Charles G. Billo
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

[CHILETA J.]

DIM: This is Chileta Dim, and I'm here with Charles [G.] Billo at the Dartmouth Special Collections Library at Rauner Library [sic; Rauner Special Collections Library] in Hanover, New Hampshire. It's August 14th, 2015, and right now it's about 1:15.

So first off, thank you so much for joining us, Charlie.

BILLO: My pleasure,

DIM: I hope this comes to great fruit. So let's just start at the very beginning. When were you born?

BILLO: I was born in October 1942 in Bronxville, New York, a suburb of New York City.

DIM: And what was it like living in that area of the city? World War II was just coming to an end. Do you have any recollection?

BILLO: Well, my earliest memories are from 1947. I do recall, however, that my father participated in the U.S. Navy as a doctor in World War II, and I recall him coming home in his uniform and talking about his experiences in France.

DIM: What was that like, having your father in the military, in a major war and growing up with those stories in your house?

BILLO: Well, he was always—modestly pointed out that he was in D-Day-Plus-10. He wasn't trying to pretend that he was in the D-Day invasion. And his job on the beaches was to sort out or triage the injured infantrymen and decide which ones could be treated locally and which ones should be put on a boat back to England.

Of course, he was able to travel in his off days, in France, and brought back some memorabilia, which I still have, about—that he had picked up from captured Nazi installations. He had nothing but respect for the guts of the infantrymen who stormed those beaches.

So that was the atmosphere that I grew up in, which was one of service to the country, not shirking and doing the right, patriotic thing. And that—later on, in the ’60s, those lessons were quite important to me.

DIM: With all that going on with your father in the house, was military service something that you thought of early on?

BILLO: No, my father wanted me to be a doctor, and that was the end of the story.

DIM: It often is.

So tell me a little bit about your mother. What was her name?

BILLO: My mother. Barbara Leggett Billo, a Wellesley [College] grad.

DIM: What was her maiden name?

BILLO: Barbara Leggett.

DIM: Leggett.

BILLO: But she was a traditional 1950s homemaker. She helped raise me and my two sisters and supported my father, who had a very active pediatric practice in my home town and needed backstopping because of his very long hours.

DIM: So what was it like living in your neighborhood? What kind of town was it? What kind of atmosphere was it for children?

BILLO: It was a wonderful atmosphere for children. It was very safe. It was a town that was definitely upper middle class. A lot of corporate CEOs lived there. It was probably a predominantly Republican town, and I attended Bronxville schools from kindergarten all the way through high school. And [it] was a wonderful time and place to grow up, although later on, one discovers that it was a kind of protected life that we led and a very privileged life.

When I got to college, my adviser, who knew Bronxville schools, pointed out that essentially I went to a high-quality—what amounted to a high-quality private school, like

a boarding school. Of course, when you're a student, you get up in the morning and just go off to school. You don't think about the privileges that we had and the type of education and advantages that we all received there.

DIM: So mentioning how privileged and protected that you felt your neighborhood was, what was *your* interaction with the rest of the city?

BILLO: You mean New York City?

DIM: Right.

BILLO: It was very limited and sporadic in those days. We're talking about the 1950s. My parents went out of their way to expose us to the cultural advantages of New York: the Hayden Planetarium, the museums, the Metropolitan Opera. The train into New York City from my home town was a 30-minute ride, and when I got older, I went into town, into New York City on my own, occasionally with my buddies when we were in high school. We went to—we really lived large and went to various concerts, rock 'n' roll concerts, but that was when I was a junior or senior in high school. But prior to that, it was more along the lines of what I was saying, which was visiting cultural spots.

My grandma on my mother's side lived in Brooklyn, New York. We would drive to Brooklyn every couple of weeks and have Sunday dinner with her. I remember passing the ships, the transatlantic ocean liners as we drove along the West Side Highway in the 1950s. There were a series of major ocean liners docked at a series of piers, and that was all very romantic and exciting. And we'd read the names of the various ships and exotic Scandinavian and Dutch and other names. So that, I remember distinctly.

DIM: So did that instill in you any sort of desire for travel or any sort of relation-want of outside the U.S.?

BILLO: To a degree. One doesn't really draw a straight line on that kind of thing when you're 10, 11, 12, but suppose in the back of my mind, there was always at some level, as I grew older, some curiosity about the wider world. And my parents, of course, encouraged us to learn foreign languages, encouraged us to think big about the world.

When I was a junior in high school, I was chosen to go to Italy on the American Field Service exchange student program, and so we actually took a ship from New York to Rotterdam (the Netherlands), which—when you're 16 years old, you're on a student ship. It was one of the most exciting, challenging things I'd done up till that point in my life.

DIM: We'll probably return to that a little bit later, but you say "us." Did you have siblings?

BILLO: I had—I have two sisters, one older, a couple of years older, who lives in Richmond, Virginia, and the other is about five years younger, and she lives in Dorset, Vermont.

DIM: So did you—were you three close? What sort of relationship did you have, especially?

BILLO: I'd say we were reasonably close. One advantage that we had was we always vacationed together, growing up. We either went to—near Cape Cod in the summer for a week or two or we went to northern Vermont, the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. And so we were a very tightly knit family, and my parents were very active in making sure that we understood the importance of family. Of course, like any other American family, there were always periodic rivalries and siblings disagreements. [Chuckles.]

DIM: So let's make our way up to starting school, kindergarten. You're probably around five. What sort of transition was school for you? What was the elementary school experience like, if you have any remembrance of that?

BILLO: I have all good memories of that. I mean, I can't give you a whole lot of detail, but I went to a school that—for example, in high school there were only a hundred kids in the grade, and so you can imagine, in elementary school or in kindergarten, we were only talking, if I remember correctly, 15 kids in a classroom.

DIM: Mmm.

BILLO: The other part that I didn't mention was that there was practically zero diversity in Bronxville, New York, just by the nature of the economy and that type of—the cost of living and et cetera, et cetera. So my recollection of that period that you asked me about was one of sitting in a classroom

with all white children, a white teacher, very atypical of the wider world that was waiting for me out there.

DIM: Mm-hm. Did you have—so this period probably extends all the way up into the later ’50s. Any recollection of the beginning of the civil rights movement or anything in the news at the time?

BILLO: Yes. Of course, we paid attention to the news every day. We read the newspapers every day. But we were in our own silo, so it had no immediate import as a youngster, for my day-to-day life. I will remember—I will say, and I’m not sure about cause and effect, but my parents raised us to be respectful of all races and all ethnic backgrounds, and I remember—because I was actively involved in sports, I participated in a lot of sports that involved diverse groups, and I remember that I always—even though I led—I was living in this totally unrealistic kind of a cocoon, we always had respect for anyone who was different, who looked different or—because that was the way we were brought up.

DIM: Thank you so much.

Do you have any recollection about when you started high school?

BILLO: Well, yeah, I’ve got a lot of recollections.

DIM: I mean about what year did you start high school?

BILLO: Yeah. That would have been in about 1957, give or take.

DIM: Fifty-seven.

BILLO: I will say that up until ’57, I sometimes was a somewhat rebellious student, and I was seeking acceptance among my peers. I misbehaved somewhat. My parents decided to take things in hand. They weren’t happy with the trajectory I was on, and they sent me to Phillips Academy Andover summer school, which was a transformative experience for me.

DIM: Do you know what year that was?

BILLO: It was roughly the summer of 1957. The thing about that was twofold: One was that I met teachers who were very both athletic and intelligent. For me, this was extremely important,

that I have male mentors or role models who I expected. It's what perhaps I hadn't found in middle school, which I was always cutting up. And there were some teachers at Andover that turned me around. And then in hindsight, later on, I came to realize that my parents were doing me a favor, or showing they cared about me enough to pay the money to send me to that school, and so I realized that I had a good thing going.

DIM: It's wonderful to meet older people who care and really believe in you.

BILLO: Yeah. Of course, when you're in ninth grade, you don't—you don't process that. At the time, my take-away was, *Oh, my God, I have to leave my buddies at home to go to <u>that</u> place?* But it was only later that—when I had my own kids, that it became clear that they cared about me, and so that was—that was transformative for me.

DIM: Was there anyone in particular that stood out? Any names you remember?

BILLO: Well, in particular, a math teacher, algebra teacher named Mr. [Thomas M.] Mikula [pronounced MIH-coo-luh]. It was a Finnish name.

DIM:` Can you spell that?

BILLO: Sorry?

DIM: Could you spell it?

BILLO: Yeah, M-i-k-u-l-a. I may not be giving it the proper Finnish pronunciation. I think we called him mih-COO-luh, Mr. mih-COO-luh. He was an ex-[U.S.] Marine and the wrestling coach. And I wasn't going to mess with that guy. He taught me to stand up and take my medicine, and I came out at the end of a summer—after a long struggle, I came out with a pretty darn good grade in algebra. So that's one memory I have.

DIM: Thank you so much for sharing.

You mentioned a little earlier in the interview about rock concerts with buddies in New York City? What was your friend group like? Did it change after that summer?

BILLO: Well, most of my friends derived from sports teams in high school. I was a three-sport athlete.

DIM: Wow.

BILLO: In a very small school, as I said, with only a hundred students per grade, so a couple of these guys had this thought to go to the RKO [Hamilton] Theater in Harlem, where [Albert J.] "Alan" Freed, the king [sic; father] of rock 'n' roll, was emceeing a concert, and Jerry Lee Lewis was there. I can't remember now the other performers. But for a Bronxville kid to get on the train and risk going to a rock 'n' roll concert—I think it was in the daytime (I don't want to overdramatize this thing)—but for Charlie Billo, that was—I don't even know if I told my parents we were going. That was a high-risk venture.

DIM: Were these common occurrences?

BILLO: No, no, it was seldom. But essentially in high school I was into sports, and I played soccer, basketball and baseball, and I had some good luck. I told you I won the scholarship to go to Italy. We lived with an Italian family that I still keep in touch with. It was a good time, but I had a lot of maturing to do, a lot of maturing to do.

DIM: Well, if we can go back to the American Field Service trip that you mentioned, going to Italy, what was that application process like? How did you hear about it?

BILLO: Well, American Field Service then, and probably still today, was the preeminent high school exchange student program, and our school traditionally hosted a couple of visiting scholarship students. And they would live with a Bronxville family for the whole school year. And, on the other side, the two or three Bronxville kids every year were awarded scholarships to go abroad. So my year, I went to Italy, and a colleague of mine went to Indonesia, and a third colleague went to New Zealand, so that was quite something.

The part about my experience was that I was there in the summer, so I was not attending classes in Italy, and the only Italian language training I had was on the ship going over. It was a seven- or eight-day voyage, and every morning we'd meet on deck, those of us that were headed to Italy, and we

were boning up on Italian. It was pretty primitive, but that was as much as I understood of the language.

So American Field Service is a great program. It's branched out considerably since the 1950s.

DIM: Branched out in what way?

BILLO: Well, for one thing, they send a lot more Americans to developing countries than they did in my day. I don't have specifics to back up that assertion, but I think, in my day, it was a fairly elite operation, and today it's probably in every—the American Field Service may be active in every school—I don't know—on the East Coast or across into California. I just haven't been tracking it. But it's a prestigious organization.

DIM: And what year was all this?

BILLO: That would have been the summer of '59 I went to Italy, just before my senior year. It opened up experiences and exposure to different settings and operating away from my family, so it came at an important time, as I entered my senior year in high school. Yeah, it was—it also involved, when I got back, making a lot of speeches and trip reports and slide shows, the usual stuff you do in high school to share with your classmates and underclassmen. So that was a very, very lucky break.

The family they matched me up with in Turin, which is the Detroit of Italy—it's where the Fiat automobile cars used to be made—was—in terms of socioeconomic status, was similar to Bronxville, and that's how the organization worked. They tried to match up students in America with sort of similar situations overseas so that if you're living in a family, you have to have some basic compatibility to make the family structure work, and I guess that was the motivation.

So the father in my Italian family was head of the manufacturing association. Would be like the National Association of Manufacturers in the United States, definitely a conservative business organization. And they were able to—because of their status, they were able to share with me a lot of different experiences: weekends in the Alps, side trips to Venice. So, yeah, it was a very successful

experience for me and one that I cherish, and I still, as I said, keep in touch with those of the family that are still living.

And when I went into the State Department [sic; U.S. Department of State], I went back to Italy following [the] Vietnam [War], and now I'm an Italian teacher on the side here in Hanover. So it all—in the end, it all circles back, in one sense or another.

DIM: So that's the summer before you enter your senior year.

BILLO: Right.

DIM: Senior year of high school, what were you thinking post graduation? What was the college application process like?

BILLO: The long and the short of it was that my parents had gone to prestigious schools in New England, so there was no talk of me doing anything but going to prestigious schools in New England.

DIM: Were they alumni? Your mother was from Wellesley.

BILLO: Yeah. My father went to Williams College. And so probably some of my teachers and counselors in high school realized that maybe a highly competitive college wasn't the best suited for me, that I was somewhat shy, and they were tossing out ideas, and, to make a long story short, there was only one possible opportunity for me, and that was to go to some Ivy League school full stop. I ended up going to Brown University. That was an interesting experience, in more ways than one, but—so that was that.

I was—I was—in high school, I was captain of this team and captain of that team, and I was president of my class, and I—if I respected a teacher, I went full bore, you know, on the subject matter. I had a couple of mentors in high school. If I disrespected the teacher, I wouldn't work hard, and so that was—that was essentially—the whole backdrop beneath all that was essentially a person who was too easily influenced by my parents, who maybe wasn't ripe for the real world away from home and who—to get ahead in school, I had to work hard. I wasn't one of these folks where anything came easy.

So in all of that mix, I wound up as a freshman at Brown University and played varsity soccer at Brown and failed to achieve much in pre-med studies, and that was—that was, in a nutshell, my experience at college, not being focused on a career, not knowing—not being hell bent for a particular career, just working on improving my social skills and fraternity life and being one of the guys. So it was an interesting time.

DIM: What year did you matriculate?

BILLO: Nineteen sixty, fall of 1960.

DIM: So that was the year [President John F.] Kennedy was elected. Did you have any perceptions of that? How was the campus reacting to that campaign?

BILLO: That's a good question. Probably guys that I knew on campus were Democrats and very open to Kennedy and the New Frontier. I, having grown up in Bronxville as a Republican, in a Republican family, I was often just repeating various mantras that Republicans had at the time about the Kennedys. And so that was—yeah. I mean, I can't—to be honest, I can't remember what the undergraduate body was doing or thinking when Kennedy was elected. I would just say they were probably tilting towards supporting the Democrats, and people—that's what I remember right now.

I was apolitical. I wasn't one to get out and campaign for candidates. Yeah. It's an interesting question that you pose in that later on, when I joined the [U.S.] Foreign Service, I would explain to my cohort of friends and my peers, my parents' friends that Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you." I was in this mode of—at least I adopted this posture of, "Hey, these guys on the New Frontier were the type of people I looked for growing up, the people that were both smart and athletic." And I could sit here and name several of Kennedy's advisers that met this criterion.

DIM: Any in particular that you looked up to?

BILLO: Well, there was a law professor at Columbia University named Richard [N.] Gardner, who was a mentor of mine when I went to graduate school. He was a Rhodes Scholar.

So in one way or another—maybe this was, like, an ex post facto rationale—I signed onto the New Frontier, idealistic wave that by then, a lot of young Americans were into. And so this was—this was a feel-good kind of a thing. And get some direction in my life and have it sort of validated by these hotshots down in Washington[, D.C.].

DIM: So you mentioned briefly before that you joined a fraternity? What year was that?

BILLO: It was when I was a sophomore at Brown. We had a lot of soccer players and lacrosse players, and we—we weren't the goody-goody student council president type of group. On the other hand, we weren't as degenerate as some of the other fraternities. It was a good—a good experience. We knew how to throw a party. I still keep in touch with a couple of my colleagues. It was a good time. It was all about Charlie Billo learning—working on his social skills and gaining some confidence.

DIM: And so how was soccer life for you? Since you've been involved in team sports since you were a child, was that a major factor in your—and you were a varsity soccer player in college. How did that affect your experience?

BILLO: That's a good question in that when you arrive—I think when a lot of people arrive as a freshman, you're scared as heck. It's all different. You don't know anyone. So I had an immediate nucleus of friends who were teammates, so even if, you know, nowhere else, at least I had this nucleus of support, so you can gauge: *Hey, am I as good as these guys? Am I as smart as these guys? Am I prepared the right way?* You know, you can test yourself. And that was as huge lift for me, having that. I don't what other—if I hadn't had that, it's hard to figure out where or how I would have landed on my feet.

This is not relevant, but we had a very successful soccer team. That always helps, too. And we got in some travel every second year. We'd be up here in Hanover, playing Dartmouth. And we held our own in soccer. We got totally trounced in football. In those days, soccer was at 11 on Saturday morning; football was around 1:30, so after our soccer game, before going home, we had to go and endure watching Dartmouth just walk all over the Brown football team. Those were difficult times.

But we—as I said, every second year, you were traveling to an away game, and so we'd be in—down at Harvard or over at Columbia or—yeah, so that's cool, you know, when you're 20 years old.

DIM: And so, in just sort of describing your school life, it seems that you went along collecting mentors, collecting friends, building your social capacities. Post graduation, did you keep in contact with a lot of these people? You mentioned some, but—

BILLO: Yeah, yeah, very much, yeah. A bunch of us went down to New York after college. I was at Columbia Business School, and we had a good—we just picked up in New York where we left off in—at Brown. Mentors. Yeah, I had these high school teachers at Bronxville, a couple of them that I really respected, and I would look them up and try to—try to keep those flames going. Yeah, I—it's not much to really comment on other than the obvious. I think going to New York City and going to Columbia University, you realize it's a much bigger stage than anything I'd experienced in college. And so I—I mean, Columbia University, then and now, was a world-class institution, you know, in the sciences. And New York City is a world-class city. So I was—I was into enjoying all the delights of New York.

I burned through my father's money, tuition money, and so in the end, I picked up additional mentors that helped me navigate the next chapter, and—yeah, it was—it was kind of a not very efficient way to proceed. And there was a lot of waste and a lot of false starts, but I guess it's—in some way, it's a journey, and you can't pre-script these things.

Just to show you the kind of indecision that gripped me, when I was leaving Brown, I knew I had no plan. I didn't know what the plan was for post graduation, so I applied to Navy OCS [Officer Candidate School], which in those days was a proper avenue or a proper thing for an Ivy League grad, or any grad, to do: go down to Navy OCS at Newport, Rhode Island, under go the four months' training, and then spend three years in the U.S. Navy. This would have been in 1964.

Vietnam was not always on the front pages of the newspaper, and the pressures were a lot different in '64 than

they were in ’66. So—and then, miraculously, I was accepted at Columbia Business School, so I told the Navy folks that I wouldn’t be joining them after all, so that was a—that was a fork in the road for me. And in some level, it showed I was essentially without any firm direction, and it was kind of rudderless. You know, one could say I was grasping for straws. So, yeah, it’s one of those unknowns you’ll never know. If I’d gone to Newport, Rhode Island, and served in the Navy, how I would have developed. One will never know.

DIM: It’s a tough choice, sure.

BILLO: Well, in those days it as an honorable thing to do. I mean, not to repeat myself, in those days—this comes out in the Class of 1964 book on Vietnam that was published here at Dartmouth, how many of those authors said they either were in ROTC or they went to Navy Officer Candidate School, because it was an honorable thing to do, especially if your dad had served, you know, and it was in your family fabric.

DIM: So you decided to go to Columbia Business School. Tough choice. What did you major in in undergrad? Did that transfer to Columbia at all?

BILLO: Not immediately. I was a history major, which was a smart move. Brown had an excellent history department, and European history was my main interest. It didn’t really play into the business school at all, but I learned when I got down there that the—Columbia had what they called a joint degree program, or dual degree program with the Columbia School of International Relations [sic; Columbia University's School of International Affairs, now Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs]. And I argued or persuaded my way into that, so I ended up getting the MBA degree in about, let’s say, ’66, roughly. And then started working on another master’s degree in the School of International Relations. And that was where history and that kid of thing played an important role. That was cool.

And at the School of International Relations, that’s where I found these other mentors. I’ve mentioned law professor Richard Gardner. I also took a course with Professor Roger Hilsman [Jr.], who had played a critical role in the Kennedy administration with regard to Vietnam coup d’état against President [Ngô Đình] Diệm. I got to confess, for the record,

that as a 22-year-old student, I was sort of taken by Roger Hilsman. Roger Hilsman was a [U.S. Military Academy at] West Point grad. Got a doctorate at Yale [University]. Was a very assertive, self-confident guy who'd served in the New Frontier, and he was—I had no reason to be skeptical about him.

In fact, one time I called on him at his office, just because I wanted to have a chat with him about this, that or the other thing, and he said, "Well, what are you gonna do when you get outta here?" I said, "I want to join the State Department." And he looked at me and said, "Oh, you mean the Foreign Service." Because he was a political appointee, so those guys don't join the Foreign Service; they join the "State Department." So I was sort of learning the lingo, and what it was that I wanted to do was take the Foreign Service exam and join the Foreign Service.

It was only later that I found out—Roger Hilsman had been fired by LBJ [President Lyndon B. Johnson] and had washed up on the campus at Columbia University and was busy writing a memoir about his experience in the Kennedy administration. It's called *To Move a Nation[: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy]*. And he was basically persona non grata around Democratic circles in the—especially in the Johnson administration.

So that shows you [chuckles]—you have to be a little more worldly wise and savvy sometimes in one's ambition to get ahead. You have to know exactly what you're doing and who you're dealing with, and that's a whole chapter that we can spend time on later on, but—

So I loved the School of International Affairs. It was like taking all the courses you always wanted to take in American foreign policy, in economics, in European history. I mean, what's not to like about that? And they even organized a trip, a study trip to the U.N. [United Nations] facilities in Europe—for example, the U.N. office in Geneva [Switzerland] in the summer. A few of us were selected to take this trip, and the Columbia University could open doors to very prominent people in these big organizations, at NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and—yeah that was—those were heady times for me.

But that always begged the question: *Well, what the heck are you gonna do with all these degrees, and who's gonna pay the bills?* That was always the looming question out there.

[Recording interruption.]

DIM: So we're back after a short, one-minute break, and we'll start off with maybe going back to Professor Roger Hilsman and what your relationship with him was like, and how did that feel, interacting with such a prominent figure?

BILLO: Roger Hilsman taught a large lecture course at Columbia School of International Relations. He was a specialist on Southeast Asia. He had been a participant in Merrill's Marauders [5307th Composite Unit (Provisional)] in World War II in Burma [now Myanmar]. He loved to talk war stories, and he was very opinionated. And I vaguely remember his lectures on Laos and the neutrality negotiations on Laos. This would have been in—these lectures took place in 1966, '67 period.

I remember him talking about Vietnam and about how the prosecute the Vietnam War. He had strong views. He came across as a very self-confident—and I gave him the benefit of the doubt, that he, as a former operative in Burma, knew something about jungle warfare, and as a West Post grad he certainly had the training to be credible. There were some occasions when there'd be an ugly story in the newspaper referring to the fact that Roger Hilsman was persona non grata in the Johnson administration, and he always—when asked about it, he'd deflect those stories, and he'd maintain this kind of confident air that he was in charge and he knew better.

It turned out, as the history books show and the Pentagon Papers ["Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force"] reveal, that Hilsman was instrumental in approving a rash telegram that was sent to Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.] in Saigon in November of 1963—it was either October or November of '63—essentially giving Lodge and the U.S. mission the green light to back a coup d'état against President Diệm. And this, the history books will show, was a pivotal moment in our involvement in the

Vietnam War. And following Diệm's murder by the coup plotters, the Vietnamese government never regained any kind of political unity or momentum, which only sapped any efforts that we had to counter the challenge of the North Vietnamese.

So this is all well-documented material. It's just ironic that I crossed paths with Professor Hilsman, and it was something that's still vividly etched in my mind after all these years.

DIM: So you mentioned your time at Columbia was between '66 and '67, and we're amping up our involvement in Vietnam. Protests are amping up. What was the sense on campus, in New York City or just within you, yourself, with the war and a lot of the animosity, especially among students, towards the war?

BILLO: Yeah, that's an interesting question. Yeah, the war was more and more prominently treated on the evening news. By then there were several correspondents from each of the television networks on the ground in Vietnam, and so if one were a student or any aware person in our society, you were shown very graphic images of fighting and operations in Vietnam. So it began to get very, very real.

At this time, a lot of the students had figured out that maybe the Johnson administration was playing fast and loose with the facts, that there was—LBJ's personality led to a lot of deceptive behavior. The journalists would uncover various deceptions. I'm thinking—for example, just to pick one example, the Tonkin Gulf resolutions. And they—students sensed that this thing wasn't going well and that the administration was not being totally honest. And, hey, guess what: Almost every male student had a draft card and was susceptible to possible Selective Service [System] draft notices coming in, especially when the big buildups started in 1965, '66, and the draft calls doubled.

At that point—you asked about the atmosphere at Columbia. There was a lot of student organization against the Vietnam War, against the administration. You could see it daily when you headed up to campus. Students later on, I think, invaded some of the offices of the professors and looked through their files. Columbia University was found to have contracts with the government, like the Institute for Defense Analyses. And this was like red meat for the antiwar people. This was

probably after I left Columbia, after I graduated, but they went after the administration and the Columbia president, big time.

So, yeah, I would say, yeah, 1966, ’67 things were really amping up, and it kind of—that being said, it kind of caught me by surprise, in the sense that I left Columbia in May of ’67 and didn’t have any firm place to go, so I was ripe for getting a letter from my draft board.

Yeah, it was—I had taken the Foreign Service exam in the spring of ’67, and I passed it. That was the written exam. This all gets back to the general vision I had of joining the Foreign Service and playing to my skills as a political analyst and a linguist.

The next hurdle was I needed to pass the oral exam, and that was scheduled for July of ’67. So, yeah, it was a confusing—to answer your original question, it was a confusing time, and people were—one’s peers were constantly bringing up the Selective Service System and, “Hey, what’s your status?” And people were looking to extend at universities in order to maintain their deferments.

And one of the ironies of some of this business relating to Selective Service was that some people could obtain medical deferments because of asthma or you name it, and a friend of mine pointed out later on that a lot of the people who had been the biggest athletes and the toughest and most self-confident young men turned out to have football injuries that miraculously made them undraftable. And it was kind of a strange and bizarre thing, so that you—the guys that one knew who were maybe nerdy in school—they—I’m generalizing like crazy, but in some ironic way, those guys might have been first in line to be drafted, and the people who one would have imagined to be infantrymen got deferments because of legitimate knee injuries, et cetera.

DIM: Well, so you’re graduating Columbia in May of ’67? Your draft card has not come up?

BILLO: Within a month, I got a letter from my local draft board, which was in a neighboring town, Mount Vernon, New York, asking me: “Hi, Mr. Billo. What are *you* up to these days?” And I had to reply that I was no longer in university, no longer in graduate school. So within a short period—I can’t remember

the details right now—they sent me a letter inviting me to a pre-induction physical exam held in the Battery of New York City, way downtown, in Manhattan. So that got my attention very quickly.

Meanwhile, I was summoned to New York City to take the oral part of the Foreign Service exam. I don't know how, but I impressed these guys well enough that I passed that, and so if the sequencing could work out, I had a chance of avoiding the draft. And I'd already burned my bridges with Navy OCS back in the spring of '64, so—and so it was a very tense few months there.

It turned out that I did go to Manhattan and have the pre-induction physical. I was pronounced fit for military service. And that was in October of '67. And then I—at that point, I was straining to find out when the Foreign Service would actually invite me to Washington to enter the basic training program.

So without spinning this out in great depth, I told my draft board that I had been approved by the Foreign Service and I was waiting any day to go to Washington, and they—at a certain point in November of '67, they invited me to the draft board for a "meeting" of the draft board, which was me and the three voting members, sitting at a table. Of course, in those days—because you know that each draft board had to fulfill a certain quota of numbers, and one never knew—like, my board was in Mount Vernon. No one knew whether they were anywhere near fulfilling their quotas.

This was—as I said earlier, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was really ramping up, so a person like me was prime bait. I went to this meeting in Mount Vernon. There were three reps at the table. The clerk of the draft board—this is after I had explained that I was seeking a deferment because I was joining the government and I was going to be working overseas, et cetera, et cetera, for the Department of State, that the clerk of the draft board said, "I vote we draft this guy."

DIM: Wow.

BILLO: And the second person said, "Well, I don't think so." So it all came down to this third individual, who was a businessman, local businessman, who was a volunteer. It wasn't his full-

time job to be on the draft board. He was older. It was around 12 noon. He was probably on a lunch break, coming down. And I sensed he was a well educated man by his demeanor. And he said, “Hold on. Wait a minute. I think this young man could do more for our country working for the Department of State than as a draftee.” And so the vote went down two to one against this lady, the clerk who wanted to make sure that some Bronxville kid got on the next train to Fort Dix. So that was—that made my day [chuckles], as you can imagine.

They allowed me to proceed with this whole application to move to Washington, and it turned out, a couple of weeks later I got a letter from the Foreign Service, saying, “Please come to Washington on January 4, 1968, to enter this class. Your pay is $7,700 a year.” And then they had some line to the effect of: “If you don’t believe that you can make this date, please let us know.” [Chuckles.]

DIM: Little do they know.

BILLO: [Laughs.] So [chuckles] I was so thrilled to get this letter. I was going to be there for that appointment in D.C. come hell or high water. So the only reason I’m going through all this in this detail is that—and it’s a fairly obvious thing for me to say—is that I was by no means a war hero or any kind of a super patriotic, brave individual. As you can tell from what I’ve just said, I was trying every stratagem to forestall the draft and to find some other niche for myself, and so in that respect and for the record, it has to be said that I was not any different than a lot of folks in that era of my age, who joined Reserve units, people like Senator [William W.] “Bill” Bradley, who had connections and got into a Reserve unit, and countless others that I’m not even going to attempt to name. I was—I was—I wanted no part of—of joining the U.S. Army, and that’s all I have to say about that.

DIM: Okay. So you made it into the Foreign Service.

BILLO: I have to say, in just one footnote—

DIM: Absolutely.

BILLO: —I experienced a lot of pain in this decision area because it wasn’t in my family background or character or upbringing to run away and go to Canada, like a lot of people in that era

were doing, so I was—I always felt a lot of stress, was the simplest way of putting it, that I had to do the—do what was asked. I wasn't going to be a deserter. That was just not—not in the cards. No way. So, again, that's a chapter that one will never know how that might have played out, if I'd been drafted and you know, what kind of—every person who's in the [U.S.] Army has a specialty. There's a name for it, and I can't remember what it is. So not everyone in the Army is an infantryman, as you know.

DIM: Right.

BILLO: And there are scores of other tasks and specialties that are distributed, so—but as a youngster, you—you can't—you can't necessarily see that. And so—yeah. So, again, I can't—if I had been drafted, I don't know which of these specialties I might have followed, and blah, blah, blah.

One thing for sure, though: I wasn't going to be posted to West Germany to defend the NATO frontier. That was for sure.

DIM: So maybe along with that, how did your family react to you joining the Foreign Service?

BILLO: They were okay with that. They understood that I had some facility for foreign languages and that I had long since burned the medical school bridge. But the part that they didn't realize on January of '68 was that I was about to be assigned to the CORDS [Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support] in Vietnam. So that—that's why I say they were pretty much okay with—you know, they made their peace with it, that I'd be doing honorable work for the United States, I'd be using a skill set that I had developed, that I would be working with good people and that I was a young guy trying to live the dream of John F. Kennedy. You know, "Ask not what your country…" So I guess they made their peace with this idea.

DIM: Okay. So end of '67, you made it into Foreign Service. When do you begin your language training?

BILLO: Yeah. Well, we had a two-month basic training course.

DIM: Okay.

BILLO: And there were some, let's say, 40 people in my entering class. And ten of us—at the end of the two months, they have a ceremony where they announce your first assignment, and ten of us, including me, were sent—were assigned to the CORDS program in Vietnam, Civil Operations for [sic; and] Revolutionary Development Support. This was a program that LBJ had endorsed. Was run by Robert [W.] Komer. The thrust of it [chuckles], as LBJ would have put it, was to send trained Americans out into the field "to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese." And these Americans were also language capable, all to the good, because they could pick up nuances of what was going on out in the provinces and gain a better appreciation of where things stood and help the economic development in the countryside, which was—you know, the counterpart to the fighting war was the economic development and social development side of the coin.

DIM: So this is the beginning of '68?

BILLO: Yeah, this was March of '68. So to answer your earlier question, I started Vietnamese language training in April of '68. It was six hours a day, five days a week for ten months.

DIM: Very intense.

BILLO: Yeah. And it's a tone language, as you know.

DIM: Mm-hm.

BILLO: So it was something different than anything I'd ever experienced. I mean, I have to say a couple things. First of all, learning that I'd been assigned to the CORDS program was a total shock, a jaw-dropping shock. I didn't realize that that was even in the cards. And my buddies, of course, from high school era, who had been following my path, the whole graduate school business and then the foreign service—they had sort of a good laugh at my expense, because I was going to Vietnam anyway.

And the other thing I have to say right off the bat is that the Tet Offensive took place in January of '68, and I—even when I was in graduate school at Columbia in '66, '67, I already had this intuitive sense that things weren't going well in Vietnam and that they had revolving door governments after Diệm was assassinated. So even as early as '66, '67, I

was skeptical. And then come the Tet Offensive in ’68, I lost all faith that this was an enterprise that was going anywhere. And so I just want to say for the record that starting a ten-month language course, I was by no means a true believer in this thing. You know, I—I did what I was told.

I’d exhausted all my options at this stage. I’d only just [chuckles] managed to escape the clutches of the Mount Vernon, New York, draft board, so that was fresh in my mind. I wasn’t going to defect to Canada, and so it was a tricky, tricky time, you know, because you’re 22 years old, 23, and you—intellectually you can’t really believe in what you’re about to do in terms of a mission. Washington is in total chaos and disarray because LBJ has announced that he’s not running for reelection.

DIM: That’s right.

BILLO: Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated, and the—

DIM: [Robert F.] “Bobby” Kennedy is assassinated.

BILLO: Bobby Kennedy in the summer, and then the antiwar people were marching on the Pentagon, right, left and center, and getting arrested. So that was the context in which I was embarking on this venture. It was surreal. But so much of the whole coming years of my work was surreal, so—

Anyway, I think I answered your question. I mean, we studied the language in small groups of five or six students per teacher. The teachers were native speakers. You learned sort of a lot about—through the teachers, about the Vietnamese culture. Every once in a while, they’d have “off-sites,” I guess or we’d be brief by military and other folks about the policy in Vietnam.

We were given a few days’ training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, to learn how to handle weapons, like the M16 rifle.

DIM: Oh, wow.

BILLO: And I went down there in May of ’68 to attend this so-called training course.

DIM: Can you explain for the recorder what you’re showing me?

BILLO: Oh. I have a certificate—(The Army is big into certificates. So is the State Department, for that matter.)—that shows that I completed the provincial senior adviser training course at the [U.S. Army] Special Warfare School [now U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School] in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. As I recall, we were there for four or five days. We received a lot of briefings by young captains about what to expect when we got to Vietnam if we were going out to the provinces. I don't remember a whole lot of detail. They detonated a couple of explosives near us, without telling us, to watch how high we could jump off the bleachers. They were having fun with the civilians. We were, like—I forget; let's say a group of 20 or 30 civilians?

And we got to go to a firing range and fire M16 rifles, which were—that was a very impressive weapon, and the bullets were easily four inches long. And we were firing them at a distance of a couple hundred yards, targets a couple hundred yards. I mean, it was—it was fun, from a macho perspective, but by no means was any kind of training for actual, potential combat duty or problems in Vietnam—I mean, I guess—I guess if I'd come under some fire and someone had thrust a rifle in my hands, I would have said, "Yeah! I know this thing. I've been here." But it was—it was sort of—I don't know what the purpose of it was, really, except to toughen us up in some level.

DIM: So was this the extent of your weapons training? Basic training for Foreign Service does not deal with any sort of combat?

BILLO: No. The Foreign Service, as I know you're aware, staffs our embassies in capitals all over the world, and our job is to defend United States' political interests vis-à-vis the host country, to deliver policy papers to the host government, to persuade them of our positions, and so—and then we write a lot of analytical reports on conditions in the host country, economic reports, political reports, make prognostications about which way the local government is likely to go on a particular matter. So the whole Vietnam chapter was way, way out of the traditional line of duty of a Foreign Service officer.

Parenthetically, lately, with the U.S. presence in Afghanistan in particular, the Foreign Service was asked to send young men and women to do provincial work in Afghanistan, at

remote sites, so it was, in a way, a replication of the CORDS program except this would have been in 2008 to—maybe even until today there are young Foreign Service people, civilians out in the provinces of Afghanistan, trying to do political and economic development work.

DIM: Mmm. How everything just cycles back is incredible.

So here you are, getting foreign language training, and you mentioned earlier that you grew up, most of undergrad, being relatively apolitical, and then going to Columbia Business School and then the International School, clearly getting more political background, becoming more aware of what was happening, all the things that happened in the mid '60s with the several assassinations and great political turmoil. And then you enter into this military capacity that isn't direct combat, and you did mention that you didn't—you didn't really believe in the war in Vietnam. But did you believe in your particular mission? Did you think that economic development could in some way help the war effort or help the Vietnamese people in any way that the U.S. was able to?

BILLO: I was pretty jaded. I've talked to a lot of Americans who were in Vietnam early on, in the [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower administration, and they—that was well before the insurgency had heated up in the Mekong Delta. And so they felt that they were doing effective work in helping the South Vietnamese get organized.

But by the time I arrived, you know,—not to state the obvious, but President Diệm had been assassinated, we had revolving door governments in Saigon, there'd been a series of prominent attacks by the enemy in Biên Hòa and Pleiku. [Secretary of Defense Robert S.] McNamara and the leaders in the Pentagon, for me, had lost credibility. You know, they—they would decide on an additional tranche of American troops. And so, you know, at first it was 100,000, and then it was 200,000, and then ultimately it was 500,000. And so it was hard for me to attach any serious trust.

Of course, by the time I arrived after ten months of language training, it was already '69, and we had more or less smothered the problem with our presence, both military and civilian, and at some level we'd taken over the country from the Vietnamese. And then if all went well, of course, the idea

was that America would hand the country back after we'd repelled the North Vietnamese.

And to top it all off, [President Richard M.] Nixon, [Secretary of State Henry A.] Kissinger and [Secretary of Defense] Melvin [R.] Laird took office in early '69, and they—they had introduced Vietnamization, which was an actual diminishing of the American military presence.

So you asked me, well, could I see any prospect of what I was doing I the field having any impact, it was all too late, in my opinion. It was—no, I couldn't. So what did I do? Well, I was—my job was in the U.S. embassy economic office, and my job was to analyze economic developments in the country, so I wasn't in the business of building schools or putting in wells or growing better strains of rice to help the impoverished folks in the countryside; I was in the business of analyzing what was going on, putting it on paper and sending it to my—up the hierarchy.

So I hope I'm answering your questions.

DIM: Absolutely.

BILLO: The part I didn't mention was that sometime during my language training, I took the initiative to seek out the [U.S.] Agency for International Development, AID folks responsible for Vietnam. And I persuaded them that I had the credentials and I would soon have the language training to do economic analysis, and that this turned out to be one of my more successful moves. So when I arrived in Saigon in March or April of '69, I think it was, I was assigned to the joint embassy AID economic office.

So that—that kind of got me out of the CORDS as an institution, and ultimately they—just to finish the thought, I—ultimately, in Saigon, they decided to nominate me as a economic reporting officer, and I would have joint responsibility to the embassy in Saigon and to the deputy for CORDS in IV [pronounced Four] Corps, which is in the Mekong Delta region, who was John Paul Vann.

DIM: Yeah.

BILLO: And so I had two bosses, and it was cool. I was 25, and people actually read the things I wrote.

And the other cool and advantageous thing was that I—since I arrived in ’69, it was a quiet period from a military standpoint. The enemy had shot its bolt in the Tet Offensive, and they needed two years to regroup, so I was able to travel all over South Vietnam. I never carried a weapon. I drove frequently. They assigned an International Harvester Scout, four-wheel drive vehicle, and when I wasn’t driving, I was taking short hops by aircraft from one location to another. I could drop in on any given provincial capital and talk to the Americans there or talk to the rice merchants.

So I’m kind of getting ahead of myself here, but joining the U.S. embassy economic office was—played to my strengths and gave me a feeling that I was growing, both intellectually and otherwise. I’m not sure that I would have had that same outcome if I’d been down in a remote province or district doing as honorable work, but it was nothing that was in my background, so—yeah, it was—it was a very, very intense period right around then.

So I—[Thumbs through some papers.] I was going to show you a document which I’m not finding, so—oh. [Continues to search.] This is an organization chart for IV Corps in the Mekong Delta.

DIM: This is a document that Charlie has just handed to me.

BILLO: Yeah. And it’s dated June of ’69. And so it’s proof positive that I actually was at this location [chuckles] and that I had this title, and these were the colleagues that I dealt with. It was a very interesting organization. As you can see, it was half military and half civilian. And so that’s where I learned a lot about dealing with the U.S. military up close. We kept—we kept very busy, and I felt that I had some definite responsibility.

And the only other thing that I would say—and here I’m bragging a little bit—was that I—I developed a reputation in Saigon as a guy who knew the Mekong Delta, who traveled all over the Delta, who spoke Vietnamese. There were relatively few Americans who spoke Vietnamese. And so I became sort of a go-to guy in my little area for visitors coming out—there were countless visitors in that period. All throughout the history of our involvement, there were people visiting from Washington who had been asked by the White

House or asked by the NSC [National Security Council] or asked by somebody to go out and do a study mission and find out what's really happening in Vietnam.

So these guys often, occasionally came down to IV Corps, and I would take them around and expose them to various provincial capitals, and we'd ride the canals. We'd often—the river obviously plays a prominent role in the economy, and for a few piasters [Vietnamese currency], one could engage one of the local fishermen or farmers to take you down the river to explore around and see what's going on.

So that became, over time, after I'd been in country for several months and proven myself—that became—as I said, I became sort of a go-to guy that people trusted. There were some Americans in Saigon that probably, if they had their choice, would not have wanted to venture out of the capital, and it was easier just to stay put.

So the deputy for CORDS was former Colonel John Paul Vann.

DIM: Wow.

BILLO: He was a civilian when I knew him and, again, a very controversial figure, and whole books have been written about him. I fortunately got along with him pretty well. I guess—I don't know, I must have done something that he liked, and he sent my reports up a chain of command. He sent them to the RAND Corporation. And this report here [presents document] is one I wrote on rice production and marketing in the Mekong Delta.

DIM: It's another document that you've handed to me.

BILLO: I just kept a copy. But for anyone who was intensely interested in how things worked in that society and the role of the Chinese rice merchants and the critical importance of rice in the Asian diet, this was a significant document. And the cool thing for me was that I found out later that some distinguished people at RAND in Santa Monica [California] had seen my work. So that was exciting.

I only—just to conclude this monologue by saying up until getting to Vietnam, I'd never really done anything in my life except being a student, and every youngster, including

yourself, is going to face that day when you leave the ivory tower.

And so that is at least some perspective on why this job I had and this luck that I enjoyed: landing a good job after the Tet Offensive, working with smart people and being a civilian, as opposed to an Army guy in Vietnam—you know, why this was so significant to me that all this came together after whatever, five or six months in Vietnam.

DIM: Thank you. That was a lot that you gave me.

BILLO: Yeah.

DIM: Maybe we can backtrack a little bit and piece through it part by part. So in the document that you gave, as you mentioned, while you were training, going through language training that you had passed protesters going to the Pentagon. What was that like? Did they interact with you at all? What was your perception of them?

BILLO: That's a tricky question because I had already said I wasn't a true believer in what I was engaged in, but I wasn't going to—for whatever reason, because of my background or my youth or my upbringing, I was not going to engage in rabble rousing, and not going to launch missiles [chuckles] at people, you know. On the other hand, I was smart enough to realize that some of the arguments that these antiwar people were advancing had some—some truth to them.

Yeah, it was—yeah. Of course, socially, on the weekends, you'd go to a party or go to a bar or something, and people would ask you, "Well, what are you up to these days?", you know, and then you'd have to sort of go through the whole thing about how you were studying Vietnamese. Yeah.

So these—yeah, it was—it was totally foreign to me, any concept of protesting of this kind. I will say that I was—later on, when the people were actually—the students were killed at Kent State [University]—

DIM: Right.

BILLO: That was a riveting thing. I could not believe that students who were just being students—and even there were some protests, I know, at Dartmouth in this era—could be fired on

by the National Guard! It was staggering. Yeah. But, I mean, later on, when Nixon came in—

DIM: In ’69.

BILLO: In ’69, he took office. They started wholesale arrest of protesters, and they had schemes of buses that were dedicated to—and so they’d arrest the students, put them on buses and take them to Robert [F.] Kennedy [Memorial] Stadium in D.C., for processing. You know, Nixon and people like John [N.] Mitchell, the attorney general were systematic, you know, in how they dealt with this.

But it was—there was a lot of torment, a lot of stress for me. And initially, when you’re in a ten-month program, the first couple months—you know, it’s—there’s no deadlines, you know? You just—but [chuckles] the closer you get to month eight, nine and ten, you know, suddenly it’s real, and then it becomes *really* stressful. Like, well, “What are you gonna wear—get your airline ticket? What stops are you gonna make to Saigon?” That was—so that was a period of time the whole country was riven in some level, and I was kind of a 20-something-year-old kid being tossed around in this thing.

Yeah, it was—even to the moment that I was on the plane coming into Tan Son Nhut Airport [sic; Air Base], I was stressed out, not knowing—and this is another lesson that one learns—you know, not knowing whether the plane was going to be shot at or whether there’d be a bomb detonated that first night—when you read the daily newspaper and you see a photograph of Saigon and the caption is “VC Rocket Mauls Downtown Saigon” or “the Port” or something, and you see a photograph, and I used to in those days think, *My God! If that’s taking place yesterday on that spot, the whole city must be alive with rockets coming in.* Photographs can be so distorting and so misleading. You could also say, you know, that those photographs of those protesters at the Pentagon—it was, like, *Oh, my God! You know, the whole place is coming undone!* And it’s nowhere near that. You know, it—anyway, it’s a simply, basic lesson that—don’t trust what you see in the papers, and don’t trust photographs.

Because I came in, and I guess someone met me at the airport and we went to some officers’ billet somewhere or some USAID hotel, and I think I took a taxi to work the next

day. But that whole first few weeks in Saigon, I was real jittery, you know, because you just never knew—the city was way overpopulated and so congested and noisy, and motorbikes and bicycles, automobiles all commingled. Yeah, when you couldn't be clear as to who was near you and why, and—you know. So those first few weeks, until I'd acclimated and figured the situation out, were—yeah, were trying and stressful. You go—yeah.

As I say, not to repeat, but up till then, I'd never done anything in my life except be a student, so I had no baseline, and so that's part of the sort of learning process, the learning curve.

DIM: Thank you

Actually, I'd like—I was wondering if you would be willing to talk about this letter.

BILLO: Oh.

DIM: Who this came from and—

BILLO: Right, right, right, right.

DIM: —explain a little bit for the tape recording.

BILLO: Yeah. This is a copy of a letter from Secretary of State William P. Rogers to me dated March 7, 1969. He had just been appointed Secretary of State by Richard Nixon and the final day of our Vietnam training, our group of whatever it was—20? I can't remember now; 15, 20?—were invited to a meeting at the office of the Secretary of State, and it was kind of a morale boosting effort, and it was a laying on of the hands by the Secretary of State, and "Go get 'em, fellas" and—it lasted maybe ten minutes, and then we were ushered out.

What happened was I—I had been—this whole notion of going to Vietnam and being inducted into the CORDS program, for which I felt I had no affinity for—

DIM: This is before you went to the AID?

BILLO: Yeah. And even after I went to the AID office, I had no sort of assurance of what my job was going to be. They talked a

good game about working in the Joint Economic Office, but I—you know. So I left the Secretary of State's office, and I was slightly angry or perturbed, and I went downstairs, and I got access to a typewriter and wrote him a letter, saying that—I know I was kind of boasting that I'd had all this graduate training and all this and that, and I didn't think it was appropriate for—I thought I'd joined the Foreign Service in order to serve in our traditional embassies, and I didn't think it was appropriate for folks with "this background" to be assigned to what I called—I think I put in the letter what I called "Peace Corps work." And I guess—I didn't say this, but I guess my point was, if I'd wanted to do Peace Corps work, I would have applied to the Peace Corps. That was the unstated message.

So [chuckles] I went back upstairs to the seventh floor, and I bumped into this staff aide outside the office, and I said, "I was just in this meeting with Secretary Rogers, and I didn't particularly like what was going on, and I wrote him a letter. Here it is." And the guy took it! That was a surprise.

So then a week later, I'm at home, and I get this response from Rogers. It was just a token response, but he said, "Thank you for your letter of March 7. I appreciate your frankness." I guess I must have been pretty frank. And then he says, "You have my best wishes for your forthcoming assignment. Sincerely, William P. Rogers."

So it was, like—on the one hand, he appreciated my frankness; on the other hand, it was: "You're goin' to Vietnam, buddy." [Laughs.] And so I always—it's not often one gets a letter from the Secretary of State. I guess this goes back to something in my father's training or my family background, in which he always said, you know, "Tell people the truth. Tell them what you think." You know, in his realm it was medicine, and you're an intern or you're in training. You're standing before a patient. You know: Don't waffle around, as an intern, you know? And even with a most senior person on staff, they honor you if you're direct and you don't sugarcoat things or you don't—you're afraid to speak the truth to power. That was the overall message that I grew up with, you know? So this was my effort to speak truth to power.

Later on, I learned that the Foreign Service introduced a policy right after we left, which was that they wouldn't accept

anyone for basic officer training unless those individuals agreed to be assigned to the CORDS program. So there was no, like, suggestion that you might land a posting in Buenos Aires or London or Moscow. Yeah. If you agreed to come to Washington and report for duty, you were going nowhere else but the CORDS program in Vietnam.

So, you know, this is not proof positive of cause and effect, but, you know, it's an association with—who knows? Who knows how these decisions got made? But I—I always found that—and the older one gets and the more you read about things like Vietnam and other policy, major policy decisions, like the U.S. toppling of Saddam Hussein, that if people in responsibility would just speak their minds and get it out, that the place will be better off, you know. It always helps if you have a fallback position when they fire you. I grant you that. You know, it always helps to have family money or some—take over Dad's business at home. Or of people at the top get tired of listening it you speaking truth to power, it is nice to have a niche to fall back on.

But I was always told, or persuaded, that: "Hey, you know, life's short. Just, you know, be direct and"—one of my heroes is Brent Scowcroft, who owed a lot to—to the Bush family. But, damn it, he was going to tell the administration what he thought about the idea of going into Iraq. And he'd burn his bridges with the Bush family. But you have to honor people like that, who—who put everything on the line and risk—risk a lot for getting unpopular views. And so that's another lesson in the Vietnam exercise.

DIM: And on the subject of people giving their all in tough situations, you mentioned briefly the 1968 attack on the U.S. embassy. I was wondering if you have any things on that.

BILLO: Yeah. During the Tet Offensive, the Viet Cong sent a sapper team [members of the Viet Cong's elite C-10 Sapper Battalion] that actually blew a hole in the outside defensive wall of the embassy, and the VC were running around in the compound at night, trying to blast through the front door. There were three Marine guards defending the front door, and there was a duty officer from the Foreign Service upstairs. He had the duty for that particular week. He happened to be on duty the night the VC broke in, and he had to react right away to take steps to defend the front door of the embassy. And one Marine was—was down, and it

appeared that the Viet Cong had the power to break in, which would have been a horrific psychological and political effect for America, to have its own embassy invaded by the enemy.

And there ensued a long battle. The U.S. called in Military Police, who were working that night in and around the embassy. They were called in to deal with the Viet Cong. And my colleague, [E.] Allan Wendt, who was an economist, had to come down and rescue the Marine who was wounded and drag him onto the elevator, and he had to call the air base in Tan Son Nhut airport for assistance to evacuate the Marine, and he had to man the telephone, direct line to Washington, under very, very dangerous circumstances. He had to speak to the duty officer in Washington and explain that the embassy was under attack.

After several hours in which the air base at Tan Son Nhut tried to land a helicopter on the roof to bring in weapons and help and evacuate the wounded Marine, they finally succeeded in landing, and within an hour more, the attack was neutralized. This was a very, very ticklish and dangerous situation.

Allan Wendt had the composure to be credible with the people in Washington, and he was later given the award for heroism. In another hour or so, it was daylight. Bodies were lying all over the compound. The sappers had failed in their mission. General [William C.] Westmoreland showed up, looking very—very West Point. Directed the embassy personnel to be back at their office, at their desk, by noon. I'm very, very emotional about this. [Weeping.] Because Allen Wendt was my boss. He was a civilian. And I always ask myself, *What would I have done under similar circumstances, a similar situation if I'd been on duty that night?* It was a absolutely critical performance.

And this brings to mind another lesson or fact that's not widely known. It's the risk that U.S. Foreign Service people are under almost every day of every year in a variety of settings, that is underappreciated and little understood, and occasionally gets publicity, as when our ambassador to Libya [J. Christopher Stevens] was killed in Tripoli [sic; Benghazi] in the last couple of years [on September 12, 2012]. And it's not widely known that more Foreign Service

officers have been killed in the line of duty than the U.S. Secret Service, whose role is to defend the president.

A friend of mine pointed out recently, and I don't know if this is factual information, but a Foreign Service colleague of mine told me that the U.S. Coast Guard has suffered two Coast Guard employees killed in its recent history—let's say since—I don't know the actual period in question, but let's just say since World War II. It can be looked up. And that the number of Foreign Service officers killed in the line of duty is over a hundred.

DIM: We're taking a break. [Emotional moment in interview.]

[Recording interruption.]

DIM: All right, so we're back, and thank you so much, Charlie, for sharing that story. So with all of this, coming into Vietnam, the '68 attack, all that's going on before, how are you preparing entering into country? What do you do with the family? Was there any sort of talk amongst other—your other Foreign Service classmates?

BILLO: I was essentially scared and didn't have the experience to gauge what I was getting into when I landed in Saigon. I, of course, did talk to Forest Service colleagues who had come back from Saigon, or I picked up snippets of info about what it was like. I guess I also knew someone who worked in the Joint Economic office, who helped me settle in and answered a lot of my questions.

My family was—I was unmarried, but my parents were pretty stressed out about the whole prospect, and they probably, at some level—my father probably said, *Well, it'll probably do him some good [to] get out there.* He probably had doubts about my long-range career prospects.

I remember—not to over-personalize this, but I remember telling my mother that "if things go sour and I get bumped off, don't let anyone stand up and say, 'Charlie Billo was a great patriot and really believed in what he was doing.'" I didn't—I didn't—that was how sort of worried I was, I guess. And I just—I could not allow that someone would later stand up and—because I—I was smart enough and well read enough

and been around Washington and New York enough to know that this enterprise in Vietnam was not looking good and that the more people we put in, the—it wasn't doing any good.

And so anyway, I guess that's an answer to your question. I had a great support network. You know, I was reviewing this weekend some letters that I had written home. The family was constantly bombarding me with letters when I was in Vietnam.

Yeah. I mean, my fraternity brothers at Brown, you know—they were married, and some of them—one of them had already done Navy OCS, and he was starting his career, and he was sending me care packages. And so, yeah, it was—I had good support.

The thing is, and the piece you have to know, is that after a month or two in Saigon, when there was no enemy action at all, when I was surrounded by all these highly-trained economists, I realized that—and this is—I'm somewhat embarrassed to say this, that the embassy people—we were living in our own little cocoon, and I have to repeat I'm somewhat embarrassed to say this: We—a typical day, when I was in Saigon, was work from 9 to 12; 12 to 3, you're on lunch break. You walk over to the Cercle Sportif tennis club and swimming pool and grab a tennis game with your buddies, then have a quick sandwich and come back to the office.

So my so-called service in Vietnam was so different than the average American that it's almost embarrassing to relate. And that's why I want to make the point that the people who were in the U.S. military and who were combat officers have nothing but my highest respect for their bravery and their performance in the jungle, for the hazardous duties, the chopper pilots, the Medevac people. I have nothing but the highest respect for their bravery, and I doubt I could have functioned in those roles.

And so in that framework, I'm embarrassed to have to relate that. We were—first of all, there were literally thousands of civilians in 1969 in Saigon, and it was such a bizarre environment because these civilians had to be—had to have housing and had to have food, restaurants. So you had this effort on the part of the Pentagon and the AID and State to

re-create a little bit of America, and so there were officers' restaurants on the rooftop gardens of certain high-rise buildings; there was a PX [post exchange] in Saigon, where one could drive on the weekend and do your PX shopping for vegetables and meat as well as—

DIM: What does PX stand for?

BILLO: Post exchange. Every Army base around the world has a post exchange.

DIM: Okay.

BILLO: And civilians are often given acc- —government civilians have access to this, so people could be seen leaving the PX, you know, having purchased their tape recorders and their televisions and their Samsonite suitcases. Yes, Saigon was a—it was a very surreal environment. [Two loud mechanical tones.]

DIM: We'll be taking a short break.

[Recording interruption.]

DIM: [Soft mechanical tone.] Okay. We're back.

BILLO: I was describing the surreal situation in Saigon with the thousands of Americans there, civilian and military. Kind of a bureaucratic—[loud mechanical tone]—that had formed up, and how—[a series of loud mechanical tones]—

DIM: We're actually going to stop for today. We're having minor technical problems. And we'll reconvene tomorrow, August 15th, 2016.

[Recording interruption.]

DIM: This is Chileta Dim, and I am in Berry Library, Baker-Berry Library, in Hanover, New Hampshire. It's August 15th, 11:30, and I'm here with Charlie Billo.

So thank you again, Charlie, for meeting up with me again. Yesterday we had to end before we concluded with our interview, and we're continuing today. Yesterday we were talking, when we left off, about sort of the atmosphere in Saigon entering in '69, when you were beginning your service, and can you pick up from there?

BILLO: Yes. Let me start out by pointing out that I was present in Saigon in two installments. The first was in the spring of '69, as you just mentioned. Then I was transferred to Can Tho [pronounced TUH], the regional capital in the Mekong Delta, and I lived there for some ten months, and then after that, I was brought back to the embassy in Saigon, due to some policy shifts that the embassy undertook. And the second installment lasted approximately six or eight months, as I recall. And I left Vietnam in about October of 1970.

So what I was saying yesterday was that, first of all, Saigon resembled physically a provincial French town, such as Toulouse: the architecture, the way the boulevards were laid out, the size of the city. It was quite a beautiful, small, provincial town, with villas, with shuttered windows to keep the sun out and protect against the monsoon.

And on top of that, when I arrived in '69, was this overwhelming American presence. It was a very congested city, as I said earlier. It was way over-populated. There were literally thousands of Americans, including civilians, present. We all needed lodging. We all needed food. And so then what I saw almost immediately was that the government had provided most all creature comforts that one could find back in the States for the American contingent. And so there was this surreal situation of being in a war zone and yet enjoying restaurants, enjoying the post exchange, as I mentioned yesterday. The embassy had a swimming pool, and one was able to circulate by car, at one's convenience. There was all sorts of support mechanisms, including access to Stateside television.

So the image I'm trying to create is this overwhelming, smothering American presence. In fact, for a lot of different reasons, the U.S. had to trim back or alter the French Colonial architecture and all, in order to suit the U.S. military's needs for heavy transport going through the city. There was a lot of pollution due to heavy trucks as well as motorbikes. It was—day to day, it was fairly chaotic.

Now, as an embassy employee, I had the advantage of dedicated housing. And, as I mentioned, the government rented a number of houses or villas from the Vietnamese, and we were more or less—in my two installments in Vietnam, I lived in one of these villas, and we had servants, and we had guards posted outside.

I'm mentioning this by way of contrast to some of the military officers and enlisted people, their situation. I met a couple of acquaintances that I'd had back in the U.S. One of them was posted in Biên Hòa, which was quite close to Saigon—

DIM: Do you remember a name?

BILLO: I—I—I will come forth with his name. He's since deceased.

DIM: Oh.

BILLO: He invited me up to Biên Hòa, and I saw his—what they called in those days a "hooch." It was like a small dormitory room, and each—let's say there were ten enlisted men to the dormitory; each one had a locker like one would have back in school, to hang all their worldly belongings, and —they probably—they—I don't remember precisely, but they may have had bunk beds.

And so that was how a lot of Americans wound up. And so I wanted to draw the distinction between the seemingly—seeming unfairness of this whole involvement, where you had folks in Saigon who were—they were nicknamed the "Saigon warriors," quote-unquote, and they had many advantages that they would have had had they never left the United States.

And so there was this sharp divide, which was part and parcel of some of the tensions involved in a lot of the decision making and approach that was adopted in prosecuting this war, and I hesitate to even talk about it because the overwhelming majority of draftees probably, I'm guessing, never had access to what I—the situation that we enjoyed. And it's—I have nothing but respect [weeps] for those people.

I told you yesterday that we typically would break for lunch around noon and walk over to the Cercle Sportif, which was

a tennis and swimming club that had started in the French Colonial period. It was like something one would see in a movie about Colonial period: a large clubhouse with a veranda, a large swimming pool. Oftentimes one would see the French businessmen who were still in country. A lot of them were operating the rubber plantations and had investments in the rubber plantations, and they—they were often Corsicans. They would frequently show up at the Cercle Sportif. Their children would show up and be sunbathing by the pool. And we would have a game of tennis, and then, as I mentioned, grab a sandwich and go back to the office.

This may be a good moment to mention that the lifestyle I'm describing is one of—Saigon used to be called "the pearl of the Orient." And it was a jewel in the French Colonial crown, and the allure of the tropics is an element that I think is important. I can't say that I've seen much mention of this in the literature, but I may have missed it. But I always felt that the allure of Saigon and the lifestyle, the attractiveness of the people, of the climate explained a lot about the French presence. And in my—I'm guessing, I'm speculating that it explained a lot about the number of the foreign correspondents from France, who stayed on in Saigon for many, many decades: François Sully and others. It was a very seductive atmosphere.

I would be curious—I've talked to colleagues about this. I've talked to U.S. military veterans anecdotally about this, and I always felt that the atmosphere and the lifestyle of a westerner living in Indochina was a very, very seductive and important, potentially important matter. I don't want to take it any further than that right now.

DIM: Okay. Thank you.

So a little earlier, you mentioned that sort of these American comforts in Saigon where it was almost a smothering presence and they were almost pushing out, a bit, the French to make way for these American lifestyles. Did you at the time view that as odd, or is this—or were you so caught up in your work that you maybe didn't take notice of this?

BILLO: The thing about this when I arrived very late in the game, '69, was that the U.S. had undergone the big buildup, obviously, militarily, and they had a similar buildup in terms

of civilian officials. And by the time I got there, money was no object for this war, and so there were—there were a lot of folks on the civilian side that were hired, and there were a lot of contractors who were hired because there was—everyone had his own motives, but I would just say that there was good money to be made. There was probably better money to be made working for the AID program than one could get back in the States. There were—the government was paying the regular salary plus hazardous duty pay.

So by the time I got there, in many quarters in Saigon there was this large American presence and offices and high-rise apartments, and so it don't—in answering your question, I think I'm trying to describe what I always wondered about, which was what Saigon and the Mekong Delta looked like in the '50s, after 1955, in the early years, when General [Edward G.] Lansdale and the support group were there in small numbers, in this lovely, provincial town that had this wonderful allure of a southern French city.

It was a question mark I've harbored for many, many years. I've since filled in some of those answers, but essentially when I got there in '69—as I mentioned earlier, the U.S. had wrested the war away from the South Vietnamese to some degree, to a large degree. And we—we were there in numbers; we were going to fight the North Vietnamese; we were going to show the South Vietnamese how to do things in the—in the field.

And so I cited this one example of—this is perhaps just a trivial anecdote, but I cited the example of how the military, for their own requirements, had to clear out these wonderful tree-lined boulevards because oftentimes they would run a convoy right through the center of town, and they didn't want to be stopped by overhanging limbs from these trees.

So I—speaking personally, I found this sort of a shock, but it was a war, and the military had its motives, and they knew what they were doing, but that's just one example of the—there are multiple other examples of how this U.S., overwhelming numbers eventually interfered with the operations of the local society.

One other factor which I want to splice in is the elites in Saigon, the Vietnamese elites—some of the government ministers, some of the successful importers, businessmen,

some of the folks who were well connected politically or had worked for the French—they still had their role and their presence, and I knew several Vietnamese who attended a grammar school or high school that was run in the French way, and it was called the Lycée Marie Curie [de Saigon]. It was a school for young girls.

And so that was another factor that I—while I on the one hand accept that liberal democracy is good and it makes room for all kinds of pluralism, and that's the difference with the communist system. I always felt—I wondered on my question whether the U.S. would want to be working hand in glove with people who were holdovers from the French colonial period, who represented kind of an elitism.

Half these folks that I knew and went to Marie Curie didn't speak Vietnamese that well, because the instruction was in French. And so that's another sort of a piece to a very complicated environment in Saigon, that—it's hard to encapsulate everything, but we were—it was a very amorphous, free-flowing thing, and I—I just wondered whether—and I think this, later on—we did this the right way. We should throw our hand in with the peasants and the underrepresented people in the field, out in the provinces, rather than protecting wealthy people or even being seen to represent—to protect folks who hardly knew their own native language and weren't exactly representative of the country.

DIM: Thank you.

So you're talking a lot about French and American businessmen in the area, U.S. governmental workers, Vietnamese elites, and you mentioned near the end about your liking this idea of throwing your hat in with the peasants, with the underrepresented populations. I was wondering if you can talk a bit more about your relationship with the Vietnamese people in Saigon, in a non-working fashion.

BILLO: Well, I can't say all that much, unfortunately, except I will note—and this may sound like bragging, but I spoke pretty good Vietnamese, and [chuckles] one of the fantastic benefits for a westerner who spoke their language was that the man or person on the street would light up immediately when you exchanged pleasantries with them in their own language and in a credible, intelligible way. So I—I took great satisfaction in that. I enjoyed the banter. The South

Vietnamese were very friendly, by and large open, happy people.

And I—I think I did some good things in actually getting to know them, using the Vietnamese I had. And it was reciprocated, as I said, in that they made me feel like a VIP every time I used my Vietnamese. I don't know why they did that except they probably—I'm guessing that in the French Colonial period they never heard or they rarely heard a westerner who would bother to speak their language. That's the only possible explanation I could come up with.

But I—to be honest, most of my contacts and friends with the Vietnamese society were through work. I had the benefit of a couple of local Vietnamese advisers, I guess they were, who did a lot of the legwork for us in the economic section, and outstanding people who were willing to go to work for the Americans, even though—who knows, after the U.S. departed, what happened to these individuals.

But by "legwork" I mean—we would perform price surveys in the local market. We would send a Vietnamese, one of our advisers, down to the market to ask the daily rate for rice or the daily rate for fish. It's something that an outsider could never have done because you wouldn't get any accurate data. And so—

And we had a lot of what the embassy called "local hired employees," who basically did support work for us in the building. You know, they would—they were the ones who typed up our reports. I got along really well with those folks, again maybe because they heard me speak Vietnamese; they thought I was an acceptable, good guy. [His voice cracks.] I don't know what happened to a lot of those people. Some of them made it to the States. I know that. The embassy got them out in '75.

One of them was sent to—[Pause.]—I found out later one of them was sent to a communist reeducation camp multiple times. I mention that because if anyone thought that the U.S. had made a mistake trying to defend liberal democracy in Vietnam, they're dead wrong. We may have executed the job in a terrible way, and a lot of mistakes. But anyone who knows anything about these reeducation camps that were instituted after 1975 will know that this was serious business.

So I'm kind of strained from the subject. But since I was mentioning my colleagues in the office, at the Joint Economic Office, I might just remind people that this was the pre-digital era, pre-Internet, and the most we had was an IBM [International Business Machines Corporation] electric typewriters. There was a lot of use of carbon copies.

And another facet which I know has already been discussed in various places, like the Class of '64 volume on Vietnam that the difficulty of people deployed in Vietnam to contact their families back home—kind of by today's standards, pre-email—it was very primitive, and I vividly remember soldiers on the weekends in Saigon going to I believe it was probably the USO [United Service Organizations] office, which was a support office for the military in Saigon, and them queuing up to get ten minutes of a phone link to America and have a brief chat with their spouse or their children. That was just another element that I want to insert here to describe the times, in effect. We're talking here the '60s and '70s.

And so, yeah, that was very vividly etched in my mind. I mean, since you had asked me about the atmosphere in Saigon: The weekends, one would see enlisted men who were in Saigon for a couple nights' R&R [rest and recuperation] leave probably—I'm not sure where they came in from, probably nearby provinces, I'm guessing, maybe from Biên Hòa. And that was a whole eye opener because (a) by '69 we were—we had announced we were Vietnamizing the war or the U.S. was scaling back, taking people out, so the morale on the U.S. side was not the greatest.

And these folks were coming into Saigon on R&R, looking for a party, and I was probably—I was an observer and saw a slice of what was happening out there and that I'd never otherwise would have seen. It gave me a real insight or piece of the puzzle that I didn't see day to day. These folks were working the bars, and that culture has been well documented in various films, and I'm not going to elaborate on that. But, again, it was part of the—part of the mosaic in Saigon.

DIM: Thank you, Charlie. So I think you gave me a really clear description of what Saigon was like in '69, and so maybe we'll pivot a little bit and talk more about your day-to-day work. You mentioned yesterday that the bureaucracy that

you were involved with involved both military and civilians, so I was wondering if you could a little bit about what it was like to work with actual military men.

BILLO: Yeah, I'd like to do that. In my training course in Washington and when I got to Vietnam, the CORDS program had identified the top-of-the-line majors and lieutenant colonels in the Army and had decided that these were the people that were needed at the province level, to be province senior advisers. I got to know some of these people, and they indeed were very able. I mean, some of them were West Point grads. I mean, these are people that were so able, they'd been promoted at a very young age to major. They were occasionally lieutenant colonels, as I said. And they were no-nonsense, they were well educated, and I really respected those people.

Of course, in any large organization, including on the civilian side, there are echelons of people who—as I said earlier, who are present for their own motivation or their own goals, and some are more able than others. But I—I—I have a mixed kind of a take on the U.S. military. And I think, you know, up until, say, '66, '67, when the CORDS program was getting underway and they decided they needed to find these very, very qualified personnel, that—my reading tells me that the Army had adopted a more traditional approach and that there was a lot of careerism and a lot of filling in reports that would advance one's career.

And the thing that I want to point out—and maybe this is not the best place to point [it] out—was that—is that this war was intended or viewed, early on, in '63, '64, as this was going to be a "cakewalk." My sense, from my reading, is that in many ways, the U.S. Army—and I may be being unfair here, but that they—maybe the U.S. military in general wanted to get into this. After all, it was—it was a—you were—you were operating in a developing country. You're up against people wearing black pajamas. You represented the world's superpower. Hey, how could this possibly—how could they possibly hope to take us on?

And besides, my take is that the military—it was an opportunity for promotions. Every time there's a shooting war—I'm now talking—I don't know if this is true today, but in the '60s, when there's a war on, that's when the military is at its, quote-unquote "best." And by golly, captains are going to

get promoted to majors, et cetera, et cetera. And that's—hey, that's an advantage, too. So it was very, very complicated.

[Pause.] The other thing—and this is somewhat related—was the—I think the Army has, by the nature of the business, has its own rigidities, and we were talking yesterday about the failure to speak truth to power. In a hierarchical organization like the U.S. Army—and I never was in it—I don't think there's a whole lot of space for contradicting the colonel if you value your career.

Now, that may have changed. But by rigidities I mean an addition [*sic*; admitting] that counterinsurgency warfare in Vietnam did not pan out the way we thought it was going to be. So any neutral observer would have said—I mean, this is all documented in the Pentagon Papers, that it didn't work out. Any neutral observer would say, "Hey, let's—we're back home now. Let's do an after-action, comprehensive study of what happened, what went wrong, where we made mistakes and are we going to prosecute the next counterinsurgency."

To my utter astonishment [weeps], at the time of the decision to go into Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein, I read or heard that there was no such analysis available on the shelf that was a comprehensive study of how to conduct a counterinsurgency war and lessons learned from the Vietnam experience. If David [H.] Petraeus had the brilliance and the insight to initiate such a document—and from what I've read, during the Iraq involvement he required a systematic review of what happened in the past in Vietnam and lessons learned and how we got to do this successfully.

And so you asked me what I thought, working next to the U.S. military. Those are some anecdotes. I had some great contacts. When I lived in the delta with people of varying ranks, from captain up to lieutenant general, smart people, able, the best we've got, but there's a tendency in big organizations, including the civilian side, to group think, and organizations like the various branches of the military, don't have a lot of room for people who question authority. And the best leaders, in my opinion, are people like David Petraeus and others—I'm not going to try to list them—who have a sense that something's not right, and they have to ask questions and go back against their leaders and commanders, even if it's not career enhancing.

That's all I'm going to say.

DIM: Thank you.

So maybe we'll move on. You gave me a slight chronology of your time in country. So you were in Saigon for six to eight months, then ten months in Can Tho, and then you were back in Saigon, so maybe we can begin with your first period in Saigon. What were you doing? Who were you working with? And just sort of what was your general, day-to-day working experience?

BILLO: Right. That's very good. It was a memorable period. I told you yesterday I reported to Allan Wendt,—

DIM: Yes.

BILLO: —who was branch chief in the market analysis division. And my first few weeks and months were spent in familiarizing myself with Saigon, with the country, with the office routine, and it ended up that I was asked to go to IV Corps, the headquarters in Can Tho, to replace a very able AID officer named Lee Jones. Lee now lives in Rutland, Vermont, and is a part-time professor at Boston University. Lee Jones was one of those individuals who was dedicated to solving economic problems, who had worked in the developing countries, especially in Laos and did some good work there, who volunteered for employment in Saigon because he wanted to test his analytical abilities in a setting like Vietnam. And so he was—he was a, you know, interesting individual.

As I say, he asked to go to Vietnam. He did a great job. He was energetic and creative, and he—he was the best that the AID had. For a lot of different reasons, he wanted to transfer back to Saigon, I think for family reasons, and the office in Saigon was only too happy to have him come back because of his drive and creativity. So I replaced Lee in Can Tho.

But those first few months in Saigon, I think it was a question of me getting my feet on the ground and the office reviewing their whole array of employees and seeing where I could best fit in and what their overall needs were. So there's really not much to report.

I did make a couple of trips outside of Saigon, to the provinces, memorable trips. The idea was for me to get—get acquainted with the Mekong Delta region and then for later on, for Lee Jones to introduce me around to some of his contacts, be they Vietnamese or American.

I should mention that if we weren't driving the roads, typically we were flying in some very, very fancy Swiss-made aircraft that were used by the Swiss in the Alps. They were, as a lot of folks know—the airline was called Air America. It was a CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] "company, and the aircraft were STOL, short takeoff and landing aircraft that one could land in the Alps on a glacier successfully and then take off with a very brief run of a couple hundred yards and they were up and gone. So in war zone, these aircraft—and especially with the jungle of Vietnam and Laos, these aircraft were a wonderful instrument.

They only carried, like, four, five, six people max. One simply had to get one's name on the roster the day before if one was planning a trip to one of the provinces. And one would show up, jump in the Pilatus [PC-6] Porter, and they'd whisk you off to whatever province you wanted to visit. It was—that's how I—it's what I remember from those two initial familiarization trips I made in those first months in Saigon.

So just to reiterate, when I was there, money was no object, and almost any sensible idea that one had was achievable. And the other thing that one should point out is that because it was a shooting war, there was a lot of scope—not everyone wanted to—not every American wanted to be involved in a shooting war, so people like Lee Jones or Charlie Billo show up, the system is not going to say, "Oh, what have you done in the past? Let me see—let me look for some gray hair," you know, as you might expect from a corporation back in the States, where you have to have a résumé a mile long. In a war zone, young people are given responsibility, and there was heady stuff. It took me a while to realize this process after I arrived in Saigon as this rather green and untested and fearful young man.

I gradually was able to shock all of that and realized that it was—there was an opportunity. They wanted you to do a job, and no one was asking, "Well, what are your connections, and what have you done on your career?" and blah, blah, blah. Just: "You, you and you, get out there." It

was a very, very enabling experience, and there was a lot of luck involved in being in the right place at the right time.

And, as I said yesterday, there was a lull in the fighting. I only had one what I called a dangerous or hairy experience in my two years I was there. And so it just shows that (a) in a fighting situation there's all kinds of opportunity for young people to make their mark, and (b) there's a whole lot of luck involved in almost any pursuit that you develop. And there's just no accounting for—for luck. But I'm conscious of that in my—in my two years working in Vietnam.

DIM: We'll be taking a short break.

[Recording interruption.]

DIM: Okay, so we're back after a short, one-minute break. And thank you so much for talking about your first couple of months in Saigon, Charlie. And so now, after you've explained sort of how you were learning on the job, you were cutting your teeth those first couple of months in Saigon, and you described how you got your job in Can Tho. I was wondering if you can begin with when did you get to Can Tho, and what was the town like? What sort of place was it in comparison to Saigon?

BILLO: My recollection is I probably transferred to Can Tho in about June of 1969. And Can Tho was a one-horse town. It happened to be the regional headquarters city for the Mekong area, and the CORDS program had a major presence there. AID had a low-rise apartment building for civilian employees. Across the street was an officers' mess with a guard. All of these buildings had guards out front.

And so one typically would go across the street to get breakfast or dinner from that low-rise building. And I remember there was a beer factory on the main drag, not far from where I lived. It was called Brasseries [et] Glacières d'Indochinois [sic; d'indochine]. They produced 33 Beer, which—anyone who lived in Vietnam in those days knew what 33 Beer was. It was an export lager, developed by the French and probably available throughout Indochina in the Colonial era.

I took up residence in Can Tho. I was nominally—I had a Vietnamese counterpart, who was, as I recall, a colonel in the Vietnamese army, a wonderful guy. Smart. Had an attractive wife. A good family man. And I believe his title was inspector for the IV Corps region in the Vietnamese government structure.

DIM: Do you remember a name?

BILLO: I can't come up with it right off the top of my head.

So I told you yesterday my immediate boss in Can Tho was John Vann. My day-to-day job was to, when I wasn't traveling to various provinces, to look into warehouses owned by the Chinese rice network, to check on inventories. I was engaged in a lot of briefings at headquarters. We had monthly meetings, where the provincial senior advisers would come to town. John Vann and, later on, William [E.] Colby, head of CORDS and later, after that, director of CIA, would conduct briefings for the province senior advisers.

And we had a string of visitors. As I mentioned yesterday, part of my job was to escort visitors. There was no end of people coming out of Harvard or coming out of Washington agencies who wanted to get a first-hand glimpse of how things were going in Vietnam and offer their advice to players in Washington, in the White House or wherever.

So I was essentially my own boss. I wasn't getting any directives from John Vann. Occasionally, the folks back in the Joint Economic Office would ask me to travel to a certain province and check on something, but I was, you know, 25 years old and my own boss, access to a vehicle to drive around, access to these wonderful aircraft that I talked about. It was dramatic stuff. It would surely beat being a graduate student in New York City, which is [chuckles] the simple way of saying that it was a very inspiring period, and I—

So I—among other trips I made, I visited the Cà Mau Peninsula, which was as far south as you can go in Vietnam. It was a scene of a long-standing VC insurgency. Later on, the U.S. military, to stop this insurgency, engaged in defoliation. The VC, because it was largely a swamp area with estuaries and mangrove—the VC found it a relative safe

haven, and the U.S. military wanted to defoliate the mangrove swamps to expose the enemy.

I met—I remember on this familiarization trip to Cà Mau, we met a Navy SEAL team [U.S. Navy's **Se**a, **A**ir and **L**and Teams] that was operating on the Swift Boats [Patrol Craft Fast (PCF)] in those estuaries and got a glimpse of some of the aid programs that were in operation there, the schools and health facilities that the aid program was building. I remember when we went to talk to the SEAL team guys, they were pretty tough individuals. It was an impressive group.

So, yeah, getting back to my job, I had to learn an awful lot about rice agriculture, and as a city boy, it was a steep learning curve. I had to learn the difference between paddy rice and milled rice, and I had to know the growing seasons and the weather issues, and I had to know what provinces produced the best rice and who controlled the distribution system: where was it warehoused before it was shipped to Saigon?

And the reason this was important was that because of the critical nature of rice in the Asian diet, if there was a crop failure, the shortfall would have to be filled by imported rice, and the AID had a program all in place to bring in shiploads of U.S. rice from—typically from the West Coast, California rice, because the transport was easier.

But to make that all happen, you needed to figure it out with a lead time of three months in order to load the ships and get them into the ports in Saigon, so we, in the market analysis division, submitted a—I'm going to say a biweekly report. I can't remember how often, but—on the rice situation in country. And so I was a link in this reporting system. I was the guy who had to make a first-hand observation of inventories and let the people back in my office in Saigon know what the stocks looked like, and they would in turn make an estimate how many boatloads of American rice should come in.

So, yeah, what I should digress and mention is that the Mekong is one of the top five or six rice-producing areas in the world. Because of the nature of the landscape and the paddy fields, it was a natural place. One could toss seeds into this landscape, and anything would grow because the

temperature was right, the water levels were good, and the rains helped.

And so this is not often treated in the books that I've read, but there is a real dichotomy between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. South Vietnam was the rice basket and in a good year could produce more rice than was needed locally, after they deducted for seed purposes. That left rice for consumption, and there was a surplus, and that could in one way tied back to North Vietnam's efforts to gain control of the south.

I don't want to overstate that, but in the mountains of North Vietnam, it actually snows from time to time, and one thing that I want to point out here is that because of the climate in North Vietnam and other factors, the populace had a different approach than in the Mekong Delta, where—we used to say that the peasant sin the Mekong Delta, because of the food surplus, were kind of fat and happy, not just the rice growers but the fishermen. Life was easy, from a survival point of view, whereas in the north, it was—the landscape and the climate was more forbidding.

And this—it's well known, and I don't know if it's widely written about, but the North Vietnamese have a more aggressive personality as a group, for some of these reasons that I'm mentioning, that they are more aggressive, they're tougher, because of climate and other factors, the need to eke out survival, subsistence. And I have to say that in choosing [chuckles], as we did to defend South Vietnam, it had to be factored in that the folks we were working with side by side were not as driving and unforgiving as the North Vietnamese.

And one—one in Washington should know or have known this dichotomy, and I'll very quickly say that the people in the Foreign Service, like myself, who had worked in Italy, saw the amazing similarities between Italy and Vietnam, that it's well known that the people in Milan and in the north—Milan, Turin, are much more able, energetic business people—I'm generalizing—than people in southern Italy. And it was—had its counterpart, in my opinion, in Vietnam.

You know, there are other analogies between Italy and Vietnam, one being the rather peninsular nature of the two countries. But you had a topography in northern Italy which

consisted of the Alps, and a rougher climate than in southern Italy. I don't want to overstate this, but it's an interesting—it's an interesting factor to consider.

So, okay, yeah, I wrote these reports about the rice situation. I stuck my head in a lot of warehouses, watched people loading and unloading bags of local rice. I drank brandy with the Chinese rice merchants, and then one of the enjoyable things was showing these distinguished visitors around that region. Professor Arthur—[weeps]—Professor Arthur Smithies, from the Harvard economics department—we took him out to the Vietnamese border with Cambodia. And we took people from the Institute of [sic; for] Defense Analyses in Washington on familiarization trips.

It was—it was very good. John Vann allowed me to use his helicopter when he wasn't using it, and that is an experience in itself. I went out to, as I said, the Cambodian border. A helicopter used to inspect the transport system from Can Tho north to Saigon because of the two branches of the river and the ferryboats, backups. Was easy to inspect them from air.

And I just want to mention, before I move on here: I told you that William Colby talked to us one day, and one thing I remember him saying was that—this was in '69, mind you, a little bit late in the day—but he said he understands that the U.S. people in Vietnam often refer to our host government and population as "gooks." And he said [weeps], "I'm layin' down the law here, now that no one is to use that epithet." And, of course, there were other ones, too, like "slopes" and you name it. I mean, we had—"we"—I mean civilians and military alike had derogatory epithets.

Colby was a little late in the game. Apparently, a gook was actually an expression coming out of the Korean War. It had to do with the Korean language, so it was just transposed to any—a derogatory expression for it would do for almost any Asian because these people were not like us, and they were people to be belittled, and so that's what I got to say about this.

DIM: Thank you. Well, that might be a nice segue into just talking about what it was like working with these big-name guys. Colby eventually, as you said, would head the CIA. Paul Vann is a very famous person. What was it like interacting

with them on a daily basis? Like, they were your direct bosses.

BILLO: Yeah. I had relatively little interaction with William Colby. He was way, way above me. I remember the obvious things that people comment about he had these sort of thick eyeglasses, and he was a rather slender, athletic man, but people always compared him to the television show, *Mister Peepers*, just because of his physical feature. But he was a highly decorated [weeps] OSS operative. And he'd had multiple tours in Vietnam, so this guy knew what he was talking about.

As for John Vann, he was colorful and decisive, no nonsense. You don't waste his time with a lot of preliminary war stories. It's get in and get out. He was brave. He would go on night patrols in the districts and accompany Vietnamese military patrols. He'd fly in. He was known for arriving in a province unannounced, just to see what was going on and not give the American senior adviser an opportunity to put on a show. He was tough.

Fortunately, I got along with him. I'm not sure why, but he came from a redneck Virginia family, and he wore blue jeans and short-sleeved shirts, and we all knew that he'd left the Army as a lieutenant colonel and then recycled back to Vietnam as a civilian at a very high level. And we'd all read about him because he gave interviews to David Halberstam of *The New York Times* and [Cornelius M.] "Neil" Sheehan. And he'd created a nice kind of aura around him of bravery and military savvy, and dedication to the job in Vietnam. So that was at one level.

Of course, one later read Neil Sheehan's book, *A Bright Shining Lie[:John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam]*, that unearthed a lot of information that kind of pulled the rug out from under John Vann, and that there was a lot of deception and that he was a womanizer. He actually was on the brink of a court martial, and so he only had one option, which was to leave the Army. But that only came out much later.

And then he was killed, flying his helicopter up in—I believe it was II Corps [pronounced Two Corps].

DIM: II Corps is where?

BILLO: That's two-thirds of the way up the peninsula. And he had a premature death, but he was trying to rally the Vietnamese commanders in that area that were facing an attack by the North Vietnamese, and his helicopter went down. I don't remember the precise details.

But I do [chuckles]—getting back to Can Tho, I do remember some of the Vietnamese employees, womenfolk, telling off the record that John Vann was a womanizer. And, you know, that was good information to have, and it didn't necessarily surprise me. And so when I read Neil Sheehan's book, I said, *Well, okay, we knew that.* [Laughs.]

And so that's as much as I can say. I—I—I liked John Vann. He supported me, as I said yesterday. He went all out for me. He got my name in front of some people in the States, and he let me use his helicopter? What can I say? He was—he was active, and he was tough.

DIM: You mentioned female Vietnamese employees, so I was wondering if we could transition to how you interacted with these Vietnamese farmers that you were working with, your contacts in Can Tho, and maybe a little later we can talk a bit about what it was like working with Chinese merchants.

BILLO: Yeah. One didn't work with Vietnamese peasants and rice farmers. One talked to them anecdotally or one drove past them on the dirt roads and observed them. But the point to be made is that in my estimation, and I think books back this up, that the rice farmers and the peasants in general in South Vietnam weren't—they were apolitical. They, in my estimation, weren't terribly interested in the South Vietnamese government versus the VC. They wanted to be left alone and to do what their families had been doing for millennia, which was grow rice. These people were not educated people. They were hard workers, and they could be seen wading around in the rice paddies, and so that's what I have to say about that.

So I was dealing more with the better educated, commercial folks who then collected the rice from these paddies, and then they ran mills. I remember visiting a lot of rice mills.

DIM: Owned by Vietnamese.

BILLO: Yeah, right. At that time, they were owned by probably Chinese, what they called the “overseas Chinese” that had lived in Southeast Asia for—for centuries. Yeah, so I would go into these mills. I’d observe what was going [on], and the manager would show me around. As a visiting American, I guess they had to show you around and pretend to be happy to see you and, you know, make a good effort for you, and have a cup of tea together.

And then there was this other crew of Chinese merchants, who controlled the warehouses. The bags of milled rice then would go into warehouses that were immense structures, and all these bags would be loaded by peasants who would have—these bags probably weighed a couple hundred pounds, and you’d see a guy loading the bag on his shoulder and walking up some gangplank and tossing the bag onto a pile. It was—it was different.

But you could tell that these Chinese rice merchants were kind of more entrepreneurial and mercenary. They had the big houses with the television antenna on the roof and lots of picture windows and a couple of nice cars parked out in front. They were different, and they probably in turn had their counterparts in Saigon. And actually the section in Saigon called Cholon [pronounced cho-LUN], which means “big market,” the market side of the city. And so somehow these bags of rice I’m talking about were put on trucks and trucked to Saigon and wound up in the Cholon warehouses for distribution and sale in Saigon.

I don’t have much to say about the guys I told you I drank brandy with? I mean, it was, like,—again, I was the American visitor. They had to be polite and welcoming. We got kind of—you know, I was doing my best to hold my liquor, and I tried to glean info from these people about what was going on. Yeah, it was—

So that’s really—that’s as much as I can say. But they—I want to make the point that there was a network for rice distribution, and it was carefully controlled by the Chinese. And we got this knowledge about this network through the advisers that I mentioned earlier, who—locals who spoke Chi- —one guy in particular, Peter Kao [pronounced like cow], K-a-o,—

DIM: Thank you.

BILLO: —who spoke Chinese, and he did our legwork. And he developed much of the info that we had about who was running this show and how it worked.

DIM: Can you talk a little bit about how it did work? So what were these networks doing? Were they just controlling the rice? Were they controlling distribution?

BILLO: I guess—well, two things. One was that the motives of these networks was to drive the price of rice up as high as it could, so they obviously would buy as cheaply as they could from the people at the paddy level, and then by withholding rice from the market in Saigon, they would hope to then come forward and get the best price at the last minute. And what they were up against, though, was the Vietnamese government was aware of these people and could exercise their control to some degree in preventing this kind of distortion taking place.

The government also bought a sizeable amount of rice on a fixed contract basis, so that gave these individuals—they could count on the Vietnamese government—South Vietnamese government to buy a good portion of the crop early on. But, of course, the last thing that these merchants wanted was to trigger imports from America. That would undercut their situation, so it was a double-edged situation.

The one thing that I haven't pointed out is that the Vietnamese had a taste preference for their local rice, and not all American, not all rice coming out of America met their preferences in terms of the degree of hardness of the rice or the length of the grain and the lack of aroma. These were clearly—it's a fairly obvious statement that there was a strong preference for locally grown rice.

So that's about as much as I can say. I didn't comment on—I think you and I had been talking earlier about—the one dangerous moment I had in this job was I flew out to Châu Đốc [pronounced chow duk] Province [now An Giang Province, Vietnam] for one of these talks with the provincial team, and I was supposed to stay overnight. And to Châu Đốc Province was along the Cambodian border, and it was not the most secure area. [Chuckles.] So all was good.

And then they assigned me to some dormitory for the night, and around—it must have been around two in the morning, I hear this loud knock on the door, and one of the American hosts says, “Get up, get up! We’re under attack!” And I—of course, you’ve been sound asleep, and it’s in the middle of the night, and you’re sort of groggy, and the last thing you want to hear is, “Oh, shoot, we’re under attack!” And he says, “Follow me! Follow me!”

And we were then herded into this concrete, large concrete bunker that held, let’s say, eight or ten Americans, and it had—like most bunkers, it had some series of small slits on all corners. And you could hear small arm[s] fire in the distance, and it was pitch black. It was the middle of the night. And I guess [chuckles]—so they issued me an M1 carbine, which was not exactly the weapon I was talking about yesterday, the M16. It was a World War II, Korean War carbine.

And they said, “Okay, poke that out there. If you see anything moving, shoot!” And I’m saying to myself, *God! Here I am, this dude out of Columbia University, been in country only six or eight months. Is this what I signed on for, you know?* I mean, I was—I was not—I was not happy. These other guys were a little bit more calm, and they were doing the same thing on their side of the bunker.

Shortly thereafter, you could hear helicopters patrolling, and what happened then, the small arms fire kind of drifted away, and the guys in the bunker said, “Well, it looks like the VC are pulling back. The choppers must have neutralized them.” You know, by then it was probably five in the morning, you know, and everyone’s breathing a sigh of relief.

But I just remember them saying afterwards that they almost forgot about me, that they were all in the bunker, and some guy says [chuckles], “Hey, what about that guy from Can Tho, the visitor? Where the hell is he?” [Chuckles.] It was in that way that the other person came and knocked on the door.

That was—in two years in the country, that was the only nerve-wracking, crazy experience that I had. The rest of the time, I just traveled around without any weapon. And maybe in hindsight, maybe stupidly traveled around like that? But

when you're in your 20s, you do a lot of stupid things you later on would question.

DIM: Okay. Thank you.

So you described the rice situation very well. Just a small question: Did you sense any contention between Chinese—well, as you describe, Chinese merchants who were sort of hoarding rice to inflate prices and the farmers who were actually growing the price [sic] and having to buy rice at this inflated price?

BILLO: I can't remember any tension along those lines. I mean, it's a different economy, a different society, a different level of economic development. I don't recall that the farmers were well organized the way you would expect, say, in a more developed country. So I don't recall that the farmers had any leverage in the situation. In the French days and the millennia before that, there were individuals called "ramasseur", whose job was to go from farm to farm and collect the paddy and—so that's what I remember. You're dealing with a society that was not an advanced society, so—

I would only add that there probably was ethnic resentment against the Chinese merchants, who were a little more clever and a little more organized. I know the Vietnamese had epithets that they used to label the Chinese, so that's probably where the tensions came—you know, like, it's a natural phenomenon if there are people that you feel are exploiting you and they're some other ethnic background or something. It's easy to assign epithets to these people. But that's—I think that's the best answer I have to that one.

DIM: Okay. Thank you.

And you mentioned—or you were talking about your visits—I was also just wondering: Was there a particular visit, a particular visitor that really sticks out to you in any particular way? And you mentioned that a lot of them were sort of experts in their field and they would give you advice. Did you find that advice helpful?

BILLO: They weren't giving *me* advice. They were getting a quick snapshot of ground truth in Vietnam. Of course, in my recollection, 90 percent of these visitors were people who

supported the war, so they—and probably people in the government, in the administration were only too happy to have those people go out, make an in-person assessment, and that's what they were doing. And then they would write it up when they got home or go and talk to their contact person in the administration and add another degree of knowledge about what was going on.

Yeah, I mean, and a person like a Harvard professor in that era of '69 would have been in a definite minority on the campus, but that was the kind of personality this man had, of not doing the group think thing, not doing the easy thing, which was to join the antiwar movement or—

DIM: "This man" is?

BILLO: Arthur Smithies. I'm just picking him as one example.

DIM: Mm-hm.

BILLO: So he—and he had the common sense and the savvy to say, "I'm not going to sit here in Cambridge, imagining what's happening in—I'm going to go out there and actually go to the field and take some risks and get a first-hand experience, and then when maybe I'm back in Cambridge I can talk to my colleagues in the faculty club and say, "Hey, wait a minute. You know, I was just there." And so that was what that was all about.

I had people from the Bureau of the Budget [now Office of Management and Budget] and others. I'd like to think I had some outstanding person from Washington, but I would just [chuckles]—I would just say that I—I will tell you I had some support from people in the RAND Corporation who had read some of my work, and they—

DIM: And do you have any names?

BILLO: Well, I will mention one person, who I admired, who was Charles A. Cooper. He later became the minister-counselor for economic affairs at the embassy. He volunteered. He worked in Washington for a long time under Robert Komer. He was a brilliant person, who had already had a tour in Vietnam earlier, in the economic side of the house, and—I never showed him around the delta, but it was probably the sexiest moment I had in the two years in the sense that he

sought me out. He wanted my opinion about things. And he gave me some inside information about the fact that he was probably going to come back to Saigon and that there was unhappiness with the existing policy in Washington, and they were going to make some changes because the present team was on the wrong path economically. And so that was—that was nice, to be courted like that. That was—that was unforgettable.

DIM: Mmm.

BILLO: I'll just mention very quickly that the existing leadership in the economic side in both State and [US] AID had bought into an idea of austerity and imposing economic austerity on the country. That was when they—I guess they just felt that the U.S. was spending too much money and it was a wasteful expense and that the idea was to tighten down on a lot of the programs and the monetary flow.

It had some adverse—some immediate adverse effects because they eliminated overtime for the local Vietnamese employees, of which the embassy had hundreds, of drivers and support people. And suddenly the word was out that these drivers, who were trying to support their families, could not longer get overtime pay. And so people—there was violence as a side effect. The drivers found out or got the word. The boss had say, "Hey, drivers, no more overtime," so they went and retaliated against that guy. So that was just a small example of an overall picture which was trying to pinch pennies. And probably these gentlemen were well motivated. There was a lot of waste, and they needed—

That was when they drew me back to Saigon from Can Tho because they said, "Why are we wasting money supporting an observer out in the Mekong Delta? You know, we can save—we don't need those people out there. Bring 'em back." And so I was summoned back to Saigon.

What I'm trying to finish up by saying is that—and this was in 1970—that this policy of austerity ran against the grain with the Nixon administration and what they were trying to do, and the recommendation was made to Henry Kissinger to have a change of leadership at the highest levels in the embassy, economic section. That was pretty big stuff. I mean, seriously big stuff.

Of course, Nixon was on a track, and Kissinger was on the track of a gradual tapering down of our presence, as is well known, prolonging it over a three- or four-year-period in the hopes of diverting or stopping a huge, cataclysmic, score-settling thing in the United States as between those who thought we were doing good in Vietnam and the sacrifice of our soldiers had been—had to be accounted for, versus the other people, the antiwar group, who said that "the sooner we get out, the better. We've already lost too many people."

So Kissinger's strategy was to prolong this over a longer—a four-year period. And who knows? The idea was that maybe our allies in South Vietnam would, over a long period of four years, prove themselves capable of standing up to the North Vietnamese challenge. So that's a hotly debated question, the wisdom of that.

But I was in just one small corner of the whole question, and I—I was nearing the end of my tour in Vietnam, and it was a privilege to be in on a lot of these questions and to know people [weeps] such as Charles A. Cooper and others, who knew what the right questions was. That was always the first thing. If you don't know what the right questions are, you're not going to come up with any good answers. That's all I have to say on that one.

DIM: Thank you, Charlie.

So you say you were recalled from Can Tho because of this new policy of austerity in 1970.

BILLO: Right.

DIM: Do you have about a month when that happens?

BILLO: Yeah, I think it was—oh, my gosh! That was in the spring of 1970 sometime.

DIM: Okay.

BILLO: [Laughs.] I remember Charles Cooper coming up and sitting down with me and a couple of other guys, like Allan Wendt. And he said, "I hear you've been brought back from Can Tho." He said, "I hear you worked for John Paul Vann." I said, "Yeah, I lived there for ten months, and now I'm back." And these guys sort of looked at each other and said—the

body language was: “Whoa! That might not be the best decision to be making, you know, as we’re trying to right this ship.” But I just—it was just one anecdote.

Okay. So what—yeah. Okay, so what did I do when I was in this period in Saigon? I was getting ready to leave the country in October, and I continued to make trips, forays to the delta by plane to check on the usual rice problem. I flew to other parts of Vietnam, South Vietnam, such as Da Nang and Huế, to talk to American advisers there.

I do remember—I think I mentioned yesterday that I had to escort newcomers to the embassy. These were people that would be taking my place, and I had to familiarize them with the job, and we did a lot of traveling and a lot of boat excursions and whatnot on the Mekong River. It was—yeah, I—I can’t say that I—

Oh, I remember one time in this period. My boss asked me to be an interpreter in French between the U.S. Army and some French rubber plantation owners. He, my boss, spoke good French, but he had other, more pressing things to do, so I went out to the plantation that was, let’s say, an hour from Saigon. I don’t remember.

Sat down. The U.S. Army had—there was some issue about compensation or something. I can’t remember the details. There were two U.S. Army guys and a couple of French guys, and someone owed money for something. Maybe the U.S. had damaged part of the plantation. [Chuckles.]

So that—yeah, I wasn’t quite as—maybe not quite as busy in this period in Saigon as I had been earlier. Yeah. I mean, the building I was in in this period was called USAID 1, and it was a high-rise building. It was like a honeycomb of offices and AID personnel next to Foreign Service, State Department personnel. So we had our own little mini-bureaucracy: lots of meetings and—

I do remember the day that I left. I was saying—I’d packed my bags. I booked on a flight out of there. And I was saying my goodbyes to my superiors in the office, and they were sitting around the table, talking about—as I stood up to shake hands and all that, someone used the word “experience.” And I shook hands and was headed to the door, and I heard the boss say, “Well, there goes our

experience right out the door." Okay, it was a throw-away remark, but, you know, it was—for me, it was sweet music to my ears, that maybe I had some, made some impact in those two years and that I—so that was—getting on the plane to leave, it was pretty satisfying to think about that.

DIM: Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, so that must have been a very emotional experience for you, October of '70, going back home after two years of service in Vietnam.

You brought this document along with you dated also in October of 1970, and I was wondering if you could just explain for us a little bit about what it means, why you brought it.

BILLO: Yes. It's a letter from the minister of economics, Pham Kim Ngoc [pronounced fahm keem nyup], who incidentally was an Oxford [University]-educated economist. I'm not sure where he is today or whether he's still living. But it was, I think, a gesture to recognize some of my work and some of my activities when I was in the Can Tho office. Given the date, he must have been aware that I had left the country, and he was giving me a nice send-off, where he says, "I wish to thank you for your devotion and your contribution to the economic welfare of my country."

And it was very interesting. I remember, speaking of the minister of economics, going over to his office one time with my boss and sitting down—and this gets back to that story I was telling you about austerity policies—and there was a lot of corruption in Vietnam, as you know, and people needed licenses to do business, and the one way to get licenses was to probably bribe the right government official.

And this gentleman, Pham Kim Ngoc, said, "You know"—he was talking about having to deal with these American leaders, the two gentlemen who were promoting the austerity policy, and he said, "In my job as minister, every day I deal with whores, whores, whores: people seeking a contract or attempting some subterfuge to get business." And then he says, "And then these two American senior officials walk in, who were, like, the other end of a spectrum, trying to tell me that I need more austerity and I need to clamp down on corruption and, you know, I need to tighten up my ship." He was kind of laughing, you know, because he says, "My typical day is I'm just confronted with corrupt

individuals right, left and center. And then these guys come in out of the blue and lecture me in the other direction." He thought it was kind of a ironic situation. But—yeah. I think South Vietnam had some very able, able people, and Pham Kim Ngoc was one of them.

DIM: Can you spell Ngoc for us?

BILLO: Yeah, N-g-o-c.

But I think over all I would say that there are two schools of thought about our involvement in Vietnam. One, the orthodox school is the one that most of these books about the war say that it was a big mistake right from the get-go, and the U.S. never should have put their big toe into those waters.

And I belong to the other school, which is the revisionist school, which lately there have been several well-documented books written about this, that the war, according to the revisionist school—was that it was a noble cause but executed foolishly. That's where I come out on this thing. I think in the early days, in the late '50s, when Gen. Lansdale was there, it was easy to identify qualified, dedicated, patriotic South Vietnamese leaders, and a lot of times the U.S. gravitated—later on, there was a tendency to gravitate towards people who—Vietnamese who spoke good English, you know? If you—it's kind of bizarre, but you—it's just easier to work with people if you're able to communicate well, so any Vietnamese that came forward that spoke really good English was way up there in the esteem of American advisers. That doesn't always get you the best—best results, unfortunately, but that's the way—that's the way life is.

Yeah, it was—there were other things that hampered our performance there over all, speaking historically. The typical military tour was only one year, and just about the time an officer in the military was figuring out how the place worked, they were already counting the days to return to the United States. That, I think, hampered what we were doing. But there were a lot of other questions that just put us on the wrong path back in—talking now from '63 onward.

LBJ was a very insecure individual and a control freak, and he wanted to be involved in minute detail of everything to do with the war, and he was totally influenced by some of the

New Frontiersmen, the people left over from the Kennedy administration, such as McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara. And unfortunately, some of those people, as brilliant as they were, such as McGeorge Bundy—they were the type of egos that they were individuals who didn't know what they didn't know. They were brilliant analysts, but if they started with the wrong input, they would maybe come out with the wrong output.

So I don't know to what extent you want me to comment on my overall take after my experience in Vietnam. I kind of brought you up to the day I walked out of the office in October of 1970, so let me know what you want me to—how you want me to finish this up.

DIM: Yes, I definitely do want to hear what you think of the war now that you've gone through it. Maybe I'll give you a couple of questions—

BILLO: Yup.

DIM: —to sort of structure your thoughts. So you mentioned earlier in our interview that you knew, and then some other people sort of come to the conclusion that counterinsurgency didn't really work out in Vietnam, and I was wondering: Where do you place your own work in that frame of counterinsurgency? And did you think what *you* were doing was effective?

BILLO: Yeah, I'd have to say, in my own corner of the operation, that if my work helped drive decisions in Saigon about bringing in American rice to compensate for a shortfall in the local production and let's say that prevented potential rice riots that could have led to kind of political unrest, yeah, I have to say I thought my work was useful, to that extent.

You know, there are other little insights, like the one I mentioned, where only people who had been through the Vietnam language program would understand that there were significant ethnic differences between the northerners and the southerners—you know, could make that kind of an observation.

It turned out that—yeah. So—otherwise, my corner of this counterinsurgency game was the economics of the corner, and most of the writing in the books you read never touch on

this, so that—that was a unique niche, and it drove a lot of things. And there were a whole bunch of other smart people who have written about these types of things. I remember reading something recently, written in ’64, if I remember correctly, by a visitor to Vietnam, that pointed out the U.S. [chuckles] was flush with money, with dollars, and Asia was flush with people, so the question is: How can we deploy what *we* did best (which was our wealth) and avoid falling into a trap against what Asia did best, which was deploy just thousands upon thousands of fighters? You know, that was—that was a key—an interesting way to analyze the situation. And I think that we had to do more to boost morale in the south through our economic resources and not try to Americanize this war by sending in more and more troops, because that’s not what we did best.

The other thing was—I haven’t talked about the Hồ Chí Minh trail because it’s not part of my portfolio and I really don’t have any—my work had nothing to do with the resupply of the Vietnamese, the Viet Cong via—by way of the Hồ Chí Minh trail, but later on, if you want, we can talk about that.

What were you asking me a second ago about? Oh, yeah, how my work related to counterinsurgency.

DIM: Mmm.

BILLO: Well, counterinsurgency—I will just say the obvious—involves the full spectrum of things, not just military but social and political and economic, so I think what I did, even though it’s not maybe that sexy, played into the economic piece of that. That’s as much as I can say.

DIM: Okay. Thank you.

And I also want to just sort of talk a little bit about—you can take this anywhere that you want—your relationship with your family while you were in Vietnam. You mentioned earlier that you sent letters back and forth and that there was quite a few. Did you feel that your family was particularly worried about you or did they sort of view this more as another job that might have, you know, different implications but didn’t see you quite as a soldier? How did they see you?

BILLO: Oh, I think initially they were worried, and then over time—I wrote them letters, say, every couple of weeks, because I

knew they—they wanted to hear from me. They wanted something. In those days, it was all snail mail. By the time I'd been there a few months and I was describing my coworkers and describing my routine and getting more and more enthusiastic about what I was involved with, et cetera, et cetera, they—I think they must have had a big sigh of relief.

I also went—took a week off and went home to attend my sister's wedding so that my—that was after I'd been in country for, oh, let's say, five or six months.

DIM: So it's still '69.

BILLO: Yeah. So they were happy to see that I was alive and well.

DIM: Yeah.

BILLO: It's one of those jobs that you do when you're a bachelor, you know, and you're footloose and you don't even think about your own mortality. You know, you can do anything. So, yeah, it was—and I told you yesterday I had a lot of support. I had people sending me care packages. Yeah, so—

DIM: So. Thank you.

So how old were you when you left country, 26?

BILLO: Let me—so if I left in—yeah, I probably was more like 27.

DIM: Twenty-seven. And what did you do immediately after your service?

BILLO: Well, I stayed in the Foreign Service and was assigned to work in the Milan, Italy. And I went almost right away into Italian language training for four months, I believe it was. And I—we had a small consulate in Milan, and I was—I was swimming in those waters. It was fun to be back in Italy, where I'd been as an exchange student. I did find it hard to adjust to—this was a more traditional Foreign Service assignment than what I'd been involved with, and it was—it was—I had to follow the book more and do the routine stuff, so that—that was kind of a shock to the system, to be frank about it.

I then met my future wife, who was a British woman working at the American International School [American School of Milan?]. We were married in June of 1973. The work wasn't so interesting, but life had its compensations, and I also got to know the U.S. ambassador to Italy, Graham [A.] Martin, who was a protégé of Kissinger's. And Graham Martin eventually went to Saigon from Rome and was present in the final days of the U.S. evacuation from Vietnam. He was an interesting character in his own right.

While I worked in Italy, I received a notice from the department to pack my toothbrush because I was on a list of individuals who would be going back to Vietnam to supervise the implementation of the Paris Peace Treaty [sic; Paris Peace Accords]. That was a little bit of a surprise in that by then I was engaged to be married and had the wedding all planned out. And they had a hundred names on this list, a lot of the guys that I'd studied Vietnamese with. And at the end of the day, they took the first 50 names off the list and sent those people to Vietnam, and I—my name was not among the 50. I don't know why, but I wasn't going to fight it, because of the personal plans I had and because I told you in the beginning that I didn't see this thing turning out right. And so that—in the end, it was academic. They didn't invite me to go back, and that was it.

DIM: Okay. And maybe we can talk a little bit more about when you were in Vietnam. So you went to Italy straightaway. You didn't go back to the States at all?

BILLO: No, I studied Italian in Washington. The Foreign Service, to my mind, had an excellent language program. That's one of their strong suits. So, yeah, I went—I went home for Christmas and had some leave, then reported back to the State Department and started the Italian language training. That must have been in January. I can't remember right now.

DIM: Of '71.

BILLO: Yeah. Yeah. The whole thing about working in Vietnam in that era in the Foreign Service was that that was a posting that everyone was talking about, and I had colleagues in the economic section that volunteered to go there, thinking that down the road, because of the significance of our presence in Vietnam, the Cold War, blah, blah, blah, *it's going to be important to my career to say that I was there, and I'll be*

*able to tell war stories, and it'll*—you know. So [chuckles] there was some of this same—some of that attitude must have rubbed off on me. I didn't volunteer, by any means, but there was this feeling of, hey, there were those of us that were there, and there were those of us that weren't, you know? And so we like to—my colleagues and myself, you know, would like to get together and tell war stories and this and that and the other thing.

But that had little to do with the traditional work of the Foreign Service, which was a lot more structured and a lot more bureaucratic and a lot more conservative and traditional. But—

DIM: Okay.

So you talked a little bit about immediately coming back home and what that was like, being back with other Foreign Service workers who were involved in the war, in various aspects. So—and you're getting married. You got married in '73, correct?

BILLO: That's right.

DIM: And so what was your feeling when Saigon eventually fell a couple of years later, after going through a big of your life and getting this, as you said, more structured, bureaucratic job in Italy? What was that like?

BILLO: I guess I was pretty disturbed by the images. As you know, there have been several documentaries about those final days.

DIM: Mm-hm.

BILLO: And I knew a couple of fellow officers who deliberately flew back to Saigon to find their in-country colleagues—

DIM: Mm-hm.

BILLO: —to help get them out of there. I didn't—I didn't do that. I guess—for whatever reason, I—I guess I—I won't try to justify or explain that. I just [loud beep], but I—I was disturbed that after all those years, this is what [a softer beep] it came down to, this chaos at the gates of the U.S. mission, and people trying to climb on the helicopters. I

mean, what a—to me, it was, like [loud beep]—it was very disturbing and, like, the lowest point of a series of events [low beep] over six or eight or more years that were extremely negative [loud beep], low events. So that's as much as I can say. It was the lowest of the low, and [soft beep]—

[Recording interruption.]

DIM: This is Chileta Dim, and I'm with Charlie Billo. It's August 15th, 2015. We're coming back from our previous recording, same day. We had some technical difficulties, so we had to stop for a few minutes. So we'll pick up where we left off.

You were describing your emotions and sort of what you were going through as the fall of Saigon was happening. Is there anything else you'd like to add to that?

BILLO: Well, it was a sense of watching these images of the South Vietnamese trying to escape and get on helicopters out of the city, and always then running through your mind, *Do I know any of those people? What about my coworkers there? Where do they stand?* You know, then later on, of course, one heard stories about those last few days and the lack of preparation and the poor execution of the evacuation plan and whatnot, which I don't really want to get into.

Some of my coworkers successfully made it out through the good offices of some Americans working in the Joint Economic Office, and some didn't. And I mentioned earlier this one woman who I found out much later had been sent to a reeducation camp by the North Vietnamese.

But one's overall take was, *My gosh, couldn't this whole episode of our entanglement with Vietnam—couldn't this have been handled better?* And then one does meet people today who make the argument that Kissinger and Nixon were on the right path and that even in '73, '74 there was a chance to right this ship, but the U.S. Congress withheld budgetary support with which we could have resupplied the South Vietnamese Army and refitted the South Vietnamese Air Force. And there were schemes that some people were running to go around the U.S. Congress and get money from the Saudi Arabians to fill this resource gap.

And so, yeah, there's an active bunch of people who think that the overall situation could have been saved and the chaotic retreats by the South Vietnamese Army in II Corps and people, military people taking—throwing away their uniforms and whole cities of civilian Vietnamese clogging the roads in panic was [an] avoidable thing. But I—overall—

I remember, on a different note, some of my close high school friends that I bumped into wanted to hear about my experiences, and then there became—by then, in 1975, Americans by and large had reached a saturation point on Vietnam. I remember a good friend of mine saying—he'd been discussing the Vietnam War for so many years that he was Vietnam'd out. He didn't have anything more to say [chuckles] or any more questions to be asked. I guess that was probably true for a lot of—a big chunk of the population.

But I've done a lot of reading lately about the overall strategy and our failure to execute a viable strategy, and so I think that there were—I will just say one more time that it was a noble cause foolishly executed, is where I come out, because the backdrop you need to understand is the backdrop of the Cold War and the U.S. foreign policy decisions and the decision makers I the '50s and '60s and '70s. They were living in the context of the Cold War. The tensions with the Soviet Union in a lot of hot spots, like Berlin, the conundrum of Mao's [Mao Zedong's] China.

So I would argue that a lot of bizarre and nonsensical decisions were made in the foreign policy arena, and a lot of crazy things happened. But you can only understand it in the context of the overall obsession that the U.S. had with the threat from the Soviet Union. And so the early days of our build-up in Vietnam, starting with the Kennedy administration into the Johnson, have to be viewed in this context.

We all know this history, and we all know some of the decisions that Johnson made, you know, were taken out of—these decisions were made with the backdrop knowledge about the Republican charge against the Democrats of "Who lost China?" And I will leave my remarks—limit them to that because we all know how that uneasiness on the part of LBJ led to some of his overreaching and ill-advised decisions to execute this war in Indochina.

DIM: Thank you.

So you've gone a little bit about your opinions on the war after it's happened, and you've done a lot of research about it and sort of situating experience in that, and so just some chronology of your life after the war. I know you're a career serviceman. You worked as a consultant in the intelligence community from '91 to 2000, I believe?

BILLO: That's right, I did.

DIM: Yeah. And now you live up here, in the Upper Valley, and you volunteer with Dartmouth as a retiree. What final lessons do you have from Vietnam? Do you think about it in your day to day?

BILLO: Yes, I have to say I think about it, as you can tell from this interview that we've had. It was a very critical time in my personal development, and it was certainly exciting. It was a lot different from having a, quote-unquote, "desk job." But I—I came away with some basic conclusions about our foreign policy-making apparatus and about Washington politics and big organizations.

One of the things that has come out in my recent reading about the Vietnam War was the contrast between Eisenhower's recommendations about this war versus the policies of Kennedy and McNamara and Johnson, et cetera, and—but there's so much to say, really, about the role of ethnocentrism and hubris, the idea that "this is going to be a cakewalk," and they were discussing in '63 how we'd get this done by '65, and the unwillingness of these decision makers, like McNamara and others, to pay any attention to input from lower-ranking military and civilians who'd actually lived in Vietnam, who actually knew something about the culture and the nuances of the scene in Asia.

So what I want to say is that the much maligned Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was more or less belittled and ridiculed by the incoming New Frontiersmen—it turns out, from what I've read, that he, because of his experience in warfare and running big operations and living overseas and dealing with the Allies from other cultures, he had this instinctive knowledge that the McNamara policy of a slow squeeze and gradual response was totally wrongheaded and that anyone who knew anything, especially about the North Vietnamese,

knew that they were rigid and unforgiving and not at all disposed to respond to any political gestures by the West, especially by the United States.

So Eisenhower, when asked by Johnson and McNamara, et cetera, for his advice, he said, “Go for the head of the snake.” This is all well-documented information. Eisenhower—his advice was solicited by LBJ, and he spent several hours explaining what he thought should be done. Unfortunately—this would have been in about 1965, if I remember correctly—unfortunately, even though they called Eisenhower in to the White House, they then ignored his advice and proceeded with this graduated response, what McNamara called “the slow squeeze” until eventually the north was just going to give up and say, “Okay, you win.”

And so that, to me, is critical. The thing is that, as I said earlier, if individuals have such little experience in these types of undertakings like warfare, that people like McGeorge Bundy and McNamara, who, to my knowledge, had never served in the military—they—they don’t bring to the table anything useful, in my opinion, even as brilliant as they were in an analytical sense.

And, of course, this is all key and critical now as the U.S. continues to be a leader in foreign—in foreign affairs and is involved in engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere, that this capacity to bring in the right consultants and advisers is—is absolutely critical.

I think—I’m just—yeah, the other—one other question that’s come up lately in the revisionists’ school I referred to is whether the U.S.—if you went to attack the head of the snake, whether choking off the Hồ Chí Minh trail was a potentially feasible thing to do and whether that could have turned the tide there in 1964 or ’65, when North Vietnam began to funnel in more and more personnel and supplies—it’s an unprovable question, but from what I’ve read, Johnson was too timid about going for the head of the snake, that he feared China would react and send troops south.

And we didn’t have good intelligence of what the Chinese were doing. And it’s been pointed out that China, in contrast to the conventional wisdom, had already sent troops into North Vietnam, doing jobs there that enabled the North

Vietnamese to send an expeditionary force down the Hồ Chí Minh trail.

So this is something that ought to be investigated further, but I would just conclude by saying that there was this fear of going for the head of the snake. It was rooted in the possibility of another—a comparable thing to what happened in Korea, when the Chinese came over the border in North Korea, and therefore it was the critical context in which Johnson and McNamara continued on a kind of a losing trajectory of slow squeeze, which led to the U.S. putting in 500,000 troops to take over the fight, which led to the South Vietnamese being bumped out of the picture.

And so I just—I've learned that you want to have as your advisers people who actually have this kind of experience that I was talking about, and you also have to find the right ones, like David Petraeus and others in the Army, who know how to articulate these views and articulate their experience under very high-pressure situations.

So that's a long-winded answer, but—[Pause.]

I do remember Robert McNamara in his book—I think it was called *The Reckoning*, saying, among other things, that there was no one at his level with whom he could discuss Vietnamese affairs, who had a background or knowledge about Vietnam. And to me, that was the most kind of absurd and damning remark because I think it's incumbent upon the top people to look around and locate those people, no matter how lowly they might be, and ask them for their input and ask them to tell them what they're doing wrong. It takes a certain type of person to do that, and you have to—I guess you have to be always aware, when you're in the White House or in the State Department or wherever, at the top, that there's a hothouse atmosphere that leads to a lot of yes men and a lot of group think, and sometimes things can go off the rails.

So unless you have some other question, I guess I would also say I noticed—you mentioned that I was a consultant to the intelligence community.

DIM: Mm-hm.

BILLO: There were some mistakes made in the intelligence community, on the analytical side. Again, the same principle holds, that you—you have to have experienced people in the room who know what the right questions are and who have the background knowledge and whatever linguistic skills or on-the-ground experience to pose the right questions. And you—it takes strong people to run against the bureaucratic safety. And so we got into a lot of—a lot of thickets by people not—not inviting people into the room who'd actually been there and done something.

DIM: Okay. Thank you.

I was going to ask this, but you sort of answered this question: sort of how your Vietnam experienced your work and how you approached your career. I just want to end on an observation: You *are* very well read about the Vietnam War and what the arguments are out there, and I was just wondering: Has this research looking into the war—is that a recent phenomenon, or is that something that has been pretty steady since coming back? And why?

BILLO: Yeah, that's a good question. I have always been a Vietnam junky ever since I came back, (a) because it's unique experience and not everybody—my contemporaries had; and (b) I knew—I knew the players. I knew the names. I knew the locations. So right from early on, I was reading almost every serious book that came out about that war. And I read the Pentagon Papers, of course, back in the day. That was going back to '75 or something.

And I must say—I've got to say when I was invited to participate in the Dartmouth Vietnam Project, I began reading again because I wanted to be somewhat credible about this material, and—of course, there's so much available in hard copy and on the Internet.

So I've—I feel like I have an excellent handle on understanding things, and I've enjoyed—I've benefited from individuals like Rufus [C.] Phillips [III], who published a book fairly recently and talked about the Lansdale period. And I've also been reading books by authors of the revisionists' school.

I should sit in on some classes at Dartmouth and find out what young people in the classroom are asking and thinking

about this whole era, the whole question of our Vietnam experience and what it did to our country.

I kind of lost the train of thought of what I was going to say. But—yeah, I guess one final remark I'll make is that one of the best films that I remember on the Vietnam War is *The Deer Hunter*, which was—it's quite an old film now. But it essentially portrays 18-year-old American guys coming out of a steel town in Pennsylvania and volunteering to join the Army to get out of this rather confining place in Pennsylvania and stumbling into Indochina and a foreign culture and environment that they couldn't possibly comprehend from where they came from in this small town.

And I will only conclude by saying my life story is in some ways similar in that I came out of a very protected and privileged background, not knowing a whole lot about the world, especially Asia, and stumbled into this place called Vietnam and did the best I could. And stumbled out again. And that's—anyone who's seen that movie, *The Deer Hunter*, will know what I'm talking about, that people signing on to something on which they were totally unprepared. And, you know, in some ways that was my experience, but I was lucky.

It's kind of as much as I can say, that I came out of it and was lucky to get out of it in reasonably good shape.

DIM: Thank you, Mr. Billo. I think that will conclude our interview. Let me just say I really appreciate you coming down and talking with me, and we will close this out. Again, it is August 15th, 2015. I am Chileta Din. Thank you.

BILLO: Thank you very much.

DIM: Thank you.

[End of interview.]