

Interview with Richard M. McCarthy

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RICHARD M. MCCARTHY

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Biosketch: Richard McCarthy

Q: Dick, would you begin by giving us some of your background?

McCARTHY: I come from Iowa, a graduate of the state University of Iowa, was in the Marine Corps and the U.S. Navy during World War II. I took the Foreign Service exams in December 1946. To my surprise and the surprise of other people, I was accepted. I came to Washington and was assigned to Beijing, or Peking—or, in those days, Peiping—China, arrived in November 1947.

Initially State Department Foreign Service Officer First Assignment, Peiping 1947; Soon Moved To USIS Work

Q: What was your job there, Dick?

McCARTHY: I was a vice consul stamping visas. Then I became administrative officer with the consulate general. Then, it must have been in 1948, Brad Connors came up from Shanghai, Director of the USIS China, took me for a swim in the consulate pool, and in the

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middle of the pool—must have been the deep end—asked me whether I'd like to work for USIS. Since I was tired of stamping visas and doing inventories of consular furniture, and also happened to be a major in American literature at Iowa, I hastily accepted. I became the number-two man in a two-man post, working for Dyke Van Putten.

USIS Election Coverage 1948

I remained in Peiping until we were all more or less kicked out in the spring of 1950. There are several highlights I can mention. One was the presidential election in 1948. Dewey versus Truman. The Nationalists, who still held on very tenuously to Peiping, saw the handwriting on the wall if the Democrats continued in office. So to a man, there were all pulling very vigorously for Tom Dewey. USIS had a big election chart on the outer wall of our premises in Peiping—I wish I could remember the address, but I can't—to chart the returns as they came in over the Voice of America. The crowd was so big that it eventually blocked traffic on the street outside. Most of the crowd was composed of university students, Nationalist military officers, and government officials, who all had a personal stake in the selection. They cheered at the early returns which showed Dewey in the lead, and they were very much crestfallen when Harry Truman eventually turned out to be the winner.

Defeated Nationalist Troops Despoil Peiping

The final year in Peiping under the Nationalist regime was a fairly hairy one, partly because Nationalist troops, several hundred-thousand strong, poured into Peiping after they were defeated up north. They were under no discipline, they hadn't been paid, they were ragged, and most of them became marauders.

The military situation in north China developed very rapidly. Eventually Peiping was surrounded to the Mao Zedong forces. The only means of communication into the city was by an air strip built on the old polo field inside the city walls. There was some sporadic shelling of the city, and I recall one day being home at lunch and receiving a call from

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the librarian, saying that the USIS library had just been struck by an artillery shell. I went back there. Little damage to the building. The only people left at that point were the staff members; everybody else had taken off very hastily. Unfortunately, a student from the next compound was killed.

Communist Forces Enter Peiping: January 1947

So we weren't quite sure what was going to happen, but six of the consular officers, including myself, were asked to stay after the Liberation. I can recall going down to one of the main avenues and watching the Communist forces move in. I guess at that point at least 80% of the population was delighted to see them come on, because they figured that nothing could be worse than what they'd gone through in the last couple of years.

After the Liberation USIS did continue in business for a while and there was a very brief honeymoon period of several months, when we maintained our normal operations. We had people in the library. As I recall, we also distributed the Wireless File. We discovered that our employees, most of whom, I think, were glad to see any kind of change in the local circumstances, proved to be immensely loyal to us.

One person I'd like to mention is Chang Tung, who moonlighted as one of Peiping's leading political cartoonists, working, as I recall, for the Catholic newspaper there. Chang Tung had been imprisoned by the Nationalists because of one of his political cartoons. Within a couple of months after the Communists arrived, he was interned, jailed by the Communists for several weeks, finally got out, but was subjected to some pressures which he did mention to us. However, he did remain entirely loyal to us, and I'm happy to say that when we withdrew from China, he made his way down to Hong Kong and served in Hong Kong for USIS for a great many years, until his retirement.

Q: Wonderful! Have you covered the main points you'd like to there, Dick?

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McCARTHY: Eventually, subtle pressures and some not-so-subtle pressures began to be exerted upon students. I worked a great deal with students. In fact, I taught an English class at one of the local universities. They were afraid to come around and see us, because the military posted guards at the door, and people had to show their residence permits when they entered, which discouraged a great many of them from coming to see us. We ended up pretty much isolated.

Communists Shut Down USIS Tientsin In Summer 1949

The Communists came in at the end of January 1949. In the summer of 1949, I was sent down to Tientsin to take charge of USIS, because Sam Yates had departed for the States. Within two weeks after I got there, a 15-year-old soldier on a bicycle came around and handed me a proclamation which closed us down. At that point, I found it difficult to get back to Peiping, although my wife was expecting a baby, incidentally, who was the first American child born in the new capital of Communist China after it became the capital—Debbie McCarthy, born November 14, 1949.

But I had difficulty getting back there because I was taken into the People's Court, and our employees were asking for two years' severance pay, which seemed a bit steep since some of them only worked for us for six months or so. Even these employees were more loyal to American interests than I would have expected, because they would come around in advance and tell me what the authorities were making them do, and then I'd go to court and know pretty much what to expect. But I was also frequently interrogated by people coming around to my house, either early in the morning, around 6:00, which is early for me, or 10:30 or 11:00 at night, asking me where I'd been, whom I'd talked to, and that sort of thing. So there was increasing pressure on us.

USIS Peiping Closed In Spring, 1950

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However, we stuck it out back in Peiping, which was, I think, a marvelous chance to see a new Communist government established first-hand, until early in 1950, when they seized most of our consular property in Peiping on the grounds that it was former foreign military property. We told them we'd leave if they closed us down. They closed us down, and so we departed. I think I departed in April of 1950.

Q: Did you go directly back to the States then?

McCARTHY: No, I caught a small Butterfield and Swire coastal steamer over to Inchon, Korea, got off, took the train down to Seoul, partly because I wanted to visit John Muccio, who was then ambassador to Korea, and who had been on my board of oral examiners when I came into the Foreign Service. I did travel around Korea for several weeks to get a look at the country, came back on home leave to Webster City, Iowa, in June of 1950. Got up one morning, read the headline in the Des Moines Register that the North had invaded South Korea. I predicted to my dad that since I'd seen some South Korean troops on field maneuvers, they were the best troops in Asia, and I didn't think the Korean War would last six weeks, the invaders would be repelled. Dad was unkind enough to remind me of that when I came back on home leave again in 1953. (Laughs)

Hong Kong: 1950-1956

I went back to Washington, was assigned to Hong Kong as information officer, and spent six of the best years in my life in Hong Kong, where I was successively information officer, deputy PAO, and then when Art Hummel left, became PAO. Those were the days of the CRP, the China Reporting Program, one of my principal efforts, where we were producing material in English and other languages for worldwide consumption about what was happening on the China mainland. We also started a very successful Chinese language publication for Taiwan and Chinese and Southeast Asia called World Today magazine, which lasted for over 25 years before somebody put it to sleep.

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Q: I remember that very well. So six years in all, in Hong Kong. Can you remember a few highlights of that part of your career?

McCARTHY: I think I mentioned the China Reporting Program, which was our major excuse for being in Hong Kong. We did run, of course, a fairly extensive local program, a very extensive book translation program. I think at one point we did around 60 titles in a single year. We did achieve some publishing success in English. We discovered Eileen Chang, who many people regard as probably one of the two or three top Chinese writers of the second half of the 20th century. She wrote a couple of books for us called *Rice Sprout Song*, and I frankly forget the title of the other one, but they were both published in the United States and had some critical acclaim.

We also did a fair amount of work supporting film makers who were producing anti-Communist pictures in Hong Kong, and Chinese language pictures in Southeast Asia. So we were very much involved in the Chinese motion picture industry.

Q: Was Raymond Chow one of your employees?

McCARTHY: I'm glad you mentioned Raymond. Raymond, who is now one of the principal movie tycoons of Asia, runs an outfit called Golden Harvest, is the man who is largely responsible for the craze in Kung Fu movies. He was the one who discovered Bruce Lee. Raymond was our VOA reporter until the bright lights and a lot of money beckoned. Very, very capable guy.

Other local employees worth noting, I think, are Richard Lee, who ran our book translation program, and Tommy Dunn, our principal Chinese employee who had both attractive attributes and some that weren't quite so attractive. Tommy is still alive and kicking and writing a twice-weekly column for Taiwan's English-language newspaper, published in the United States.

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Again, I'd like to say a word about the loyalty of our Chinese employees. Richard Lee, whom I thought a lot of and a lot of other people thought very highly of, came to me and told me that he was under pressure to report on our activities to the Chinese Communists in Hong Kong. They put considerable pressure on him because his wife and family were back in China. He told us and was told what to tell them; he was taking a considerable chance. His family eventually got out of China, but even after so many years, I have to honor Richard Lee for his loyalty. Another employee was approached. He finally came and told us after we'd found out from other sources already.

A footnote on Richard. Much later, during some of its periodic economy drives, the agency was going to drop off some of our old-time employees in Hong Kong, including Richard Lee. Ed Martin happened to be the consul general there. Ed had served as consul in Hangzhou during the Chinese civil war. It was necessary to evacuate Hangzhou. Richard got them down the river at considerable personal risk. Their ship was shelled. He talked them past gunboats from both sides. When Ed learned, as consul general, that Richard was going to be one of the people terminated, he announced firmly that Richard Lee would have a job in Hong Kong as long as he was consul general, or, in fact, in the Foreign Service. This happened. Richard Lee eventually retired in due course, with full honor and served out his career.

PAO Bangkok: 1956

Q: Good story. You had six years in Hong Kong. Then what happened?

McCARTHY: I was transferred as PAO to Bangkok by George Hellyer, who was then the area assistant director. I was sent to take the place of Jack Pickering, a man who most of us admired very much. Jack belonged to the wrong political party and had run afoul of the ambassador (Max Bishop), so he found himself on the way home. I was sent out there to replace him.

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Q: That was what year, Dick?

McCARTHY: That was late 1956 or early 1957.

Q: You were there how long?

McCARTHY: I was there until August of 1958.

Q: What were some of the highlights of that period, would you say?

McCARTHY: My first task when I arrived in Bangkok, apart from the basic task of getting along with the ambassador, was to cut back very severely on something called PIP, the psychological indoctrination program, which, as somebody there at the time said, had managed to cover most of Thailand with two inches of paper. It was a massive psychological indoctrination program operated jointly by the Thai Government and American agencies. Its thrust was primarily anti-Communist, but it also built on the twin symbols of Thai national stability, the Buddhist religion, and, of course, the money.

Q: What was the reason for cutting it back? Money?

McCARTHY: Partly money, partly the growing realization that it probably wasn't that necessary, particularly the anti-Communist objective. The Thais were about as anti-Communist as they were going to get, given the realities of the situation. Anyhow, we found ourselves trying to build a more or less conventional USIS program. This was the first time I'd served in a country which had a number of branch posts, and we tried to build up that particular field program. But we had posts, as I recall, in Songkhla, Chiang Mai, Udorn, Khorat, and I may have forgotten one or two others.

Q: Was the American Binational Center functioning then?

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McCARTHY: It was functioning, but it certainly wasn't as important in those days as I understand it has been since. It's now a major part of the program, I understand.

Q: Yes. But did you have that same location as it is today, or do you know? It was a land grant, as I understand it, from the royal family. Then there was a little sliver of land that was needed, and that was donated by the U.S. Did that happen during your time?

McCARTHY: I think I would remember something like that if it had happened. I think it may have happened either before my time or after I departed.

After 1 # Years In Bangkok - PAO Taiwan; During August, 1958 Matsu/Quemoy Crisis

Q: It has been a remarkable success. Dick, what was your post after Bangkok?

McCARTHY: I was PAO in Taiwan. Actually, I still regret the fact that my tour in Bangkok was so short. It was only one and a half years, but I happened to be in Taipei on leave in August of 1958, when the Quemoy Straits crisis broke out. There was no PAO in place because Ambassador Drumright had just removed a good friend of mine, Ralph Powell. So Drumright, with correspondents coming in from Hong Kong and Taipei to cover the story, asked me to stay for 30 days as the mission's spokesman. I did. The crisis continued. He asked me to stay another 30 days, and I finally ended up staying there for four years as PAO.

Q: My memory of the Quemoy Strait business is fuzzy, but was that a troublesome problem for you for most of that period, or how long?

McCARTHY: Of course, the thing started when the Chinese Communists began shelling Nationalist supply vessels going into resupply the Quemoy garrison. We decided that the offshore islands were essential to American interests, so we announced that we were going to escort these Nationalist supply ships into this very narrow body of water. You can see the mainland from the island of Quemoy. There was considerable trepidation. In fact,

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some day it will be worth writing about. I was down in the atomic bomb-proofed command center with Drumright, the senior Chinese military commanders, Vice Admiral Smoot, who was running an American carrier task force, which was ready to go. I think it was a Sunday, the day that we sent several destroyers in with the Nationalist supply vessels. I'll never forget watching all the lights in this control center, which was a very futuristic thing with a great big table, airplanes and ships and a relief map of the islands, Amoy and the surround mainland. Because all up and down the China coast, the Chinese Air Force sent up fighters. We had three carriers on the other side of the island of Taiwan, on the eastside, away from the mainland. We launched fighters, and they patrolled back and forth for several hours before the Chinese fighters landed to refuel, and they did not come up again. And the Communist forces did not fire on the American vessels.

This was a fairly prolonged crisis. We did have a great number of American and other foreign newspapermen, mostly from Hong Kong and Tokyo, to cover the story. The job of mission spokesman was a little bit tough, because we were doing a number of things that we didn't want the press to know about on Quemoy. So we couldn't permit them on the island. For several weeks, Quemoy was off limits to them. We couldn't explain why. One reason was that we were installing batteries of 120-millimeter guns with atomic shell capability. Some old friends in the press I'd known for a dozen years at that point were threatening to get my job.

Q: All during this time, you had a fairly normal USIS program going on?

McCARTHY: No, it wasn't normal, because a year or two years before, the USIS building had been destroyed in a demonstration. When I arrived, USIS was housed in a private residence, a rather dilapidated private residence. Not even the screens worked very effectively, and we didn't have air conditioning. It was something of a slap in the face to us, because the house had previously been occupied by General Sun Li-jen, who was in deep disfavor with the Chinese National government. In fact, I think at that point he was under house arrest someplace outside of Taipei.

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So the staff was a bit demoralized. Several people had been hurt in the riot. I'm sitting here desperately trying to remember the cause of the riot. (Laughs) We had obviously done something that the Chinese Nationalists did not like, because students invaded the place and damaged it so severely that we were moved into this private house by the Taiwan government until they could prepare proper quarters for us, which happened about six months after I arrived.

I think then we ran a normal USIS program, branch posts in Taichung, Kaohsiung, Tainun, information centers in several other places. Pingtung is the only other one I remember.

But I think the most notable thing about the time I was there, which was from August of 1958 to July of 1962, was the work that we did with young writers and artists. We sponsored and, indeed, worked upon a large number of English-language translations of the work of younger Chinese writers. We published the work of books of art by the more advanced avant garde Chinese painters and Taiwanese painters in Taiwan. One reason for doing this was competition with the outpouring of works in English translation, art work from the Foreign Languages Press in Peiping. This stuff was designed for distribution to the rest of the world, some of it through commercial channels, some of it through USIS posts elsewhere.

Another reason was that we were particularly anxious to get to know the younger generation in Taiwan, which was composed partly of mainlanders and partly of Taiwanese. We learned fairly rapidly that at least among the people we were dealing with, the real battle wasn't between Taiwanese and the mainland Chinese; the main battle was between the generation that held power, somewhat disparagingly called "the long gowns" by these younger people. The student generation, both mainland Chinese and Taiwanese, was pretty much united by the fact that they felt held back and restrained by the older generation. They were a force for change, a force for progress. We did identify some very capable people. A great many of them went to the United States to study writing. In fact, I would argue that the interest of the University of Iowa, of which I happen to be a graduate,

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in Taiwan writers was one of the main reasons for starting the very successful international writing program, which celebrated its 20th anniversary back in 1987.

In fact, the original director of the international writing program, Paul Engle, who, of course, for many years led the Iowa Writers' Workshop, actually met his future wife at USIS in Taiwan, a very successful Chinese woman writer, Nieh Hua-ling. Nieh Hua-ling was older than the students, but she was regarded by the students as a leader because she was the editor of the literary page of Free China, which was a Third Force liberal publication in Taiwan, which had to suspend publication when its editor went to jail for his too liberal sentiments. Nieh Hual-ling was our principal editor for this book translation program. She married Paul, and for the last 15 years, she has been the director of the International Writers' program at Iowa.

Q: After Taiwan, where were you assigned?

From Taiwan, Assigned To VOA: 1962

McCARTHY: I was assigned to the agency, and found myself as Chief of the East Asia and Pacific Division of the Voice of America.

Q: That went on for how long?

McCARTHY: That was from the fall of 1962 until May of 1965, when I found myself in Vietnam.

Q: During you time at the Voice, the period you just mentioned, were there changes in languages or on the nature of programming?

McCARTHY: Yes. This was the time of the great expansion of the Vietnamese service. I think we had been broadcasting an hour, an hour and a half a day. As I recall, when I left to go to Saigon three years later, we were up to nine hours a day. In fact, that was our

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principal emphasis during most of the time I was there, just recruiting these people and training them and bringing them aboard, and trying to find space for them.

Q: I remember. The VOA experience, of course, is something that you are reliving in a way. To follow sequence here, after the Voice, you were sent to Saigon. In what capacity?

To Saigon, Vietnam: 1965

McCARTHY: I was one of the three assistant directors of the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, the infamous JUSPAO.

Q: Reporting to Barry Zorthian.

McCARTHY: Reporting to Barry Zorthian.

Q: What was your special responsibility?

McCARTHY: I was in charge of most of the more conventional aspects of the operation, the publications, radio programs, the binational center, library, motion picture showings in the provinces, and certain aspects of the field program. But we also had another assistant director, Bob Delaney, a USIS officer who ran the civilian field program. Then we had Brigadier General Fitz Freund, who ran the military program.

Q: We forget that there were some fairly regular conventional activities during that period. Did you find that you were up against others for resources, either manpower or money, within JUSPAO?

McCARTHY: Not really. If we needed money, it seemed to be there. Or if we needed people, they were hauled in, in some cases kicking and screaming, of course, from all over the world.

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Maybe I shouldn't tell this story, but I will. I went out to Saigon. I think it was late in 1964, very early in 1965, when they had finally decided to have a JUSPAO. I went out on TDY. Barry Zorthian had asked me to come out, to put it bluntly, to finger people for his staff. (Laughs) I was there long enough to be greeted with great indignation by some of my good friends who suspected I had something to do with their being there. They were all present at Tan Son Nhut airport in May, when I found that somebody else had fingered me for assignment in Vietnam. As I say, the money was certainly there, the people were there, perhaps more people than we really needed, although I don't want to get into that.

Television Comes To Vietnam

I think one project which is probably worth somebody doing a story on at some time is the arrival of television in Vietnam. Armed Forces Radio people decided that we needed television for the American troops, and the buildup started a couple of months after my arrival. It was also decided that we couldn't have television for our own troops unless we had television for the Vietnamese.

They cast about for some means of transmitting these broadcasts, and they discovered three of these Super-Constellation aircraft that had been converted to military use with television transmitters. They had been hastily modified for the Cuban missile crisis. They had an interesting capability; they could fly over a target area, they could jam the local television, and on other channels they could transmit our television.

Anyhow, these three Blue Eagle aircraft were brought out to Vietnam. They proved to deliver a surprisingly good signal, but we scratched our heads a little bit when it came time to find out how to get Vietnamese television on the air, because we couldn't find anybody in country, and Vietnamese who had had any experience with television. We finally decided that the only thing we could do was use the resources of their national film studio, which was a very small-scale operation.

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There was a problem, of course, of receivers. I remember that we bought 2,000 black and white receivers, very large receivers, from RCA in Camden, New Jersey, and we flew them out at a cost higher than the purchase cost of the receivers. The idea was that these receivers would go into community centers within reach of the transmissions of that Blue Eagle aircraft, and most of them landed up there. Some of them, of course, were diverted into the hands of Vietnamese generals and government officials.

We went on air pretty much on schedule. We had some top names from American commercial TV come out to help. One I remember in particular was Larry Gelbert, who was the presiding genius of "M*A*S*H," and I think some of his better ideas probably came from his experience in Vietnam. Certainly a remarkable and inspirational man.

Q: The idea was not to provide entertainment only to the Vietnamese.

McCARTHY: No. The idea was to provide practically anything that would move on the screen. We ran old films, Vietnamese opera films, time and time again. It was very difficult to do news or anything live in Vietnamese. One upshot of this, of course, was that a great many Vietnamese watched Armed Forces Radio television programs. I may say that we took one survey that showed that the most popular program the Vietnamese watched was the old American film with Vic Murrow, "Combat." We didn't object to this at all, because, of course, the Americans always won.

Q: But it was justified, the whole effort, as a morale builder. Was that the justification?

McCARTHY: Yes, and it was that. It was amazing how soon the black market blossomed with Japanese sets, which somehow made their way in country. When the PX got in sets from the U.S., they didn't last more than 15 minutes.

Q: Did that whole enterprise come under your jurisdiction?

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McCARTHY: I was part of it. As I recall, I believe it came under Sandy Marlowe's general direction. But since it was somewhere in between radio and motion pictures, and I had those, I did most of the work on it.

Q: You left Saigon when, Dick?

McCARTHY: I left Saigon late in '66.

Q: And were assigned where?

McCARTHY: I was assigned back to Washington as special assistant to Reed Harris, who was deputy director of policy.

Q: That's a separate story. I hope someone gets into it.

McCARTHY: Yes, yes.

Q: And that lasted for how long?

McCarthy Retires: 1968

McCARTHY: That lasted until I submitted by resignation to marry an alien late in 1968, and it was picked up.

Q: Since that time, you've been a consultant?

McCARTHY: No, first of all, I worked as the New York representative of the Salk Institute (Dr. Jonas Salk) for a couple of years. Then I worked for a non-profit firm in Washington called University Associates, whose main function was to give a hand to black and church-related colleges largely in the South, under several Department of Education programs. I worked there about almost a dozen years. Then I worked for three years for an outfit called

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HRM, Human Resources Management, which was a consulting firm doing work for the Department of Defense and other government agencies both here and overseas.

Q: How did you get back in this office?

1985: Called Back To Contract Work At VOA

McCARTHY: I retreated gracefully into retirement, and after a couple of months, I got a phone call from Ivan Klecka, chief of the East Asia Division of the Voice of America, saying he was looking for a writer, and would I like to do some work on a POV purchase order basis. I said I'd give it a crack. They liked my stuff. They asked me, after six months or so, to come aboard, first part time, then that somehow turned into full time. Now I am chief of something called East Asian Pacific Field Services, which involves a feed to Thailand in Thai and a feed to the Philippines in English.

Q: I want to give you an opportunity to make any general conclusions, summaries, opinions, wisdom, anything you'd like to get off your chest. Would you do it all over again?

McCARTHY: Yes, I would. It was certainly rewarding and a full life. I occasionally look back and wonder, at least in the programs I was associated with, how much impact we actually had. I'm mindful of the fact that I devoted six years of my life in Hong Kong to doing anti-Chinese Communist propaganda, which perhaps was worthwhile at the time, but as time went on and American policy changed, we argued about American policy and began to doubt increasingly whether the expenditure was worth it, whether the objective was really there anymore. But I suppose that's the nature of the beast. We have a country program which is designed to accomplish certain objectives, and sometimes we do, sometimes the situation changes, and what worked a couple of years ago is no longer valid.

Q: I want to thank you very much for your contribution to this oral history.

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End of interview