives of the various arms manufacturers when they came calling, and how much help, or how little cooperation we were to give them? We were just supposed to give names and addresses, and that's all. We weren't to set up any appointments, provide transportation, none of that stuff we used to do. They were on their own.

Q: It was a real change.

BURNET: It's just a shame that all of that by the end of the Carter Administration had pretty much gone by the boards. But in one Administration that was quite a change.

Q: How about the human rights. How did you see the political situation evolving when you were there?

BURNET: That was quite a point of interest. Washington let us know that they were not just interested in the annual human rights reports which were just getting going in those days.

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Because, as you know, the record of Republic of China was not very good in this area. Arrests of the opposition, throwing people into the pokey for a long period of time and virtually forgetting about them, were going on all the time.

So we had to burrow into the political opposition among the Taiwanese, which wasn't hard to find, and they were always glad to talk to us. They had the scoop. They knew what was going on. They knew who was in jail, and where, and how long they had been there, and what they had done to get there, and what happened at their trial.

All of these things, all of these details Washington wanted to know. We got ourselves in a position to report them and did, I think, a pretty good job of keeping that front covered for the Department.

Q: Was the Chinese government responding?

BURNET: Yes they were.

Q: They saw the winds of change.

BURNET: I think we were effective and our pressure helped. And all other kinds of outside pressure helped, too. Somebody would lean on Washington about a certain individual, and then we'd go to the Chinese and say: Look, we hear he's not well, he's not getting proper food and medicine. How long is he going to be there? And can you see your way clear to make things easier on him or even release him? We'd do it, and we'd get responses from them. We got results, I think. Slow, but we got them.

Q: Adding sort of a personal note: At the time, I was in Korea and we were sort of miffed at all this human rights stuff.

BURNET: Were you?

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Q: Well, of course we had an enemy 25 miles away, a real honest-to-God enemy, Kim Il Sung. But looking at this thing, I must say I think President Carter made a real earth change in the world by doing this. A short period. I must say I was not impressed at the time, but looking back on it I think this was a really major change in the United States. It brought us back to where we should have been a long time ago.

BURNET: I forget whose idea it was, it was either the Ambassador's suggestion or Washington's suggestion, but, to make an impression on the staff, they had us set up a seminar on human rights in general. I organized it, and held it at my home, wives were invited. It was really a good exercise. It was mainly for the American staff people, just to get us thinking in that direction.

Q: It really was an earth change.

BURNET: You must have done the same thing in Korea.

Q: Yes. Well, Frank, looking at your career now, I guess you retired then.

BURNET: Yes, retired in '78 at the end of that tour. I had a heart attack, so that brought that to an end.

Q: Well now, looking back on your time in the Foreign Service, what gave you the greatest satisfaction would you say?

BURNET: You know I guess the greatest satisfaction was performing what I was trained to do. Having been at an early stage of my career trained in Chinese language, at the end of my career I finally got to China, in effect, although it was Taiwan, the Republic of China. But I felt completely at home and knew the language, knew the people, and was able to operate and accomplish something.

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And the same with my wife. She had been through language school with me, so she, on her side, was able to operate pretty freely in that society, in that culture.

And so, at last, we felt effective and useful. Doing at least what Washington wanted us to do.

Q: Yes, I know how you feel. Well, looking at it today, if a young man or woman came up to you and said, "Mr. Burnet, what about Foreign Service as a career?" How would you reply to them, for today?

BURNET: If you want an interesting and stimulating career, in which at times you'll have a feeling that you're effective (and remember there will be those times when you have the feeling that you're not, but with enough on balance to buoy your spirits and make you feel good about yourself), and when you can apply what you've learned throughout all the years of your education and training and be stimulated at the same time, the Foreign Service might be for you. I enjoyed it. I think I'd do it over again.

Q: Well, very good. I thank you very much.

BURNET: You're very welcome.

End of interview