John D. Isaacs '67
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CAROTHERS: All right, this is Andrew [T.] Carothers. Today is August 17th, 2015. I'm interviewing John [D.] Isaacs by phone. I'm in Hanover, New Hampshire, and John is in Washington, D.C.

Hi, John, how are you?

ISAACS: Good. How are you?

CAROTHERS: I'm doing well. So we're going to start off the interview today with some biographical information, so let's start with where and when were you born?

ISAACS: I was born May 12th of 1945, sort of the tail end of World War II. I was born in Philadelphia, and there's a small story behind that. During World War II, people forget—my father worked for the government, and during the war a number of government agencies were moved out of Washington, D.C., just in case the Germans or the Japanese came bombing, we wouldn't love the entire government at the same time. So we were moved—he worked for the [U.S.] Securities and Exchange Commission, so we moved to Philadelphia for about three years, and that's where I was born. More than you needed to know, but just for your information.

CAROTHERS: Great. And then I saw in the bio that you filled out that you then went to high school up in White Plains, New York, so where did you grow up? Did you primarily grow up around Philadelphia or did you move up to New York pretty early on in life?

ISAACS: The answer I give frequently is I'm from the East Coast. Three years in Philadelphia, then the family moved back to Washington, D.C., specifically Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington. As I said, my father was a government lawyer. And I went through elementary school, up to age 12, in Silver Spring. Moved to White Plains, new, another suburb, this time of New York City, in 1957—incidentally, the same year that the [then New York, now San Francisco] Giants and the [then Brooklyn, now Los

Angeles] Dodgers left New York and went to the West Coast. And I went through junior high school and high school at White Plains public schools at that time. And my parents stayed in White Plains through the remainder of their lives, so I would go back and visit. So Philadelphia, Silver Spring, Maryland, White Plains, New York, and Hanover, New Hampshire, and that's kind of up and down the East Coast.

CAROTHERS: Great. Great. Well, that's funny that you mentioned the Giants and Dodgers moving out because I'm from San Francisco, so as a San Francisco Giants fan, we're pretty happy about what happened in 1957.

ISAACS: I won't hold you personally responsible, but I'll hold [Joseph] "Buzzie" Bavasi [pronounced buh-VAY-see]—is it?—and Horace [C.] Stoneham (I may have the names wrong) responsible for stealing the teams from New York.

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.] Yeah, yeah. And when you were in Silver Springs [sic], Maryland, what was it like growing up in Maryland and around D.C., and with your father involved in government work, what was the environment like both at home and then at school and just—in that time, in the late '40s or early '50s?

ISAACS: Well, my parents were fairly traditional in the sense that my mother usually stayed at home. As we grew older, she worked at a gift shop in White Plains, but she was home. She was the one who basically was in charge of discipline, making sure we studied and making sure we behaved and so on. My father was either busy at work or he was active in a lot of public interest organizations, various causes, from American Civil Liberties Union, [National] Urban League, prison reform, many other kinds of quote-unquote "good government" issues. So quite a lot, he was out, out of the house during the day but also out of the house during meetings, so the mother was the primary child rearer.

I would say it's a classic middle-class background. Silver Spring and White Plains were both sort of middle- to upper-middle-class suburbs, the kind that were particularly being developed after World War II in the great expansion from there.

And the public schools—as opposed to the city, the public schools were quite good, so, again, I went to public school

both in Silver Spring and White Plains; the whole way, public schools.

CAROTHERS: And you said that your dad was involved in a number of good government issues. Did he speak with you a lot about politics, growing up, and did his political beliefs and activism influence you as you became more politically active?

ISAACS: That's an interesting question. I'm not sure I can totally answer. I don't know that we had many discussions, my father and I, about these kinds of issues, but certainly all four of his children—I have three siblings—all four of the children wound up on the left side of the spectrum, and that's the way I grew up.

I have to say my father's father, my grandfather, was a politician in New York City and was a Republican, what we used to call a Rockefeller Republican (that doesn't exist anymore), and, in fact, he was a Bull Moose Republican who supported [Theodore] "Teddy" Roosevelt, who was obviously involved in politics in New York before he eventually went to the White House. And when Teddy Roosevelt left the Republican Party to form a Bull Moose Party in reaction to his successor, my grandfather went with him.

So even through college, I toyed with the Republican Party, but my grandfather was, as I said, a Rockefeller Republican, and for people who don't understand what that means, it meant the liberal Republicans that almost don't exist today. But at some point, I decided the Democratic Party was where I wanted to be, and that's the party I have supported since.

In terms of political activism, I may have gotten it through osmosis. Again, I don't remember discussing these issues at the dining room table, but from high school I went to the Martin Luther King [Jr.] "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., so I was modestly involved. He, my father, went off to Mississippi to work as a volunteer lawyer in some of the civil rights cases.

Politically, I don't know that I got so politically active, but I certainly was interested in politics and particularly got more interested—I know I'm jumping ahead here—in college, in reaction to the Vietnam War.

And I might say, from college—and, again, I'm going beyond high school at this point—I was an intern twice in Washington, D.C., once for a United States senator, Jacob [J.] Javits, also a liberal Republican, and once for the [U.S.] Department of State. So that was kind of a way to test whether I liked Washington. I like government, and I like politics, so at some point in my life, when I was finished with school and I returned to D.C. for government and politics, and that's in fact what I did.

CAROTHERS: Great, great. We'll be interested to hear about those internships. And I think as we get to Dartmouth [College], we can talk about those, definitely.

I was interested to hear about your dad moving down to Mississippi to be a volunteer lawyer. About how old were you when he moved down, and do you remember what that dynamic was like in your family at the time?

ISAACS: Well, I think I've learned a lot more about the civil rights struggle since that time and not during that time. In other words, at this point, of course, I realized how dangerous it could have been and how a number of blacks and also whites were attacked for this civil rights work and having seen the movie *Selma* in the last year or two. But I don't remember a particular fear that *uh-oh, he's gonna get himself in deep trouble there.* I just thought it was another one of his strong—part of his belief in activism.

And I might go back a little bit now in time, because my father was very active in, as I say, these public interest groups as an avocation, being a lawyer as his vocation. His father was in New York City politics so was involved in current issues and public affairs. His father was a maritime judge in New York and active on issues, particularly Jewish issues, and *his* father (so that would be my great-great-grandfather) was one of the first English-speaking preachers—rabbis in the United States, coming over here in 1839.

So there was a history of activism in the family, taking different paths: one, a rabbi; one, active in Jewish affairs but also a maritime judge; one, a New York City politician; one, a lot of activities in the evening; and for me, active in Washington as a full-time career.

None of my siblings are so involved. As I say, I think they're all on the left of the spectrum, but I'm the one who's been most engaged in public issues in this family lineage.

CAROTHERS: Great, great. So let's talk about your siblings now for a little bit. So you said you have three siblings. Are they brothers, sisters, older, younger?

ISAACS: Yes. [Both chuckle.] Older brother by about five years was involved in programming computers. That was his career. He wound up going to Antioch College, which was sort of a liberal, progressive—an unconventional college in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

My older sister by two years went to Middlebury College and has been involved in the travel business in various ways. Both of them are now retired. In various places. Married a Frenchman, so lived about 20 years in France, then they lived in the U.S., and now it's in the New England area.

And then my younger sister by another five years, the "oops" in the family, has been involved in the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the development of fundraising and community outreach work.

So I've been on the East Coast the whole time, my older brother and my younger sister have been in California for the last 30, 40 years, and my older sister now splits her time between Boston and Arizona, but spent a considerable time in Arizona.

And all are politically aware. I'm not sure how politically active, except my older sister has been involved in some campaigns in the Boston area.

CAROTHERS: And were you close with your siblings, growing up? Did they influence you? Did you—you know, were you a big influence to them? Especially I'm thinking of your younger sister. What was your relationship like there?

ISAACS: As with many families, we didn't get along that well when we lived under the same roof, and when we had gone our separate ways to college and life beyond, we've gotten quite friendly, so every couple of years now we have a family reunion in California in December, around Christmas time, and go to each other's—not all the time, of course, but

significant events: marriages and Bar Mitzvahs and those sorts of things. So we are very close now. We weren't growing up. And I'm not sure if I had any influence over them or they had much influence over us—over me. I'm sorry.

CAROTHERS: Cool.

ISAACS: At least politically, you're talking about.

CAROTHERS: That's great.

ISAACS: Mm-hm.

CAROTHERS: Yeah. So it sounds like—I have sort of an idea about your family. So I kind of wanted to go back to this idea of being from the East Coast and moving around, so you said when you were 12—correct?—you moved from Silver Springs [sic] up to White Plains?

ISAACS: Correct. It's Silver Spring, by the way, without an "s," not that it matters, but just so you know.

CAROTHERS: Silver—all right, Silver Spring.

ISAACS: Mm-hm.

CAROTHERS: And what prompted that move?

ISAACS: My father had worked in the Securities and Exchange Commission, as I mentioned before, and went into private practice, corporate law in New York City. We had had a friend who was also a lawyer in Washington, D.C., and had gone on a similar move about a year or two before to White Plains, so we kind of knew about the area.

My father also—I'm not quite sure how much he wanted to leave or how much he had to leave. [Senator] Joseph [C.] McCarthy (if you pardon my political divergence here) was a very major, right-wing figure who was talking about communists in government and was extremely powerful for a few years, from the [President Harry S.] Truman years to the [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower years. And at one point, my father, at a dinner for *his* father, made a real jibe at Joseph McCarthy. That got back to his overseers at the Securities and Exchange Commission, and I think that may have helped precipitate his departure.

But basically he wanted to go into private practice. He and my mother both grew up in New York City. As I say, the generations before them lived their entire lives, most of their entire lives in New York City. And I think another reason was to be closer to both sets of parents, who were in New York City when we were in White Plains.

CAROTHERS: And what was that move like for you? So at this point, you have lived in Silver Spring for nine years, and did it feel a little bit like you were uprooted and moved, or was it a natural transition, or what was the move like?

ISAACS: In some way, the transition was eased—and this is something I probably should add in terms of life in Silver Spring and White Plains—I almost always went to a summer camp, one of these seven- or eight-week overnight places in Lake Placid, New York, a great, progressive camp, where there's horseback riding and canoeing and swimming and mountain climbing and arts and everything else. So when the move was made, I was off at summer camp, and I'm sure that helped ease the transition.

I did not feel any great dislocation moving from Silver Spring to White Plains. My understanding from others and maybe siblings: The greatest difficulty moving is when you're entering high school because then you're getting more socially involved and considering dating and such things, but I was entering junior high school, and I did not feel that this was a great trauma or anything like that. In other words, it was just moving on to the next phase of my life.

CAROTHERS: And what was that next phase of your life like? What was it like living in New York and junior high school and high school? What was that experience?

ISAACS: Well, again, I'm talking about broader experience and my own experience. A lot of people—I remember high school much better than junior high school. One advantage of moving up in my seventh—I went up, and my first grade in White Plains was seventh grade, junior high school in those—in those days, seventh, eighth and ninth were junior; tenth, eleventh and twelfth were senior. I was a new kid at school, but everyone was a new kid at school. In other words, they had come from a number of different elementary schools in White Plains, so for everyone it was a new

experience and meeting new people. So I didn't feel I was coming to a situation where there were all these groups or cliques and I was the outsider.

But senior high school, I had a very good high school. I'm an organizer, builder and organizer, and organized a couple of high school reunions. And so many classmates there and elsewhere have had high school traumas, including my wife—not traumas, but difficulties in social engagement and finding that a very awkward time as they were changing in their minds, their bodies, their interests.

I had a great time in high school. I was involved in a lot of activities, including debating, including some informal—not honor society, but it was kind of like that but nothing formal, and involved in a variety of other activities, so I enjoyed White Plains High School.

CAROTHERS: Great. And you were saying that you were involved with debate and honor society. What did you learn from some of what you were doing in high school? What did you gain from some of those activities going into college?

ISAACS: Again, it wasn't a formal honor society, but it was kind of an informal—I felt for years that the two most important courses I ever took—activities that I took outside of the classes—one was typing. Learning how to type made life much simpler ever since. This is before the days of computers, when they had manual typewriters and then electric typewriters but then moving on to computers was a very useful course I took during one summer.

And the other non-class activity was debating. And debating is an activity where you have to organize your thoughts, but the major arguments down for your side, get some experts to agree with—that you could quote on that side, find out what the opposition arguments are, finding out what the best responses are, again getting the experts to back up your position, and you have to be extremely organized and reasonably fast on your feet.

That kind of activity is almost the same thing I do today. In other words, I'm working on the Iran nuclear deal right now. We do the same thing, and I've been doing the same [thing] for my entire life: developing arguments, getting experts to back that up—let's say right now former ambassadors and

former members of Congress and a variety of experts—finding out what the other side is saying, developing responses to that.

So, again, those two activities, typing class and debating, were two of the most useful activities. And parenthetically, I did debate for a couple of years at Dartmouth, and one of my only regrets is I didn't debate for two more years after that.

CAROTHERS: Great. And that gets into Dartmouth a little bit. We'd love to sort of shift from life at home to life at Dartmouth. But first, how did you end up at Dartmouth? What made you interested in the school?

ISAACS: Well, I'll give a couple of points in that. First of all, I felt I was reasonably bright and did well in high school, but I had a lot of friends who were so much brighter. [Chuckles.] In other words, I knew a lot of extremely intelligent people. My grades were good enough to apply to a few Ivy League schools, such as Dartmouth and University of Pennsylvania and some other schools. I can't remember—I probably have a list somewhere, maybe Syracuse [University] was one of my eight schools in case I didn't get into the other schools.

My father had gone to Dartmouth, and that's one of the areas where I did succumb to pressure and came to regret it. I'd gone, as I mentioned a couple of times, to public schools, coeducational schools. I knew Dartmouth was an all-male school, but I didn't realize what that meant. In other words, until I lived it, it wasn't real to me. But both parents—my father, subtly; my mother, less subtly—said, "You should go to Dartmouth."

I should have at that time gone to the University of Pennsylvania, both because it was coeducational and because it was in an urban area. One of the poor choices in my life that I made. But, again, I think I went because my father was Class of '32, and I was kind of pressure to do so.

By the way, just to clarify right now, I'm sure I'd love Dartmouth the way it is now, coeducational, but an all-male institution was a very poor choice, for me, at least.

CAROTHERS: And why do you think that was, and what was the difficulty, like, in moving from a co-ed high school to an all-male college?

ISAACS: Because it's very unrealistic to be in an all-male institution. This is a time you might be interested in dating and such things, activities, and that was pretty impossible. We had all these awful mixers, where we'd get a group of women coming in to Dartmouth for the weekend or for the evening and we would go down to Wellesley [College] or [Mount] Holyoke [College] or Smith [College]. It was all so artificial.

Plus I felt kind of awkward in that kind of social engagement. In other words, it wasn't easy to meet women at these mixers, as they were called, whereas if you're in a class, you meet people, women and men, in the class and in relaxed settings and in sports and other activities at college, and it seemed to me—not seemed to me—it was a lot easier. So I found that one of the major difficulties at Dartmouth, a very artificial atmosphere because it was all male.

At one point, one of the board of trustees, a Congressman [Thomas B.] Curtis of Missoura, Missouri, however you want to say it, came to visit and spoke to a group of us—I don't remember the auspices. And he went on and on about the values of monastic education. Monastic education. That's monastery. And I thought, *Oh, God, did I make a mistake on this!*

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.]

ISAACS: But I never felt—I don't think I ever seriously considering switching schools. But, again, I probably should have gone to the University of Pennsylvania as it existed then and to Dartmouth as it exists now.

The other lesson I learned from applying to college, as I did apply when I got to graduate school: Talk to present students there. In other words, see what life is like. I mean, I went and visited Dartmouth, and I visited Cornell [University], and I visited Pennsylvania and various schools, but I compare that to seeing one side of an elephant. You spend a day or two there or even these days a lot of students spend a couple of nights in a dormitory, but you're really seeing a very small part of the school, and I don't know how much you really learn about it.

I didn't talk to many existing students, didn't call and say, "What is it like in an all-male institution? What is the

academic life like? What are the outside activities like?" And I regretted that. And, again, thinking I made a poor choice, when I got to graduate school and applied and got into a school (I'm getting ahead of myself), I did talk to the students there and got a better sense of things. So sometimes you do learn from your mistakes.

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.] And so after you arrived at Dartmouth, what were you involved in on campus? I know you said you did debate for a couple of years. In your bio, I saw that you did ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] for a year. How did you decide what you wanted to do on campus, and what did you pursue?

ISAACS: Well, I mentioned debating. Obviously, it was natural to from high school debating to college debating. I certainly like the outdoors, which—I mentioned, the summer camp I went to in Lake Placid—and New Hampshire provided an awful lot of similar opportunities to go in the great outdoors. And I went on the freshman trip to [Mount] Moosilauke and did some mountain climbing occasionally and used some of the cabins there. So that was another activity.

What other? ROT- —it was one of the strange things in my life. My father, who was, as I said, has a very left bent, just said I should try ROTC, and I did, and I didn't like it, and then after one semester I quit. I'm never quite sure why he insisted on it or why I went into it, but that's sort of a parenthetical part of my life.

The biggest shock going from high school to college was the rigor of the academic life. I knew—I mean, as I said, I thought I was reasonably bright, although I had a lot of friends who were much brighter, so that kept my head from getting too large. But I thought I was pretty confident about how I'd do in classes and did well on the SATs—SATs, GREs—I forget all the alphabet soup, what they mean—but the Scholastic Aptitude Test and, after college, the Graduate Record Exams. I did well on those. So I was pretty confident in my academic ability.

I sort of then got to Dartmouth and really had trouble at the beginning. I think I got at least one D and couple of C's. I took physics in high school. It was a lot of fun. It was a lot of dramatic things that flashed and popped and burned, and I

thought, *Well, let me try college physics.* It was much more difficult.

So one of the biggest adjustments, besides from coeducation to all male, was academic rigor. I was supremely self-confident, and my self-confidence was badly shaken in the first year in terms of my grades. Eventually I got them back up, particularly in the areas I was interested in: political science, government or history. But in some of these other areas—economics—even English, I thought I'd do well; physics, I did not do well.

CAROTHERS: Yeah, I have a little bit of experience with that, myself. I think a lot of us do, when we arrive at college and all of a sudden those science or math classes are a little bit harder than they were in high school.

ISAACS: [Chuckles.] That's right.

CAROTHERS: So going back to the ROTC, what did you not like about it, in particular?

ISAACS: I didn't have any particular opposition to the military, but I certainly didn't have any support for the military. It certainly wasn't the Vietnam War that led to my objections. I mean, my anti-Vietnam feelings developed much more strongly toward senior year and then afterwards. I guess I just didn't see the purpose of it. I didn't see myself going into the military. And one of the things that I always objected to about military and to the [U.S.] Foreign Service is ultimately how well you do depends on how well you get along with your superior. In other words, you're always being rated by your superior officer, whether it's the military or the Foreign Service. And that means you kind of have to kiss ass, to use the expression, and I was uncomfortable with that situation.

But anyhow, I guess I saw marching around with a play gun or whatever we did as just not a normal activity and not one in which I was very interested in. And, of course,—

CAROTHERS: That—

ISAACS: I'm sorry, one more thing: I wasn't, at that point, nervous about the draft. The draft took hold of us more in junior and then senior year, and afterwards, where it came to be a dominant part of our lives.

CAROTHERS: And ROTC—just to clarify—it was your freshman year? It was your first semester on campus you joined ROTC?

ISAACS: Yes.

CAROTHERS: Okay.

ISAACS: One other thing about college—one of my other regrets at Dartmouth is I didn't join the fraternity system. I wasn't part of a fraternity at all in high school. I wasn't involved in college. I was a determined independent. But in retrospect, considering how important fraternity life was at Dartmouth, I probably should have joined one. And I think there are some, a couple of fraternities that I could have fit in comfortably with. This whole idea of hazing, the other things you have to do to enter fraternities, at least in many cases, and a lot of the objectionable things fraternities do I'm sure I was not particularly interested in, and I was never a heavy drinker, either. In fact, I probably drank very little at all in high school. I did some in college but not a great deal.

But I should have joined a fraternity. I think I would have been much more involved in the social life of campus than I was being an independent. Now, I had my whole series of friends and various activities I was involved in and certainly enjoyed the experience, but I think I could have done more had I joined a fraternity.

CAROTHERS: And without the fraternity sort of creating a natural circle around you, where did you find your social circle on campus?

ISAACS: People I met in the dorms and classes, the normal way. I mean, again, it's the kind of the way I met people in high school in classes and in my community, and so it would be my dorms—at the dorm, people I knew in the dorms and people in my classes.

My freshman year, I was put in with three of us together in a room in Russell Sage [Hall] dormitory. Beautiful dormitory. Beautiful space. I think it may even have had a fireplace. And two of us got along very well, and one of us didn't—we didn't like the third person, so eventually he got exiled somehow to another place. But that friendship I made by happenstance, the person I was assigned to room with, not

anybody I chose, became a friend through four years in college, and I roomed with him for three years, and then the fourth year we were in what was called Cutter/North Hall [now Cutter Shabazz Hall and North Hall], some international hall. And so we became friends. He's off in Canada, so I hardly ever see him anymore, but—

And then I met some people in the freshman trip, some of whom I've stayed in touch with ever since. The way you normally meet people, before this online business, you meet them in various activities, you meet them in your neighborhood, you meet them in your classes, you meet them in your dorm, and you decide which people you want to remain friendly with.

So I was certainly involved in social life, but not—not—never ran for an office, let's say, or in any of those honor societies. And I found dating extremely difficulty because of the distance with those women's colleges.

CAROTHERS: And this is kind of an aside, but I think you'll appreciate this: Russell Sage is still around. It's still beautiful, and it actually does have the fireplaces. You're not allowed to use them anymore.

ISAACS: [Laughs.] Okay.

CAROTHERS: But they're still aesthetically pleasing.

ISAACS: Okay. Good to know.

CAROTHERS: Yeah. And so speaking of classes, you were a government major, correct?

ISAACS: Correct.

CAROTHERS: And what got you interested in government?

ISAACS: Well, I think I've described it earlier. I guess I was always interested to some extent in government and politics and followed it since certainly high school, maybe junior high and before. I don't know. It seemed to be a natural progression. I thought of history as a major, but I wasn't sure where that led, and international relations wasn't a regular course major. I think it was kind of an interdisciplinary course. You

could put something together. But politics and government seemed to be natural for me.

And when I started looking for graduate schools—again, jumping ahead a bit—I looked at political science, I looked at history but ultimately got involved in international relations, but I can go into that later.

CAROTHERS: Sure. And did you feel pressure from your family, with your family's history of being active and involved in government, to sort of keep the family tradition going by being a government major and then—

ISAACS: No.

CAROTHERS: —getting involved—no?

ISAACS: No, I didn't feel any pressure. I think—this is an analogy or metaphor, which you may or may not buy, but I think the United States is most effective when it sets an example for the world and lets people decide if they want it. They're more likely to if they do it voluntarily, if they choose. And I think with the family, my parents set an example, and I liked it and adopted a lot of it, but it wasn't—they didn't pressure me. The only slight pressure I felt in senior year in college was whether to go to law school or not, but we can get into that, again, later.

CAROTHERS: Sure, sure. And are there any particular classes or professors that you had at Dartmouth that sort of shaped how you viewed the world or shaped what you wanted to get into after college?

ISAACS: Certainly some. There's a guy named Larry [K.] Smith, who was an instructor—as opposed to a full-time professor in history, and I wrote—I think it counted as a two-course credit paper on the rise of the Republican Party in the South—again, hearkening back to both political science—it was a history class, but a paper on political science, really, and how the Republican Party developed from a small part of the South to eventually taking it over. So that—and then that same professor wound up eventually as chief of staff for Sen. Gary [W.] Hart, so I met him—I mean, I kept in touch with him in Washington, D.C., and worked with him in Iran.

I remember some great courses, like [Vincent E.] Starzinger's The Constitution and a few others, but I probably have to go refresh my memory. But I'm not sure I can say *that* professor drew me in a new direction and influenced me for the rest of my life. I don't think I can say that.

CAROTHERS: Okay. And while you were at Dartmouth, did you have a sense that you wanted to go into, go work for the Foreign Service or for the federal government or an interest in—you said—you were talking a little bit about potentially going to law school. I guess we can get into that a little bit. What was your thought process there as you got a little bit older in college and thought of post-graduation plans?

ISAACS: Well, at one point I put together a list of possible jobs, a lot of which had to do with Washington, D.C., so politics was one, and government service was one, working Capitol Hill, working as a lobbyist. I was also interested in urban planning, so it was a possibility that I could go to a Boston or New York or some city to help in the running of municipal government. But everything seemed to point me towards public service in this choice, in this listing of possible jobs that I'd eventually go into.

But I came to senior year in college not really knowing what I want to do, which is fairly common for seniors in high- —in college and probably still very common. So I wound up applying to three law schools because I did seriously entertain law school, three international relations schools, and I picked international relations because I loved the course catalogs for political science, for history, international relations. International relations seemed to be the most interesting and relevant for me. And then also applied to the State Department and the Peace Corps. So I applied in four different areas and then kind of waited to see what I got accepted to and which one I'd choose.

If I'd gone to law school, I would have gone to University of California,] Berkeley, Boalt Hall, because I wanted to try the West Coast. I've already described that I'd been East Coast. I thought I'd try the West Coast. Berkeley, because it was a good law school, not particularly because of left-wing politics that was associated with the school then and still is.

The Peace Corps, I think at various points I was offered an opportunity to go either Morocco or Tunisia. The State Department, I certainly considered that as an option at some point, but probably not yet, but I took the various State Department exams, and, as I think I mentioned, I was a summer intern in the State Department.

So those all revolved around kind of public service kinds of opportunities, international relations, political science, politics, and then I thought—but I wasn't sure what I'd do, and I certainly wasn't sure what I'd do my year after college.

Let's see, it was Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies [sic; the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies] had a program in Bologna, Italy, where you could spend nine months traveling around Europe and particularly in Italy with a very international student body, half American, half mostly from other countries in Europe, having a wonderful time and moving towards a career that I thought was possible, as opposed to going to law school. When I spoke to a lot of people about law school, most of them hated it, hated law school.

And subsequently, in later life, I found a lot of people—my father notwithstanding—had a law degree and used the law degree but didn't practice law. I mean, there are obviously options in government law as well, working for the federal government. But a lot of people didn't find hanging a shingle and going to a law firm that much fun.

So law school was a serious option; second choice, Berkeley; but first choice, Bologna, Italy, and that's what decided me to go. That pointed me in a new direction.

CAROTHERS: Okay. Great. And before we jump into your experience in Italy, which I would love to talk about, just a little bit more about sort of what it was like being at Dartmouth in the mid-'60s, so in 1973 [sic] Ngô Đình Diệm and [President John F.] Kennedy are assassinated. In '64, you have the Tonkin Gulf resolu- [the Gulf of Tonkin incident]—

ISAACS: Sixty-three.

CAROTHERS: Sixty-three. Oh, yeah, yeah, '63, and then in '64 you have the Tonkin Gulf incident, and Americanization sort of begins the next year. What was the political atmosphere like on

campus, and what were your thoughts about what was going on in the world as someone who is very interested in international relations?

ISAACS: Sure. Give me a ten-second break to get a bottle of water, and I'll be right back.

CAROTHERS: Absolutely.

ISAACS: Firstly, the Vietnam War wasn't a major presence in the early years. I mean, I'm sure I followed it, and I'm sure I followed—well, the Kennedy assassination was one of those moments in history where I remember where I was, and most people remember where they were when they heard, sort of like 9/11 later [the attacks on September 11, 2001] and, for some people, [President] Franklin [D.] Roosevelt's death in 1945.

And, of course, I and most others were very upset by the assassination. In fact, I was supposed to go to a debating tournament the next day, and we all debated: Should we stay here? Should we go to the debating tournament? And eventually we went and debated.

The Gulf of Tonkin and the Americanization of the war was happening, but I can't say that I paid great attention to it, and I'm not sure most classmates did. As you probably know, yourself, you're up in Hanover, the middle of nowhere, and some issues that might hit you in other areas didn't intrude too dramatically. We had what was called Great Issues courses, where important speakers were brought in, but even then, I don't remember—I don't remember being very focused on Vietnam.

I mentioned a course—excuse me. I'm preparing for a 50th reunion, and people are writing reminiscences about the Vietnam War and other major movements over the last 50 years. Somebody remembered Gen. Lewis B. Hershey, who was the head of the Selective Service, coming to school and being asked a tough question about the Vietnam War and whether we should be changing course there. I don't even remember this, but another classmate did. I'm sure I heard the director of Selective Service, Hershey, but his reply was, "Well, in the middle of a war in Vietnam, you can't change leaders. You can't change policies like that." So some classmate apparently from the back of the room said, "Three

cheers for the quarterback of the team. People like [Adolf] Hitler and [Heinrich] Himmler and [Joseph] Goebbels and their six million successful touchdowns."

But, again, the Vietnam War wasn't a big issue for me and for most classmates, probably until senior year. We had other speakers who'd come up, came up, including Gov. George [C.] Wallace of Alabama, who was controversial because of his segregation policies. I'd have to remember other speakers. So that got us somewhat engaged into our national issues. But it just was not big for me, and I don't think it was big for most people on the campus.

International relations in general and the Vietnam War in particular—and it didn't intrude in life. It wasn't a major concern at all till perhaps senior year.

CAROTHERS: And then what happened senior year? So that would have been 1966, '67. What changed for you? What changed for your classmates then that made it a big deal?

ISAACS: I think people—and I considered myself politically engaged, but I think there are people more politically engaged and more sensitive to what we were doing in Vietnam, and so the people organized a few protests, including maybe a weekly, quiet circle of people around the [Dartmouth] Green, to protest the war, during the ROTC graduation there's a protest, and I participated in those, but I didn't consider myself that active, and I didn't consider myself so antiwar.

Our government leaders—of course, Kennedy and then [President Lyndon B.] Johnson, were arguing that this is an important place to stop the communists, and if Vietnam falls, other dominoes in Asia will fall. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, in retrospect, as people learn more about it, became quite controversial, but people didn't realize what had happened at that time, thanks for the lies of the government, of course. And, in fact, when the Senate voted for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, I think it was unanimous minus two people, so liberals, moderates and conservatives voted on it. So neither the Congress nor the country, and certainly not Dartmouth and certainly not me, were that engaged in the Vietnam War.

Senior year, I think fatalities started—the numbers started growing. The media was paying more attention to what was going on in Vietnam and was reported what, in my judgment,

was really happening, as opposed to what the government types were saying about everything was going fine. The war was brought home on tele- —people called the Vietnam War the first war that was brought to American television screens, and I'm sure that helped influence me and other people.

So it's as the war expanded, as we started sending more troops, as there were more casualties and as there was more controversy around the country, my interest and engagement and opposition to the war was growing, as were many classmates'.

But, again, by the way, the draft war had barely begun to intrude. In other words, I didn't think of the draft—a threat of being drafted at that time. I did in subsequent years, for sure. And the most I remember was going on the senior year—well, a trip during my senior year down the Connecticut River, a canoe trip. One of the more uncomfortable trips in my life, but I had to break apart and leave the trip a little early, as did a few other people, to take some Selective Service exam.

So really the Vietnam War did not intrude in school and did not intrude in people's lives or concern, to a great extent. Again, it was expanding, but it was a few years later, when we got to graduate school and beyond that the war became a major divisive issue around the country and I'm sure at college and certainly for each of us who were faced with the choices being presented by the war and by the draft board.

CAROTHERS: So at the end of that year, in mid-'67, you graduate Dartmouth and you go to Hopkins—correct?—the Hopkins program in Italy?

ISAACS: In Bologna, Italy. And let me say one thing there but to go back for one second, before I forget it—Unless I've already forgotten it—[Pause.] I'll get to that point again.

Yes, and in Italy it was an unusual situation. First of all, we were really separated from the United States, and it was hard to get news, certainly on a timely basis. I mean, these days you get instant news through your computer. In those days, we depended on the *International Herald Tribune*. And then we had to decide if we wanted to protest the war, which we did at the Johns Hopkins—at the Bologna Center in Italy. But you're doing it in a foreign country, which is an awkward

position to be. But I think the students felt at that time that we wanted to show that not all Americans agreed with the war, that it was an American war but it wasn't a war supported by all Americans.

What I was trying to remember is—before, one summer, probably '66, '65 or '66, I served as a summer intern for Sen. Jacob Javits, and I mentioned that before, and Javits was one of those people in the middle on the war. In other words, he said, "I'm not a hawk, I'm not a dove, I'm an owl," and that line probably came from [unintelligible], who eventually became a very prominent foreign policy person.

And I tended to disagree but not vehemently. In other words, I was developing my antiwar feelings, but they weren't strong, and some of the people that I was working with were trying to find a middle ground, and I'm sure that had some influence on me. And I remember sometime after college going on a camping trip with a high school friend where he was vehemently and vigorously antiwar, and that helped influence me as well.

CAROTHERS: And so in Italy—or, first, before getting into sort of the activism in Italy, can you tell me a little bit more just about this program in Bologna? Because it sounds like it wasn't necessarily a traditional graduate school experience. It was kind of a special trip.

ISAACS: No, that's not right. It's like a lot of—well, first of all—I'm going back again; occasionally back and forth here—one of my best semesters at Dartmouth was a term in France, in Caen, C-a-e-n. And it was a great program, and I enjoyed it very much, the travel and the study over there. And so what this Bologna Center program was was Johns Hopkins was just transported with a bunch of students, both American and European, to Europe. But it's like a lot of the foreign study programs for undergraduates and graduate students today, so it *was* a traditional program. We had courses on wars and courses on French history and courses on what's going on in Italy and so on. So I would call it very much a traditional program, but a traditional program overseas.

I mean, these days—

CAROTHERS: Okay.

ISAACS: —it seems as though a very high proportion of Dartmouth students and other university students go off to study abroad, undergraduate and graduate, and that's what I did, but it was earlier than—it wasn't quite so common then as it is now, but I certainly wouldn't say that it's not traditional.

CAROTHERS: Gotcha. Okay, okay, yeah. I guess I misunderstood a little bit there. And what made you decide to want specifically do this program abroad, Italy versus a comparable program in the States?

ISAACS: As I said before, it ultimately became a choice between going to law school, which everyone I knew didn't like, and nine months studying but not studying too hard and traveling around Europe and doing a lot of skiing with the European group of students. Interesting courses, interesting times, but not too hard work. And eventually I came to realize that, you know, Dartmouth students on average were much higher quality than graduates in international relations. So it was more fun than law school would ever have been.

CAROTHERS: Nice, nice. Did being exposed to a lot of European students influence some of your political attitudes and beliefs and how you looked at international relations?

ISAACS: I'm not sure I can cite specifics, but I have to assume yes. I think most of the student body was anti-war, and the war was not popular in Europe. It was not popular in the rest of the world, kind of like our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States thinks we're doing a great thing and helping the rest of the world, and the rest of the world looks at it and say, "Why are you doing this?" So I think it must have had some influence, not that there was anything direct, but I think the hostility in Europe had some influence on me. And when you go abroad, you tend to look at the United States from a little bit of an outside perspective instead of solely from within.

CAROTHERS: And through this process of going and looking from an outside perspective, that made you turn a little bit more strongly against the war? Is that correct?

ISAACS: It was a gradual process. I'm sure that was part of it. And, as I mentioned, we had some demonstrations in Bologna. It jut kept growing and growing. As the war grew, we had a greater understanding of what was happening and felt—I

think more and more information was coming out how the American leaders had misled the American people about the war, and we learned more about it.

I don't remember exactly when the My Lai Massacre occurred, but that was kind of one of the things that might have influenced me. The classic picture of an American soldier lighting the roof of a thatched hut and saying we had to destroy the village to save it. I mean, those things kind of kept growing. But ultimately—and so I was growing more and more antiwar.

Clearly, the draft and facing the prospect of being sent to Vietnam had a major influence, probably more than any other single factor. In other words, if there hadn't been a draft, if there hadn't been a possibility of going to Vietnam, I suspect I would have been strongly antiwar but not as strong and not as personally engaged as I wound up being.

CAROTHERS: Gotcha, gotcha. And then, so, while you're at graduate school, you noted in your bio that that Foreign Service came knocking and offered you a position, so what was your reaction to the Foreign Service coming to you, and what was your reaction to the option of being able to go to Vietnam but through the Foreign Service and not through the military?

ISAACS: Very mixed feelings then, very mixed feelings in Vietnam, very mixed feelings now. As I was debating what the heck to do if the draft board came calling, I talked to a lot of people. I talked to Quaker counselors. I considered going to Canada, considered a conscientious objector, considered all sorts of options. And whatever the choice was that I'd make wasn't a good choice, but it was being forced on me. No ultimate moving on beyond that.

I think all our classmates felt the same. We were forced to make tough choices, a choice among bad choices, and it was forced on us by the government and the system. I felt very conflicted. I certainly didn't want to go in the [U.S.] Army, and I certainly didn't want to fight, and I certainly didn't want to risk my life in the war. And yet being offered an opportunity to enter the Foreign Service and going to Vietnam, eventually to work with refugees, by the way, I felt, *Well, it's ironic that I want to get out of Vietnam by going to Vietnam*, but that's the choice I took.

So my senior year, I had mentioned before, I took the Foreign Service exam. I passed the written and passed the oral and had an opportunity to go in before that point, but when they came calling and said, "Didn't keep you out of the Vietnam War. We'll talk to your draft board if you're willing to go to Vietnam as your first tour of duty," it was a Hobson's choice [a free choice in which only one option is actually offered], and I took it.

CAROTHERS: Gotcha. And so, then, after you accepted that position with the Foreign Service and you graduated from the Hopkins Center in Italy, you went back to D.C. for your training as a Foreign Service officer, correct?

ISAACS: Right. The first year, by the way, of graduate school was in Bologna. The second year was here in Washington, near Dupont Circle, where the Johns Hopkins campus was and still is. So during that time, there were more and more antiwar demonstrations. I never participated in the—I was never radicalized. I never was part of the Weathermen [formally, the Weather Underground Organization] or SDS—I don't remember what SDS stands for—Students for a Democratic Society. I never was interested in pouring blood in the files of the Pentagon or violent confrontation. But I was more engaged in the peaceful protest of the war in Washington that second year.

And then—so the year after that, after the State Department accepted me, there was 13—oh, I don't know, about a year's training in Washington, D.C., either basic Foreign Service training, area studies and then Vietnamese language. So I spent '67 and '68 in Italy, '68-'69 in Washington with Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and '69-'70 in Washington with the Foreign Service, being trained to go to Vietnam.

CAROTHERS: Gotcha. I didn't realize you had been back to Washington at the end of '68. So '68 was a big year, especially in Washington—right?—with the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., [Senator Robert F.] "Bobby" Kennedy, [President Richard M.] Nixon's election, and then a number of protests that did turn violent in cities like D.C. So what was your take on sort of the year of '68, where, at the end of that year, a lot of people in the country felt sort of like all hell was breaking loose in the United States?

ISAACS: That's because it *was* breaking loose. [Chuckles.] First of all, again, I was in Bologna '67-'68. I believe the Martin Luther King assassination—yeah, I don't believe, I *know* the Martin Luther King assassination and the Robert Kennedy assassination occurred when I was still in Italy. Now, that was the first half of the year. I don't remember precisely when. So I missed the direct, I don't know, impact of the assassinations, especially in Washington, D.C. After Martin Luther King was assassinated, there were major riots in Washington, D.C., riots that scarred the city for decades after, but I was in Italy for that. And when Robert Kennedy was assassinated, I remember seeing a headline in an Italian newspaper, saying, "Kennedy Assassinated," and I thought, *That was 1963. Why are they writing about it now?* I didn't realize that it was Robert Kennedy.

By the way, in that year in Italy, I became more and more interested in dealing with the war through politics and was very interested in the [Sen.] Eugene [J.] McCarthy campaign then, and I don't know how well you know the history, but McCarthy got in when no other establishment politician wanted to challenge [President Lyndon B.] Johnson for presidency in '68. And Robert Kennedy, among others, had declined to run. Eventually, Kennedy did get involved, but, again, I was still overseas, and it was very hard to find out what was happening in the United States, in Italy, without Internet—not in existence.

But, yes, '68 was a dramatic year, not just in this country. There's a book written about 1968. There were major revolutions, unrest, violence, demonstrations in the United States but also in many other countries, including Mexico and I think Czechoslovakia, and France had the overthrow of its—of Charles [A.] de Gaulle. I mean, it was an incredible year around the world, not just in the United States.

I came back from Italy and participated in the—because this is after the Kennedy assassination—in the Eugene McCarthy effort in Westchester County [New York] for the summer before coming the second year in Washington, to Johns Hopkins.

I think I've gone out of order here, but I hope it'll all come together at some point. But '68 was a great trauma. I just didn't realize how much of a trauma, being off in Italy when

King was assassinated and then Kennedy was assassinated.

CAROTHERS: And so you returned from Italy in the middle of ’68, are up in Westchester for the summer, come back, have a year at Dupont Circle with Johns Hopkins,—

ISAACS: Mm-hm.

CAROTHERS: —and then after that, in ’69, begin your year of training in D.C., in preparation for going to Vietnam.

ISAACS: Right. Actually, one other thing that happened during the second year—the second year of Johns Hopkins in Washington, D.C., at Dupont Circle, was I went for my Army physical in Fort Holabird, Baltimore. That also helped bring the war closer to me personally.

CAROTHERS: Right. And then I saw you noted in your bio that you did not get a medical exemption there, so that made the draft a little bit more real.

ISAACS: It definitely was real. I mentioned Quaker counseling, and I mentioned a lot of us were searching for any possible way to avoid the war, including physical—some physical deformity, like flat feet, but none of that seemed to apply to me, so it seemed to me I had the choice: I was pretty sure that the draft board would draft me, and I wasn’t sure what I’d do in response to that until the State Department came along.

CAROTHERS: And in 1969 what training did you get in preparation for going to Vietnam?

ISAACS: Well, some of it was how to be a Foreign Service officer, what diplomatic life was like and that sort of thing. An awful lot of it, the predominant part of the year was Vietnam language training. And while I was doing this Vietnam training, I participated in some of the—a couple of the great protest marches in Washington, D.C., usually as a—oh, it was marshal; in other words, someone to help keep things moving along, keeping things peaceable.

As I mentioned, I have been for a long time an activist but not a radical activist, so peaceful demonstration was my—was the kind of thing I participated in, in helping to organize—I didn’t organize it, but helping to be one of the

marshals along the route was the kind of thing that I did. And I did this when I was in the Foreign Service in Washington, D.C., and I was there when President Richard Nixon launched the cross-border operation from Vietnam into Cambodia, and I organized a letter of protest against that, a letter that somehow wound up in the newspaper and somehow drew the attention of a White House adviser, who wasn't happy with me, and the others.

I mentioned I'd been an organizer kind of most of my adult life, and that was one of the things I organized, and we were called on the carpet by senior State Department leadership, to dress us down, the second time that it happened when I was in the State Department. The first time was when I—I mentioned Vietnam was offered as an option to keep us out of the Vietnam War, and we certainly were led to believe that the only way you can go to the Foreign Service in 1969 was agreeing to go to Vietnam.

When we arrived in Washington on the first day of that training program, learned a lot of people—two-thirds of the people who were there were *not* coming to Vietnam, so we were kind of misled, and I organized a letter of protest at that, which also brought a dressing down from the senior State Department leadership.

CAROTHERS: And were there ever any more consequences or a threat of consequences for this protest action from your superiors at the State Department?

ISAACS: Well, it certainly didn't stop them from sending me to Vietnam to work for thirteen and a half months.

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.]

ISAACS: And I believe I was told that if I continued in the Foreign Service, I would have gone to my next post to Tokyo, Japan. I don't know that there were any consequences, but what might have been put in my file, I don't know. And I've always been tempted to try to look at my file and see what might have been put in there, but I don't know. I mean, could these protests have been a black mark in my record, permanent record and hindered a career? I don't know that. I wouldn't be surprised, but there's no evidence one way or another.

CAROTHERS: And clearly there were some other Foreign Service officials who were also protesting and, you know, who signed onto this letter, and did you find—amongst the people who were working at the Foreign Service, did they generally tilt one way? Were they pro-war, antiwar? What was the political environment like at the Foreign Service?

ISAACS: My major objection to Foreign Service officers during those days was predominantly they felt the war couldn't be won; it was a dumb war, but they didn't feel the war was wrong. In other words, by that point I felt that what we were doing in Vietnam was morally wrong, was evil. We were killing a lot of people for a cause, and people should have been objecting to the war because—right or wrong, not because we're losing the war. So in other words, I think people have kind of give up on the war, but they weren't morally opposed, and I felt that was a distinction that I felt personally.

CAROTHERS: Gotcha, gotcha. Okay. And then—

ISAACS: I'm just trying to think: '69, '70, and Nixon obviously had been elected by 1968. I don't know exactly when Vietnamization began, the process of, in theory, turning the war over to the Vietnamese and start withdrawing troops, but I think it was widely accepted, at least among the Foreign Service officers, that we weren't winning the war and it was time to begin getting out.

CAROTHERS: So was the sense amongst the Foreign Service that Vietnamization and decreasing American involvement was less turning it over to the Vietnamese so that they could win but turning it over to the Vietnamese so that when we withdrew it looked like it was a Vietnamese loss and not an American loss?

ISAACS: I would say I and others probably felt this more in retrospect than during that time. I mean, we spent many years building up a Vietnam military, building up a government, building up the economic infrastructure, and we knew the U.S. troops were withdrawing. We had—I felt, at least personally, and I expect most people had no idea what would be happening. I'm sure to some people it was clear that what we were doing is a cover for getting out, but we're doing it slowly, and people knew the war was lost. But I'm not sure people—I assumed that once the U.S. got out, that the South

Vietnamese Army and the South Vietnamese government would collapse.

So I'm sure there's a little cynicism, but basically felt we couldn't win the war. I'm not sure people felt strongly at that point that the North Vietnamese would definitely prevail against the South Vietnamese.

CAROTHERS: Got it. Got it. So let's—you know, we've been talking for a little over an hour. Let's jump into Vietnam. First, do you want to take a quick break at all, or should we keep going?

ISAACS: Keep going unless *you* want to take a break.

CAROTHERS: Let's keep going, then. So let's jump into Vietnam. So you arrived in Vietnam in early 1970? Is that correct?

ISAACS: Yes.

CAROTHERS: Yes, okay. So you arrived in Vietnam in early 1970, and what was the experience like of arriving in Vietnam?

ISAACS: Well, in retrospect, I always was amazed how my parents never communicated worry. Here, I was going to a war zone, where a lot of people were being killed, American and Vietnamese, and yet I never felt they were afraid for me. It's interesting in retrospect. I don't know why.

One factor in the protest that had a direct result on my path in Vietnam was they decided, okay, we wouldn't send you so much into a war zone; we would put you in a pacification program. But the pacification program included eight different kinds of programs within that broader pacification, otherwise known as CORDS, Civil Operations for Rural Development Support [sic; Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support], I think it was, one of which was working with refugees, one of which was economic development, one of which was getting the people in the Viet Cong to try to desert and come over to our side, one of which was the very controversial Phoenix Program, which was assassinating some of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong leaders.

I think because of my protests, they agreed to put me—to get me to work with refugees, recognizing that wouldn't be—

that's something that would be more compatible with my beliefs than some of the other jobs that I could have gotten.

Now, the pacification program, in the early days in the war—let's say '62, '63, '64, '65—you had Foreign Service officers—it was a combination of Foreign Service program, Agency for International Development [AID] military and CIA. And CIA—as I arrived in Vietnam, William [E.] Colby was the head of the program, just for the last week—his last week or two. He eventually became head of the Central Intelligence Agency. After him was Robert [W.] Komer, who, again, was CIA but I think had other jobs in government as well.

But I think, again because of the protests, I was assigned to work with refugees, and specifically—I mentioned the cross-border operation which occurred just a few months before I went over. A number of ethnic Vietnamese who were living in Cambodia were kicked out of Cambodia. A few, killed. Mostly were just kicked out and were sent back to Vietnam to live, against their will, of course. And those Vietnamese, tens of thousands or so, I think, were being sent around the country in South Vietnam to be settled.

So I was sent to a province to help resettle about 800 Vietnamese who arrived in the province only a few weeks before I did. When I landed in Phnom Penh—not Phnom Penh—in Saigon, by the way—and I think I—I know I put this on the essay I wrote—I learned a quick lesson about media and war. Media covers where there's things—conflict, disasters, people being killed, disruption. And it could be a place where 95 percent of everything—98 percent is very quiet, and five or two percent, things are going on.

I expected to land at the Saigon airport, that the rockets would come firing down the planes as they landed and we would have to duck and quickly get out of the plane and go to a shelter. It was like any other airport—peaceful airport. In other words, there was certainly a heavy, ongoing war, but only in certain places, and not in Saigon, not the airport. And that was, again, the lesson I learned in other wars, in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, that the media covers the dramatic action and death and destruction, but most of the country may not be directly affected by that.

But in any case, I was immediately—from Saigon, I went to this small, rural province along the Atlantic—Pacific coast. (Sorry, I get my oceans confused.) Not very populated, not much going on. During the well-known Tet Offensive in '68, which helped to lead to—eventually to the so-called Vietnamization and an end to escalation, the province I was in was not hit. I think two-thirds or so of the provinces were hit by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, but not the province I was sent to. This occurred before I arrived, the Tet Offensive, but nonetheless indicated that the province was so unimportant that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong didn't care that much about it. Either that or the North Vietnamese controlled the province and I didn't know.

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.]

ISAACS: So it was a very peaceful life in that province. Eight hundred refugees had been sent there, as I say, from Cambodia, by the South Vietnamese government. My job was to help to resettle them, moving from tents, which were there when I arrived. Eventually, they were given housing allowances and tin roof[s] and wood to build their own houses.

So I traveled all over the province with the refugee official, the South Vietnamese refugee official, and I was the American adviser. Not that I'd ever seen or worked with a refugee before and knew what to do, but that was part of the arrogance of power of the United States, that any American would undoubtedly know more than the local officials in trying to help resettle these people.

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.]

ISAACS: So anyhow—I sort of rambled here. But sent to Vietnam. First stop is the airport. Very quiet, peaceful. Central province. Very quiet and peaceful. Eventually—I was there about six or eight months in that province. Able to travel all over the province during the day. Not at night, because the Viet Cong controlled the night. Went into town, met people, had meals, we went swimming in the ocean. This is combined—a few soldiers and a few, just two or three of us civilians. And we went swimming with a couple of soldiers just keeping an eye on things with their guns handy, but nothing ever happened with that.

And ultimately, thirteen and a half months in Vietnam, I saw dead bodies once when I was in that province. There was a skirmish not far from where we were, and there was very much nervousness, from me and others, where we were, and the next day there were three dead Viet Cong laid out on some central area. That was the only time I ever felt nervous aside from being in helicopters and small planes, flying all over the place.

So anyhow, you should follow the questions. I sort of rambled on.

CAROTHERS: Sure. And just to clarify: Which province were you in, in Vietnam? What was the name of the province?

ISAACS: It was called Binh Tuy, B-i-n-h; second word T-u-y. Along the east coast. The province to the south of us was called Vung-Tau, V-u-n-g, T-a-u, and that was a province managed by the Australians. In other words, the United States was the predominant foreign power in the country. Australians were managing one province, and the South Koreans were active in other parts of the country. But, again, along the coast, in a very rural area.

I then got other assignments, but I'll get into that when you further.

CAROTHERS: Sure. And Binh Tuy was south of Saigon?

ISAACS: Pretty much due east.

CAROTHERS: Due east, okay. So on the coast, due east.

ISAACS: Right. Some of the most dangerous areas and the heaviest fighting were along the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam, which was an awful place to be and then in the delta, the very southern part, south of Saigon, again where the Vietnam were very strong. I suspect there would have been more war, more engagement in the province I was in and the region I was in, but the Nixon-ordered cross-border operation—again, I think it was 1970, while I was still in training—pushed the war to the west, so I was an accidental beneficiary of pushing the war to the west. I objected to the military incursion into Cambodia, but I directly benefited from it.

CAROTHERS: Gotcha. And why you were helping resettle these refugees, what was sort of your day-to-day work like, and what were your main interactions with the refugees, or were you often interacting with the refugees, themselves, or—

ISAACS: Yes. Directly, we were visiting the tent camps and then visiting the settlements as the people were trying to build a house elsewhere, so, yes, I would go along as an American adviser, along with a refugee official, with whom I had a pretty good relationship, and we would talk to the refugees and see what we could do to help them out and help get some of the programs, American aid programs, directly to the people.

CAROTHERS: Great. And in the refugee—I forget the title that you said that he was, the refugee official. He was a South Vietnamese official?

ISAACS: Yes, mm-hm.

CAROTHERS: Okay. And in terms of—what did these interactions with these refugees change how you were thinking about the war? What was sort of your emotional response to working with these people who had been displaced from Cambodia and were now back in Vietnam?

ISAACS: What I learned most about these refugees as well as most South Vietnamese people is they didn't favor the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong. They didn't favor the South Vietnamese. They just wanted to be left alone, to get along with their lives and build towards the future. In other words, there was a strong ideological feeling in the government and the military, both Vietnamese and American, but for ordinary Vietnamese, they didn't favor either side. They just wanted to be left alone. So that was one strong feeling I developed very quickly.

Another one was the futility of the U.S. aid programs. Two examples: One, American politicians—and here, my political science came into focus—American politicians tried to steer contracts and buildings—veterans hospitals and post offices and rebuilding bridges—to their districts and states and believed they'd get votes that way. We tried to duplicate that experience in Vietnam, building schools, building roads, building bridges, and with the Vietnamese culture, when an American official said, "Would you like this school? Would

you like this road? Would you like this bridge?" they always would say yes. In other words, it was impolite to say no to this kind of thing. But it did nothing to build support among the Vietnamese people—for either the Vietnamese government or the South Vietnamese government, or the South Vietnamese people.

Again, it was an example of our trying to transfer our experience in this country to a foreign country, where we really didn't understand the culture, didn't speak the language, and trying to help the Vietnamese when we weren't really helping. That was one strong feeling I had.

Another strong feeling I had was how different American AID (Agency for International Development) programs conflicted with each other. One of the programs was to ship in excess bulgur wheat. Don't ask me what it is, but anyhow.\,—

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.]

ISAACS: —it was something designed for Vietnamese people to eat, but they wouldn't eat it, so they fed it to their cows and their sheep and other animals.

Another AID program was trying to get various agricultural programs going, including getting the Vietnamese to grow products that they could feed to their cows and their other domesticated animals. So one program, designed to foster self-help among the Vietnamese, was directly undermined by another American program that undermined the market that they were trying to create.

And I guess the third quick lesson I drew was the reports being prepared by American officials on how the war was going, even then, in '70, '71 were false. We know, especially after the Pentagon Papers, how American officials were lying about how the war was going, and that's what—a number of Americans reporters became famous by finding out the story behind the story and finding that the statistics and the confidence American officials were showing was false, and the war wasn't being won.

I was seeing this on a more local basis when reports of how pacified, how quiet the province was, how supportive it was of the South Vietnamese government—that's all reported, but in reality, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were

much stronger than the American officials would put into their reports.

And I'm moving on to another Vietnamese experience in Vietnam, but I eventually started working with several reporters. I had been advised, before I went over there, that one of the things I could do usefully is report what's going on behind the scenes. I wasn't in the upper levels of either the South Vietnamese or the American government, but I could see things that were going on. And so when I saw a province report, an official report by some American advisers of how well things were going in the province, and statistical measurements of the success in that province, and I saw the reports by the American military staying how unsafe the roads were at night and how we might do well during the day but the other side controlled the night—the contradiction between what we said publicly and what was reported by U.S. military behind the scenes, I made sure some reporters got a hold of that and started writing it up as kind of contradictions.

And there's a whole history of the war that [Secretary of Defense] Robert [S.] McNamara went from Ford Motor [Company]?—or I don't remember which motor company.

CAROTHERS: I think Ford, yeah.

ISAACS: Developed all these measurements of success: hamlet evaluation system and other systems that might have worked for Ford or might have worked for the auto industry and did not work in Vietnam. And so, again, one of the things I was able to do is point to the lie of those statistics.

CAROTHERS: And, yeah, I would love to get into the interactions with reporters. That was one thing I was reading in the essay that you wrote. Was that essay for your 50th—for the 50th reunion magazine?

ISAACS: Yes, the essay I wrote was about that. And, again—I've already said this. I had mixed feelings before I went to Vietnam, when in Vietnam and still have mixed feelings. But one of the ways I was able to—and I'll use the term "assuage my guilt" was working with reporters to provide useful information to them on what was really going on in Vietnam.

CAROTHERS: And how did you—so what was the thought process behind wanting to speak with reporters? So part of it was assuaging guilt, and was that the main driver behind wanting to speak to reporters?

ISAACS: When I had signed up for the program and was going Vietnam, I talked to people about going and whether I should go or not, and I don't remember exactly who, but some people suggested, "You know, one of the things you could do is report from within." I don't want to compare myself to [Edward] Snowden, and I don't like what Snowden did in revealing all the secrets [regarding the types and volume of data collected by the U.S. National Security Agency], but the argument was being made to me, and I accepted it, was in some ways you can do more from within the "Green Machine" (and I don't mean Dartmouth but the Army) than from without, that there's always—these days we use the term "whistleblowers"—there's always room for whistleblowers to tell people what was going on. So it was both assuagement of guilt and I was told that I actually could provide a useful service.

And it was one specific service—story—I had moved on to a regional refugee office by this time, and there was a plan to move a lot of Vietnamese from their villages to a line that would kind of provide a break, a defensive shield against the North Vietnamese incursions. Needless to say, the people who would be moved didn't know about it and wouldn't have been thrilled by it. But I learned of the plan, gave the information to *The New York Times* reporters, and it was reported I think on the front page of *The New York Times*. And the publicity from that article I believe helped stop that forcible movement of Vietnamese.

CAROTHERS: Wow. And how did you find these reporters to get in contact with?

ISAACS: Again, I think it was some people in Washington, D.C., who told me, "Here are some reporters you could look up." One of the reporters worked for sort of a news service, probably a left-wing news service. I must have been given a couple of *New York Times* and *Washington Post* reporters' names. And I wrote about this in the essay. I had a lot of interactions with media since—at that time and since.

But one of the things I learned while still in Washington happened—I learned about the power of the press and the power of the leak. When [Gen.] William [C.] Westmoreland at one point—when we already had five hundred and some thousand—500,000 troops in Vietnam, William Westmoreland, the American general in charge of the Vietnam War at the time, said, "Just give me another 207,000 troops, and I can win the war." Quite frankly, there had been a whole series of these kinds of military requests, "just another 30,000," "another 50,000," another escalation of some number of troops that'll make the difference and win the war.

When Westmoreland made this request—and this had nothing to do with me; in other words, I wasn't involved in this—somebody leaked the request of—207,000 additional troop request to *The New York Times*. Again, it became a front-page story. Lyndon Johnson was someone who hated leaks. And when something appeared in the press, even something he was doing that might be a good thing to do, he sometimes went exactly the other direction because it was leaked to the newspaper. And he cancelled—he decided to reject the request for 207,000 troops to be sent to Vietnam. I think he sent a smaller number, like maybe 35,000, but it was clear that one leak helped prevent a much greater escalation than the American military wanted at that time.

So I learned the power of the press and the power of the leak at that time.

CAROTHERS: So clearly in Vietnam leaking was one of the most powerful ways that you could contribute, but what was the risk that you were taking on by leaking this information to the press?

ISAACS: Well, I could have been caught. [Chuckles.] I could have been kicked out of the Foreign Service. I could have been kicked out of Vietnam. I mean, that's the risk. If I had wanted a career in the Foreign Service, and I was always dubious I'd stay in for a full career, that career hope would have been terminated. And when I gave the story about the plan to move—oh, I don't remember—tens of thousands of Vietnamese around as a defensive maneuver, someone suspected me of that, but nothing ever happened.

I mean, I was able to photocopy a lot of documents and give—in those days, of course, we didn't have Internet. I

couldn't download massive piles of information, but I could photocopy some documents and turn them over to reporters. So clearly I was risking a career, but not ever being convinced I was going to stay in the Foreign Service for a career, I didn't feel I was risking the rest of my life—In other words, ruining my life by leaking some information.

CAROTHERS: And what was the experience like being able to see information that you had leaked make it onto the front page of *The New York Times* and have a tangible impact on the actions of the U.S. government in Vietnam?

ISAACS: To use the term again, it helped assuage the guilt. I felt I was doing some good, even though I was part of a system that was not doing good. So the American military and the pacification program were negative, but I was able to undermine, in a small way—I don't want to say it led to the end of the Vietnam War or anything like that—but in a small; way, I was helping to undermine the war.

And jumping *way* ahead, one of the first things I did when I got back to Washington in '72 and started working was getting involved in antiwar legislation, but that's—I'm getting ahead of myself there. So it was sort of a continuum: from protest to undermining from within to working legislatively to stop the war.

CAROTHERS: And was leaking to reporters—was that a relatively common practice within the Foreign Service? Did you know other officials in Vietnam who were doing it at the same time as you or what can you say about that?

ISAACS: I don't know anyone else who was doing it. I can't believe I was the only one, and if not—there could have been leaking also by American military officials, not just Foreign Service. And a lot of very aggressive reporters were going around, getting information on what was going on. I don't know if you would consider it leaking, but I think a lot of people were talking to reporters, but I do not know of any other Foreign Service officer who took the path I did.

CAROTHERS: Got it. And just to sort of go back real quickly—a question that I had about CORDS and sort of U.S.-South Vietnamese relationships—South Vietnamese, other—sorry—relationships, it sounds like there was a whole lot of cultures trying to work together here, but between the American

culture and the South Vietnamese culture and then the different cultures of the variety of government organizations that were working within the pacification program, so what was the balance like there? It sounded like you were saying that the balance between—there was a cultural disconnect between the South Vietnamese and the Americans, but also what was the balance like between the variety of different American groups?

ISAACS: Good question. Can I have a two-minute bathroom break?

CAROTHERS: Absolutely. Sure.

ISAACS: Can I just leave the phone off the hook and just come back, or do you want to take a break, too?

CAROTHERS: Sure, we can just leave the phone off the hook. I'll pause the recording real quick, and then we'll pick it back up.

ISAACS: Okay. Thank you.

[Recording interruption.]

CAROTHERS: And we're good to go.

ISAACS: There were vast numbers of Americans there in Vietnam, South Vietnam, with a variety of roles. And obviously, not surprising in such a situation, there's confusion, disorganization and conflict among the various branches. For the United States, the five hundred—and I think it peaked about 540,000 American soldiers, that was the top of the chain, the food chain. But those soldiers were divided into various ways, including some fighting the war, an awful lot back in bases and back in coordination efforts, but also in every province and every district there was supposed to be an American team that was shadowing, shall we say, the South Vietnamese people.

And those teams included civilians. As I said before, Foreign Service officers, the Agency for International Development, Central Intelligence Agency, Army—and I think things were—people got along fairly well, but it was a big bureaucratic nightmare anytime—you can figure five, six hundred thousand foreigners, including all the civilians in

Vietnam. The American ambassador was a civilian, was in theory [in] charge, but it was really the American general who was leading the American effort. That, plus the politicians back at home.

And then you also had a number of civilians there as civilian agencies: CARE—I don't remember what it stands for—[Transcriber's note: Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere]—but one of the international development type organizations; the Catholic Relief Services was there, and other civilian agencies. People were there trying to help the people with food or with building up small businesses or other kinds of things they were doing.

So there were a lot of conflicts, but I'd say by and large, the military were top dog, and they really managed things and what they decided was by and large what Americans decided in Vietnam.

CAROTHERS: And the different elements of the U.S. effort in Vietnam gave different objectives for what they wanted to prioritize in the counterinsurgency effort, or were people pretty uniform in what they thought the best course of attack would be?

ISAACS: No, there were major differences over military strategy, and there were major differences between the objectives of the military and civilians. This is a debate that was carried on then, and since then it's been extended to Iraq and extends to Afghanistan. Do you win wars through brute military force or do you win wars by civilian assistance programs, trying to build up the infrastructure, the South Vietnamese infrastructure, economic, military and government? The military, of course, tends towards military solutions; civilian tend towards non-military solutions. But disagreement over the best way to proceed—again, that has been reflected in future wars.

Gen. [David H.] Petraeus in Iraq was given a lot of credit for trying to build the governments and not just have a military effort but a lot of non-military effort involving both American military and American civilians, but it's a question of emphasis, which is predominant, the military efforts or the non-military efforts? And that—I don't think we've ever quite gotten the balance of that right in any of our wars.

I tend to believe—going a little bit beyond my philosophy at this point—is that foreigners have a lot of trouble in these kinds of wars. We did very well in World War I and World War II fighting a military battle. We weren't trying to win the support of the people in Europe; we were trying to win the war.

In an insurgency, it's a very different situation, something the French had trouble with in Algeria. The colonial powers—France, Britain, to some extent Germany and Italy—had problems in managing local insurgencies. The United States thought we could do better. We knew more, we're better, we're smarter, we know how to do things, but we have the same kind of failures in Vietnam as the colonial powers and that we had subsequently, I believe, in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In other words, there are some wars, I believe and a lot of other people believe at this point, the United States has no business fighting, because we can't win. Yet when there are conflicts that come up, there sometimes seem to be no solution but sending the troops. Today, of course, we have the issue of the I-S-I-L [ISIL, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as ISIS] in Iraq and Syria and what to do about them. And there are people that say, "Well, a military solution won't work", but ultimately the government decides a military solution, at least the bombing, is the best way to go.

Anyhow, those kind of conflicts played out in the Vietnam War. It was the first war, major war the United States ever lost, and it was a great shock to the system that we could send 540,000 troops over there, plus a lot of civilians, provide billions of dollars in assistance and ultimately it came to naught.

CAROTHERS: Right. So the pacification program, then, did not win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.

ISAACS: Precisely. And it became ironic in more recent times when George W. Bush, as president, talked about winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. And some people involved in the management of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts talked about this CORDS program, this pacification program in Vietnam as the model for what we could do in

Iraq and what we can do in Afghanistan. But to me, if that's the model, it's a failure model. We were totally unsuccessful.

And I've already pointed out in my view, the Vietnamese people didn't tend to favor the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong or the South Vietnamese. They wanted to be left alone. And our efforts to try to build support for the South Vietnamese government, which was largely corrupt and largely built up the political and military system around loyalty to the government leaders—that's a system where the U.S. can't operate in and where pacifications programs just don't work.

Now, we could show all our good-heartedness through our programs and dump a lot of money in, but that's not the kind of thing ultimately that wins support for the government involved—in this case, in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government; in Iraq, the Iraqi government and even in Afghanistan.

CAROTHERS: Great. And so before we move on from Vietnam, is there any sort of gaps in your experience in Vietnam that you want to touch on before we move on? Those are sort of some of the main ideas that I had.

ISAACS: Sure. You asked about the leaking, if that had many consequences, and the answer is I don't believe it did. I mentioned I started out the first six or seven months in Bình Tuy, a small rural province. I was then promoted to regional refugee head in the town or city of Biên Hòa, which was about an hour from Saigon. So whatever I did in the province didn't seem to negatively affect my chances for advancement in Vietnam.

And then in the last couple of months, I was promoted to the central refugee headquarters in Vietnam. So I was progressing in that career. What ultimately would have happened in my Foreign Service career, I don't know.

The other thing is, as a civilian—I was part of a military-civilian team in the province, starting out. That was the most basic experience I had. It probably was about 30, 40 military and three or four civilians. They kind of didn't care what I did as a civilian. I mean, I was refugee adviser. I kind of did what I wanted each day in working with a Vietnamese official with refugees. But I was also able to travel over a fair amount of

the country and even talked to a Dartmouth Class of '67 classmate, who was in the Navy's Beach Jumpers unit somewhere else, and we were able to chat over the phone periodically.

I would go to Biên Hòa, to Saigon, to pick up groceries and bring it back to the province in a small Air America plane. So I was able to visit Nha Trang, one of the cities north of Saigon and lots of other places, so I was able to travel around the country. It is a beautiful country, if you ever have a chance to visit. You could see that during a war, how you have places right between—with the ocean on one side and mountains from the other, great beaches and just a beautiful place. So I was able to appreciate that, despite being in the middle of a war, in part because I was left to my own devices to do whatever I wanted.

Again, I have to say I was extremely fortunate in so many ways. One, I was never shot at. Two, I didn't carry a weapon. Three, there's only one time where I had any real fear for my life, when we were afraid that the small province headquarters where I was stationed might be attacked, but it wasn't. And four, I was just able to travel all over and appreciate a side of the country that most of the military, either in very difficult fighting situations or ensconced in huge military bases, just didn't have that opportunity.

CAROTHERS: And so going off of the safety element in this, one thing you touched on earlier was that the South Vietnamese and Americans controlled the day and then the Viet Cong controlled the night. So what was that experience like?

ISAACS: At least in the province I was and I suspect lots of other places in the country, but I'm sorry. Keep going.

CAROTHERS: What experience was that like [sic], knowing that you could work with these refugees during the day but then as soon as, you know, sunset came around, the Americans really didn't have that much power to, you know, influence the people that we were trying to help and that oftentimes, you know, as much as the United States would try these pacification efforts, as soon as night came around, the Viet Cong would come in and could be more influential to the population. So what was your reaction to that? And did that contribute to this feeling that what we were doing was kind of futile?

ISAACS: Absolutely. It certainly contributed to that feeling. It isn't that the Viet Cong did come in every night, but you knew that they could. If I would have dinner with some Vietnamese friends in the small town in the province I was in, when it started getting dark I said, "You better get home." And it was practical evidence that we weren't winning the war. We could be safe at certain times and certain areas, but we did not control the country, and especially we didn't control the night.

So, yes, it added to my feeling that this war was useless. We were not winning the war. It wasn't exactly we were losing, and in fact I felt we could have stayed in Vietnam long after the 1973, '74—when the last remaining troops were withdrawn, and we could have occupied it. We could have had very safe bases, as we could in Afghanistan and Iraq, but winning the war was something beyond our power, beyond the power of the single-most powerful country in the world. There are just limitations of what we could do, and limitations of what an advanced country can do in a developing country, where there's this insurgency in effect.

CAROTHERS: And did any of the refugees and Vietnamese that you were working with tell you about any experiences they had had with the Viet Cong coming in at night?

ISAACS: No, no one told me. One of the things I'm not proud of is, although I spent a year learning Vietnamese, I didn't learn it very well, especially when I realized what the program was really like. So it wasn't as if I could walk up to people and say, "Tell me about your experiences in Phnom Penh," "Tell me about your experiences with the Vietnamese officials." I didn't have that ability. And when I was talking to people, Vietnamese people in those villages and the tent city and the houses, I was doing it with a Vietnamese interpreter, and it worked fine, but it wasn't as if I could get the story behind the story. And I did not.

CAROTHERS: Got it. Got it. And were there ever any instances where you were worried for your safety because of the Viet Cong's power at night in this province?

ISAACS: No. The only time—I mentioned the one time when there was an attack nearby in our province senior headquarters We had 30, 40 military and a few of us civilians. We thought we could be—in fact, that was the one time they told me—I

was armed, at least with hand grenades. I was more afraid I would blow up me rather than anybody else.

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.]

ISAACS: And I think I mentioned I didn't carry a weapon. So that *was* a time of nervousness. And the other time is traveling over the jungles in helicopters. I always felt, and others did too, you're vulnerable to get shot down. That probably happened infrequently, but it certainly happened. So those the main personal feelings of fear of being shot at or being killed that I felt. Most of the time, almost most of the time, almost all the time, I did not feel that way.

CAROTHERS: Got it. Got it. Okay. So let's move on, if you feel like we've adequately covered that experience in Vietnam, to your journey out of Vietnam, because you had an interesting route to leaving the country.

ISAACS: I knew enough about bureaucracy that if I quit in Vietnam, I'd be called in for two weeks of meetings with all sorts of officials, trying to find out what my motivation is, why I was leaving, trying to convince me I was making a mistake, and making my life kind of difficult for those two weeks. So in consultation with a couple of friends, including a reporter who, by the way, since then worked for the *National Catholic Reporter* in Kansas and still works there, worked out a situation of, nothing better to call it than deception—they regularly pay for R&R (that's rest and recreation trips). And one time I went to Australia; one time I went to Malaysia, for example.

In this R&R trip, as ostensibly planned, I was going off to India and Kashmir, as I recall. And so as far as the government knew, I was leaving the country for R&R and I was coming back. So I told a couple of close friends in Vietnam I was leaving the country, and as I left, I wrote a very strong five-page-or-so letter about my feelings about the war, how it wasn't being won, how the U.S. government was still not telling the truth, how the pacification program was a failure, citing a lot of examples.

And I gave that to a reporter for *The New York Times* to use after I left the country. So I felt I was able to leave on my own terms and avoided the difficulties with the U.S.

government and left with a nice blast at the government and the war that I disagreed with.

CAROTHERS: And did you find that you encountered any difficulties with the U.S. government or, you know, not necessarily retribution, because I don't know how much they could have done at that point, but animosity from people you have worked with at the Foreign Service over leaving the country in this manner and then sending this letter to *The New York Times* to be published?

ISAACS: There might have been some hostility or a lot of hostility directed to me by a few people at that time, but by that time I was blissfully traveling across the world for three weeks, in India, Kashmir, Turkey, Israel, a couple of other countries, I think, so there was no personal hostility directed towards me during that time, and partly because they couldn't, and when I got back to the U.S., I did not feel any hostility.

One of my jobs—my second job in Washington, D.C., was working for a congressman, where I applied for security clearance, and I wondered at that point whether I'd get a security clearance if anybody knew what I had done or didn't like the way I resigned from the Foreign Service, and I got the security clearance. So I never felt any blow-back from the government, from either the executive branch or Congress, and—we'll leave it at that.

CAROTHERS: Got it. And why did you decide to leave Vietnam when you did?

ISAACS: Partly selfish reasons. I think I turned 26 and/or the latest version of the draft—I don't know if you knew that there was a lottery system and you got a low number, you're likely to get drafted, and a high number, you're unlikely to get drafted, and I had gotten a higher number in the latest—in the most recent draft lottery.

Plus I decided I wanted to stay for an election. There was an election with—Premier [Nguyen Van] Thieu, T-h-i-e-u, was in charge of the country at that point, and I wanted to see what would happen in an election. So I kind of decided I had been there enough, I didn't have to worry about the draft, I wanted to see what happened in an election, and then it was time to leave. So I just felt right, I guess I'd say. But, again, I also felt secure from the draft at that point.

CAROTHERS: And you left in 1971? Correct?

ISAACS: Correct.

CAROTHERS: Okay. And the election was also in 1971?

ISAACS: Yes. And it turned out to be an election between Prime Minister Thieu and Prime Minister Thieu—in other words, he didn't have any opposition.

CAROTHERS: [Chuckles.]

ISAACS: So a one-party election. This happens from time to time in a variety of countries.

CAROTHERS: So, obviously, Thieu stayed in control, and what did you think about that election and really not having a competitive election in a country where we were trying to, you know, ostensibly instill a democracy?

ISAACS: One more dramatic example of how we were trying to influence events and trying to bring democracy to South Vietnam and we were unable to. Our hands, of course, weren't clean in previous instances in the history of Vietnam, where we helped orchestrate the assassination or at least the departure from power of President Ngô Đình Diệm, D-I-E-M. I don't know that we ordered assassinations, but we certainly didn't stop it from happening. And this election was just one more—adding one more brick to the pile, shall we say.

CAROTHERS: And so in '71, you leave Vietnam, send this letter, and then what do you do—what do you do after that? You said you were traveling around the world for three weeks. What was that experience like, of having finally left Vietnam, finally having sort of exited a war that you felt very morally opposed to? What was that like?

ISAACS: I can't exactly remember, but I think it had to be somewhat "free at last, free at last." I was a part of the war. It was a very mixed experience. I was fortunate in what I was doing, that I wasn't threatened, didn't feel threatened, but on the other hand, it still was a very difficult situation, full of difficult choices. I felt as part of the "Green Machine," I think, and the Army "Green Machine" and not the Dartmouth "Green

Machine." And I was free of that, and then could move on with the rest of my life. I think that's how I felt.

CAROTHERS: And what did moving on with the rest of your life entail? What did you do after you got back from this?

ISAACS: Well, I think I mentioned before, I had some skepticism about the Foreign Service as a career. I thought it was a nice thing to do for two, three tours and then decide whether I wanted to stay in or not, but skeptical in part because I didn't like the way you have to kowtow to your superiors. So I knew it was time that I could decide what I wanted to do as a career. In other words, I'd been to college, I'd been to graduate school, I'd been to Vietnam. Now what would I want to do?

It would have been like what a lot of people go through when they're in graduate school: *Okay, what next?* And that was my opportunity to consider what next. I had been an intern, and I've mentioned this a couple of times, in Washington for the State Department and a senator, and what that taught me was I liked government and politics and liked that as a career, so as soon as I could, I came to Washington and started looking for a job.

I had all these options to consider in terms of what kind of work I wanted to do for the rest of my life, not that I necessarily thought the first job I had in Washington would be the last job I had, but something to do with government and politics and that. So I came to Washington and started looking around.

And another fortunate instance: Somebody else had applied for a job at a group called Americans for Democratic Action, a political advocacy group that did politics and lobbying Congress, and didn't take the job because the salary was too low, and told me about it. I applied and got it. And that has led to a career ever since in Washington, D.C., since 1972.

CAROTHERS: And what were you doing at that first job?

ISAACS: I was foreign policy legislative representative, so I was dealing with the Pentagon budget, foreign policy issues by and large. I remember there was a sale of AWACs planes

[airborne early warning and control aircraft; Boeing E-3 Sentry] to Saudi Arabia that was controversial.

But the most interesting thing I did and the thing that [was] a most direct line from my Vietnam work was legislation being considered—it probably would be '74, '75—to stop funding the bombing of Indochina. There had been opportunities for Congress to stop the war, but Congress has been, is always reluctant to stop wars.

Could you hold the line one second again?

CAROTHERS: Sure.

ISAACS: I'll be back again in two minute.

[Recording interruption.]

ISAACS: Sorry. At this point I'm drinking too much water. But I'm back.

CAROTHERS: No worries.

ISAACS: I was also involved in some of the major controversy over nuclear weapons issues like building a new MX missile [LGM-118A Peacekeeper], which was a controversy that engulfed at least a certain part of Washington for a number of years, where the administration was proposing to build 200 and we eventually built 50 of them. There was controversy over building a missile defense system around the country. It was controversial at the time.

B-1 [Boeing B-1 Lancer] and B-2 [Northrup Grumman B-2 Spirit] bombers—also controversies. So those sorts of things.

But the most direct connection to Vietnam War was when Congress finally took it in its hands to stop the funding of the war. We never could stop—Congress wasn't about to withdraw—cut off the money while we had troops in Vietnam, just as it hasn't been willing to cut off funding for troops in Iraq or Afghanistan, and even now Congress is very reluctant to take charge of a war by declaring war. We didn't declare war in Vietnam, we didn't declare war in Iraq,

and we didn't declare war in Afghanistan. And despite proposals by the administration, by a few members of Congress, Congress has not been willing to declare war against I-S-I-L in the Middle East. So Congress is very reluctant to take charge of wars by voting for the wars and is very reluctant to stop the funding for the wars. There had been efforts by Senators George [S.] McGovern and Mark [O.] Hatfield.

But by '74, '75, the war was clearly winding down. The U.S. troops were out, and the legislative proposal that I was supporting, along with lots of people, was to cut off the bombing. All our ground troops were gone from Vietnam, but we were bombing the place. And to us—to me and to others, it seemed we're continuing the war, we're continuing to kill people in a situation we're not going to win.

A little bit to our surprise, because it was very unusual, the majority of the House and Senate did vote to cut off the funding for the continuing bombing campaign and passing the way that the president ultimately had to accept it. I think it was Gerald [R.] Ford [Jr.] at that point. And that was a great success, a great success in terms of getting something done that was so rarely done before.

I was also involved in the same field on what was called the War Powers Act [sic; War Powers Resolution of 1973]. Again, the U.S. had all the undeclared wars. Ever since World War II, the Congress hasn't officially declared war, although it has authorized military actions, but not in Korea, not in Vietnam except in a back—kind of a funny way through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

Legislation was proposed to stop the executive branch from being able to start a war and continue indefinitely. It was called the War Powers Act. It was when Nixon was in power in '72. It said the executive branch couldn't deploy more than—the U.S. troops abroad for more than 30 or 60 days unless Congress approved, and if Congress had not approved that the troops would have to be brought home. It was a political success in that it was a check against Richard Nixon's power. It was not an actual success because every president since the War Powers Act, passed in 1972—every Democratic as well as Republican president has ignored the law.

But it was a direct outgrowth of the Vietnam War. And between the War Powers Act, which in theory—to check the president's ability to get us involved in wars and then stopping the bombing were two successes directly out of my Vietnam experience.

CAROTHERS: And were you involved with other antiwar movement—protests or, you know, other legislative initiatives after the war, in addition to—

ISAACS: Yes. By the way (this is connected), the U.S. Congress cut off funding, and it was controversial at that time, certainly in the executive branch and certainly with some conservatives, but by then, of course, Americans had washed their hands of the Vietnam War. It was widely accepted that the war was wrong to fight and couldn't be won and we should have been out of there a long time ago.

I only discovered about 20 or 30 years later that there are people in government at that point and still today who believe we *could* have won the war in Vietnam had not the Congress cut off the funding for the war and tied the government hands. So to me and to most of us working on that legislation, we felt "finally we're stopping the war." But to those who were advocating the war, they felt this was a decisive blow that eventually undermined the South Vietnamese government, and when the North Vietnamese attacked in 1975 they couldn't stop that.

I was involved in other antiwar activities, something called the Indochina Resource Center, where some people were involved against the continuing Vietnam War or U.S. continued involvement, but, again, this was all legislative and peaceful, the kind of activities *I* believe in and not more activist, as some people would have preferred. And focused on legislation, which is the classic way, using the government to influence policy.

I think the nationwide demonstrations by then had died away. Once most American troops were gone, the active opposition to the war dissipated.

There's one ironic instance a few years later. I was working for a congressman from New York City at that point. This would be '75, '76 or so. At the time, word started coming out about the Cambodian government—the Khmer Rouge, an

extreme group very parallel to the I-S-I-S, I-S-I-L, whatever we call them in the Middle East today, believed in emptying people from the cities and starving people and killed a huge number of peoples by their terrible actions in the country. The congressman I was working for felt that the U.S. should try to intervene in some way to help the situation.

I felt that the U.S. has helped *lead* to the Khmer Rouge taking power in Phnom Penh and Cambodia because of our actions in the Vietnam War. On the other hand, I recognized what the Khmer Rouge was doing was horrific slaughter of innocent people, and I wasn't quite sure—we had helped cause it, but that kind of activity should have been stopped. I wasn't sure that I agreed with the congressman that it was the right thing to do to try to intervene. We could not do anything to stop that kind of slaughter, but this was one of the future international events in which I was involved in which I had very mixed feelings *because* of what had gone on before.

CAROTHERS: And getting into a little bit more about sort of some of your reflections n the Vietnam War, how has the Vietnam War influenced your attitudes on American power and how the United States interacts with other countries?

ISAACS: I have been strongly influenced by my experience but also, talking to various military and civilian experts, that there are severe limits on American power. We may have been, and probably still are, the most powerful country in the world, certainly the largest economy, not the largest military but probably the most powerful military, and yet there *are* limits on American power, and the Vietnam War was a shocking experience to Americans because of that.

But I came to believe—again, when a number of people helped convince me of this—that a highly developed, sophisticated country like the United States just could not deal with a situation with an insurgency, with a non-developed country that had very different traditions, very different religions, very different beliefs, very different language, very different mores. I came to endorse the view of former Sen. J. William Fulbright, who was head of the—chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee during the Vietnam War: The U.S. should serve as a beacon for what we have been able to accomplish in terms of democracy, human rights, free speech, civil liberties, but we can't impose

those same beliefs on a country like Vietnam or Iraq or Afghanistan or what's going on in the Middle East.

And I think the belief that the U.S. had no business fighting this kind of war lasted in U.S. official circles for 25 years, because we didn't get involved in these kind of wars in any major way. I mean, there was a small operation in Grenada [pronouncing it first greh-NAY-duh, then greh-NAH-duh] when Ronald [W.] Reagan was president, and there are certainly other, smaller events, but no American president dared to get involved in these kind of wars until President George W. Bush took office and after 9/11, when the government [unintelligible], 25 years after the disaster in Vietnam, decided, "We know what we're doing. We can do better. We can do things that other administrations couldn't do. We can win the war in Iraq easily, quickly, with low cost." And they completely ignored the Vietnam experience.

And, by the way, I think my view about the huge power of the United States to set an example but not to get involved in these wars is largely the view of the American military leadership at this point. Leadership will do whatever the civilians tell them to do, but I think the American military generals and admirals largely believe that there's a limited American power and these are the kind of wars we *shouldn't* get involved in.

Secretary of State and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Colin [L.] Powell—I think he had the philosophy, "Don't get into war if you don't know how to get out of it," something we didn't know in Vietnam and we certainly did not learn in Iraq and still are trying to learn in Afghanistan. It's easy to get involved in the war; it's awfully hard to finish the war, to get out in good order.

CAROTHERS: And do you think that attitude amongst military leadership largely comes from the Vietnam experience?

ISAACS: Absolutely. I think there was something ingrained, burned in the brains of the military then and ever since. I think the military—I always have been impressed by the military people I tended to meet, very bright and able and common sense. And I think that the military spent a lot of time studying the lessons of the war, as it always has done, studied the lessons of World War II and World War I, studied the lessons of World War II and realized this was not the

kind of war we should be fighting, this is not the kind of war we can win, and this is not the kind of war we should get involved in in the future.

And I think the civilians pushed [Vice President Richard B. "Dick"] Cheney, [Paul D.] Wolfowitz and those people, who said, "Sorry, you may believe that, but this is what we're gonna do, and you're going to Iraq," and that has changed U.S. policy since then.

CAROTHERS: And speaking of Iraq and Afghanistan, one person you talked about in your essay is Matthew [P.] Hoh [pronouncing it HAH], Matthew Hoh [pronouncing it HOE],—

ISAACS: Mm-hm.

CAROTHERS: —with whom you talked about your relationship with him a little bit. Do you think his experience, leaking information—or resigning from the Foreign Service in protest, getting a lot of publicity for that—have you talked—when you've talked to him, has his experience reminded you of *your* experience or do you think that the atmosphere and sort of the American attitudes on war and on American intervention led him to have a different experience?

ISAACS: I think what he did very much paralleled what I did, and when I read about what he did and when his resignation—he had fought—I think he fought in the Iraq war and served as a civilian in Afghanistan and was extremely competent but resigned when he felt we were not winning the war and we could not win the war. And he resigned in a major public way. Again, it was in *The New York Times*. So I saw him as a kindred folk, that what he did and what I did was a common experience.

I got in touch with him, as I knew—as soon as I could. We had lunch together, and I got him to get involved in my organization, Council for a Livable World, but I felt how parallel the experiences were, that a developed country went into Vietnam and failed and gone into—his view, from the inside—we had gotten into Iraq and Afghanistan and failed, but that was not what the government was saying. He could point out to the troops—point out the truth by resigning, and that's what I felt I could do, too. So, yes, I felt very much connected to him.

CAROTHERS: Nice. And do you think that after Vietnam and then, a few decades later, Iraq and Afghanistan—do you think we're going to have another one of these experiences, or do you think that, you know, if Vietnam didn't engrain it firmly enough in the American psyche, that Iraq and Afghanistan have?

ISAACS: I would give a more definitive experience. Until the Islamic State, I-S-I-S, I-S-I-L—again, all these different names—arose and brought more horrific, 1,000-year-old practices of slaughter of innocents, of occupying areas and wiping out peoples, of taking sex slaves, all the other things that have been reported—there's an age-old dilemma the U.S. faces: A lot of awful things are happening in the world, whether it's in Rwanda or Middle East now or Crimea [the Crimean Peninsula], where we have this feeling, "We gotta do something about it," and it's awfully hard as an American, with a can-do spirit, to say, "We can't do anything constructive, so we shouldn't do anything."

I don't believe we're going to get involved in a large-scale conflict again, at least anytime soon, after the experiences in Vietnam and Iraq and Afghanistan, but once you start getting involved, as we have with about 4,000 Americans in Iraq and Syria, with the bombing and the intelligence and the spotters for the planes, we can get sucked in. I mean, I don't believe Dwight Eisenhower ever expected that we'd have 500,000 troops in Vietnam. I don't think John F. Kennedy expected to have 500,000 troops in Vietnam. I don't think Lyndon Johnson, when he took office and started escalating the war, expected we'd have 500,000 troops.

My point is I don't think there's any intention to get involved in a war like this again, but the U.S. can get drawn into the—tossed into the briar patch by our own volition, and we could wind up in a situation—well, either withdraw in ignominy from the Middle East now and let people to their own fates, or we have to intervene more heavily militarily to try to solve the problem. It's a perpetual dilemma. It's one where the left and the Tea Party at this point in the United States have come to a general consensus: There are just some things the United States cannot do well and should not intervene in.

It has not to me, and certainly not to [Randal H.] "Rand" Paul, who's running for president, an isolationist position but an anti-interventionist position, at least military intervention.

We should be involved in the world. We should help—be working to try to resolve conflict. We should emphasize diplomacy as the president and Secretary [John F.] Kerry have done with Iran, whether you agree with it or not. We certainly should be working through the United Nations to get international efforts to try to clean up situations where possible and less possible in East Timor.

But unilaterally, it's just not the kind of thing we can do and we should do. So, again, I think the American left and the Tea Party agree on that. The question is whether those in power do. Certainly George W. Bush and his team believed that the United States *could* accomplish something quickly and easily in Iraq, and I think the [President Barack H.] Obama administration is being drawn into a war steadily. Where it goes from here, I don't know, and I don't think the administration knows, and I don't think anyone knows.

CAROTHERS: On a somewhat unrelated note, you talked in your essay—now, this was another thing that you talked about that you've been involved in since Vietnam that I found particularly interesting. You talked about how you've done some work on international initiatives with William Colby, who headed up the pacification program when you arrived as well as Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, two men with whom I imagine you disagreed on quite a number of things, especially how the Vietnam War was being waged. So what was that experience like, to go from being, you know, in an antagonistic relationship with these leaders to then being on the same team as them?

ISAACS: Confirmation that life is full of ironies, confirmation that no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, confirmation that people I used to regard as war criminals in Vietnam were actually doing some productive work I agreed with in other spheres, including nuclear weapons. It's an odd situation. It was an odd feeling, but one of the major advocates for abolition of nuclear weapons was Robert McNamara, who was one of the chief architects of the Vietnam War.

In government and politics, I think there is a wise philosophy that a lot of people share: No permanent friends, no permanent enemies. And whether you're talking about what's going on in the Middle East or you're talking about Iran, whatever your feelings about the people who are your

adversaries yesterday or today, they might well be your allies tomorrow, so you better be flexible and be prepared for that. I just accept it as life sometimes plays tricks on us.

CAROTHERS: All right. Well, is there anything else about your experiences since Vietnam that you want to talk about? Those were sort of the key points that I fixated on.

ISAACS: I'm sure there are other things that I could think of, and if I d and if I think they're absolutely vital, I might call you, but I think you've been—you've been pretty comprehensive in the questions and our discussion at this point. So I can't think of anything major that has been left out. I don't know. If I think of something brilliant that I should have said, should I talk to you and would you continue, or not, the interview? I just ask. My sense is I won't, but if there is such a—something I think of.

CAROTHERS: Definitely. Here, sure. Let me turn the recorder off, since I think we're wrapped up.

[End of interview.]