

Interview with Willis J. Sutter

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WILLIS J. SUTTER

Interviewed by: Jack O'Brien

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Q: This is February 24, 1988. My name is Jack O'Brien and I am about to interview an old colleague and friend, Will Sutter, who has volunteered to participate in this oral history of USIA and its predecessors.

Will, let us begin with the obvious—your full name, rank, serial number—anything that identifies who you are, to the people who may not know you.

SUTTER: My full name is Willis J. Sutter. I joined the Agency in June of 1966 and retired in May of 1986. So, I spent just about 21 years with the Agency.

My last overseas assignment was in Bangkok, Thailand, which was also my first overseas assignment. Jack O'Brien was my first PAO.

1966 - First Overseas Assignment: Thailand

I think I would like to talk about some of the high points in my career. Bangkok was certainly one of those high points. At the time I got to Bangkok as a JOT, in April of 1967, I

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think Bangkok had about thirty—no, it was more than that. We had about 13 branch posts, as I recall, Jack —

Q: Yes.

SUTTER: — around the country. How many American officers did we have? Thirty some, as I recall —

Q: *I have lost count.*

SUTTER: — or more than that. It was one of the biggest USIS operations in the world at the time. It was so large because of the massive American counterinsurgency program in Thailand, supporting the Thai's in their counterinsurgency program. Most of these USIS branch posts had to do with the Thai counterinsurgency program.

Basically, we were helping the Thai's in their information efforts out in the villages. Most of us BPAOs, who were young officers, spent—I think it was—fifteen days a month—I think that was Bigg's requirement—fifteen days a month —

Q: *Explain who Bigg is.*

Assigned To Field Post At Nakhon Phanom

SUTTER: Howard Biggerstaff was the Field Operations Officer at the time. He was the man who had direct responsibility and supervision of these thirteen branch posts. I was up in the Nakhon Phanom on the Mekong River, right across the river from Laos. That was my first branch post. At that time, it was isolated and undeveloped province. The people were Lao speaking, not Thai speaking.

Thai Government Fighting Insurgency: Function Of Field Posts At That Time

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It was one of the centers of the insurgency. The insurgents infiltrated back and forth across the Mekong River into Nakhon Phanom and used Nakhon Phanom, both as a base of operations against the Thai and as a conduit into adjacent provinces in the northeast. The northeast was where the insurgency was really centered—or, at least where the insurgency was hottest.

My job was to join up with local Thai officials and to basically back them up with technical equipment, movie projectors and so forth, and with publications and films that USIS had made in Thai, to be used in the local Thai officials information programs in the villages.

We used to call these trips MIT's (Mobile Information Teams). Teams consisted of the USIS BPAO and one or two of his Thai assistants, FSN's, and the Nai Amphur—literally it means the boss of the Amphur, the basic organizational unit of the Thai province.

We do not have an equivalent in American government, although maybe county executive might be something close to it. Anyway, he was the chief executive at this lowest unit of Thai government. He had under him a whole array of officers who dealt with things like public health, rice production, security, tax collection, land—recording land deeds, things like this.

The basic premise behind the MIT was that these officials had to get out into the villages and perform their service functions for the villages. This was so that the government could manifest itself out in those isolated villages where the communists roved about making propaganda against the government and winning a number of adherents to their cause.

Q: It might be useful at this point, Will, to ask, why the Thai government was not able to conduct these programs by themselves? Why was American participation and support necessary?

SUTTER: As I understood it, it was largely a lack of resources. They did not have enough money to buy jeeps, for example, or pay for the gas it would take to do a tour of four or five

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isolated villages within a week's period of time. They did not have the resources to print the publications and make the films that were thought to be so useful in this kind of work—particularly the films. The publications were not that useful, simply because many of the villagers were illiterate and only picture postcards and posters and things like that could carry a message.

Films are very, very popular in Thailand. They had already been introduced by the medicine men—that is—people that used to go from village to village selling medicines. They used commercial films as a way of gathering a crowd. They showed them films to entertain them and then got up after the film was over to sell them different kinds of medicines.

The MIT was essentially a kind of take off from that. What we would do was go into the villages with Thai officials, show the film—usually in front of Sala Wat in the temple yard, in the village. Every village of any size has a temple surrounded by a large clear yard. We set our screen up there, showed films, then after the film, the Thai officials would get up and discuss different local issues with the people.

In many ways, it was like a political campaign. This is what I used to liken it to in my own mind, that basically the Thai officials were out there in those villages, conducting a political campaign against the communist insurgents.

Q: Who made the films you discussed?

SUTTER: The films were made, for the most part, by USIS, actually all of them were made by USIS. When I first started, we had just documentaries, all of which, of course, were translated into Thai. Most of them dealt with Thai issues. There were some documentaries about the United States, but most of them dealt with, for example - the royal family, or the SEATO Alliance, or different aspects of the Thai and American relationship.

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Shortly after I became a BPAO, we got our first full length feature film made by USIS Bangkok, tapping Thai resources—we used Thai movie stars, for example, some of whom were well known. The stories were basically stories of villagers and how they had suffered at the hands of the insurgents and, of course, how the Thai government, in the end, would come in and intervene and make the villagers' life better. That was the essential story line of these feature length films that we used. By the time I left, I think we had about four of them. All of which, again, were made and produced by USIS Bangkok.

Q: Turn to the American participation in this, Will. Was it in your opinion, an advantage for the Thai villagers to see that there was an American presence working in cooperation with their own government? Did “Fared”, the Thai word for foreigner, stand out in a way that seemed to cement US/Thai relations? How would you evaluate that?

SUTTER: Well, I would say that our presence was positive rather than negative. Not necessarily because we were such experts in counterinsurgency or such marvelous diplomats, but we went out very consciously under the direction and the authority of the Nai Amphur, or whoever—whatever Thai official was leading that particular trip. We always played down our own particular participation. We always went along as part of the team. The team was always led by a Thai. That was very clear.

Our presence there was simply to show that we were united with the Thais in this effort to improve the relationship between the government and its peoples out in these isolated villages. I never got the impression that the Thai villagers that we met ever thought that my particular presence indicated American supremacy or American direction of Thai efforts. I never got that sense.

I am quite sure, too, that if the people had thought that, the Thai officials would not have cooperated with us. They were very sensitive about that themselves. They would not have allowed us to go if they thought our presence was going to undercut their particular stance or their stature with their own people.

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Q: Tell me about the reports that you wrote after such a visit in the field.

SUTTER: After each trip, we wrote a report of the trip. If I went along on a trip, then I wrote the report. If my information assistant (a Thai field post employee) was the person that made the trip, he would be required to write the report—in English, which was then sent off to Bangkok.

Basically, the report stated the number of villages we had gone to, what problems we had seen there, what Thai officials had gone with us, what they had said, what kinds of things they had done, and any positive results of the trip. For example: one of the big problems among Thai villagers was that their land was never registered, so ownership of rice land was very unclear. This could be a problem at times. The reason it was not registered was because many of these villages were at least a day's walk away from the district office, where one had to go to register land. Most Thai farmers just did not bother to make the trip. Also, Thai officials are rather overbearing and most villagers preferred to steer clear of them. As a result, a lot of what we would take for granted as government services never got performed.

Thai Government Services Performed During USIS Assisted Village Visits

One of the things these trips would do, would be to bring the land officer around. He would help the people register their titles to their rice land, which I am sure gave them a great deal of peace of mind. It certainly clarified what could be a very troublesome issue at times in these villages.

Health officers would go out, of course, and provide inoculations to the people. The veterinarian always went out. He would go out and look at the water buffalo and other livestock of the farmers. If he detected incipient disease or whatever, he would give them advice. He used to go along with vaccinations and so forth. One of the standard

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procedures of the trip was to vaccinate the livestock against whatever particular diseases were prevalent at the time.

Q: What were the overall purposes then, to summarize? Would it be to let the villagers know that their government was concerned about their welfare, their interests, whether it was health, agriculture and so on?

SUTTER: Yes, basically, that was it—to let the villagers know the government was there and interested in their welfare, and that it was going to “bring to them,” which is a revolutionary attitude in Thai society, the services that they needed. [A principal communist insurgent propaganda theme was that the Thai Government cared nothing about the people—were only interested in “feathering their own nests.”] In the past, the people had always gone to the government when they needed services. But, in this particular instance, the government was taking the services out to the people. I suppose our instrumental role there was to provide a lot of technical support that the Thai's lacked, as a kind of encouragement for them to do something they were beginning to see they needed to do in any case.

Earlier I likened these trips to political campaigns. I always liked that metaphor, because it always seemed to me the most successful trips were always the trips that were conducted by a particularly charismatic Thai official, whether it happened to be the Nai Amphur himself or his deputy or some other official in charge of the trip. What really made it work was, when he would get up there on the steps of the Sala Wat on the temple compound. It was a little guest pavilion that every temple has for visitors.

He would get up there and give his little speech, either before or after the film. It was at that point, I always thought, that the real nexus between the central government in Bangkok, represented by this particular officer, and those villages came to life. I have always believed that politics is more a question of spirit rather than material. The villagers

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certainly appreciated the medical support they were getting and the registration of deeds and all the other services that were being performed.

They appreciated those. But, what they really wanted to feel was that they were part of something bigger than themselves. I call them charismatic, that may not be the right word. But, it was always these officials who were able to impart that particular spiritual dimension, that I always thought made for a successful trip.

Q: Now, when you were out there you, of course, were cut off from communication from Bangkok and elsewhere. Did you listen to the Voice of America when you were in the field?

The Appeal To Villagers Of USIS Assists Lao Dialect Radio Station

SUTTER: We listened to the Voice of America, but we also listened to a radio station that had received a great deal of material support from USIS Bangkok. It was a radio station called 909, located in a provincial town called Sakol Nakhon. This was a medium wave station as I recall, Jack. The idea was to give the northeasterners, who were again Lao speaking, not central Thai speaking people, their own radio station. All the announcers on this station were Lao speakers, Issan, is the name of the dialect spoken in that part of Thailand. Issan is a dialect of Lao. Considerably different from central Thai.

Q: Was that station at Sakol Nakhon or Khon Kaen.

SUTTER: No, that was a Sakol Nakhon. It was at Sakol Nakhon.

Q: There was one at Khon Kaen at one time also.

SUTTER: That was a government station. That was the public relations department of the Thai government. They built the station, first it was a radio station. Now, of course, there is a television station there as well. The station I am talking about 909 or Khu Sung Khno, as

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the Thai's used to call it, was based in Sakol Nakhon. We had about two or three American advisors from USIS attached to the station to help them get on their feet.

That station was quite popular with the people in the villages. We listened to it as much as we did VOA. That was the station that was really aimed at these villagers. The VOA, of course, was aimed at a broader Thai audience. This station was aimed right at the villagers in the northeast, where we were working, and we used to listen to that a lot. It was quite popular. They had one announcer there who was an army major—as I recall. I cannot remember his name, but he was very, very popular. Occasionally he would go on these MIT's as a kind of accompanying personality. Whenever he did go, the reaction to him was the same as our “teenyboppers” reaction to Elvis Presley's presence at a concert.

I would like to emphasize that a lot of these villages we went to were “really” isolated. I mean, these villages were back in the 13th century. Very few of them had—there were no televisions at all. There was no electricity. They were living in a way that any Thai in the 13th century would have recognized, easily recognized, and been comfortable with. I think it was this disparity between the two worlds represented, you know, this earlier age of Thai civilization coming into contact with the more modern civilization of Bangkok represented by the Thai officials that were coming with us and, of course, ourselves and the films and vehicles and all that drew large audiences.

I remember one night, we were showing films in the temple compound there. There was one little guy who, before the film show, sat with us and had supper with us and was drinking the local brew, called Mekong. Apparently this old guy traveled around quite a bit. He had been out of the village several times. He may even have been in the army at one time. I am not quite sure about that. But anyway, he was real sophisticated as far as the rest of the villagers were concerned. He was telling all these tall tales of travel and so forth, and letting everybody know how sophisticated he was.

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When we showed the films, this old guy sat on the steps and stared at the projector all night long, through the entire film show. At the end of the film show, he announced in a voice that everybody could hear, "I figured out where you get those pictures from, but what I cannot figure out is where you hid that little guy with the voice."

Q: (laughter) Out of a month, you would have how many days on MIT on the average?

SUTTER: We were required to spend fifteen days, fifteen working days travelings. That was a requirement that Howard Bigger- staff, no doubt with the support of Jack O'Brien and concurrence of Jack O'Brien levied on us. Actually, it was not any hardship on us, because it was such an interesting experience to travel back into those villages. The Thai officials with whom we worked were, in many cases, very interesting people. The work we were doing we thought was very worthwhile, so there was not really a lot of hardship involved.

Q: The Thai officials would set the time and schedule the location? Correct?

SUTTER: Yes. They would set what villages they wanted to go to, how long they wanted to spend there and so forth. It depended on the Thai official. Some of these officials had done MIT's already, or had good ideas of their own—they would simply come to us and say, "Look, I want to go to so-and-so, so-and-so, and so-and-so, and these are the things I want to do out there, can you come along and can you help us with films and vehicle support?"

Other times, we would go to them, particularly if there was a new Nai Amphur who had not been in that part of the country before. We might go to them, introduce ourselves, tell him what kinds of things we had done in his district, what kinds of support we were willing and ready to give him and gently suggest that he might want to visit a couple of villages. We knew villages ourselves that might be trouble spots and we thought might be appropriate places for him to begin his experience.

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So it depended on the Thai official. In no case could we tell them they had to go. There was no suggestion that we were directing things. We basically were working as a catalyst. Whether we were a very active catalyst or a passive catalyst depended a lot on the kind of Thai official with whom we were dealing. Basically, it was their expertise and their interest that made the thing go. We just simply gave them more means to do the things they themselves were convinced they had to do.

The Insurgent Defector Who Never Shot At Sutter

Q: Did you ever receive any threats or warnings?

SUTTER: I never got any direct threats. I remember, I guess, after I had been in Nakhon Phanom about nine months or so, I met a defector. That is, a man who had been the chief of the military arm of an insurgent band in Amphur Muktuhan, which is one of the better known Amphur's in the Province of Nakhon Phanom. It is the site of a chedhi that apparently goes back to Khmer times.

This man had been the military chief of the band located in the Don Yen forest, which was south of the district seat along the Mekong River. It was a particularly hot spot for the insurgents. I think it was one of the main highways they used in sending people out of Thailand to North Vietnam for training and then infiltrating them back into the country.

This particular guy had conducted an assassination attempt against the district office at the time. It almost killed the district officer. He was severely wounded and his jeep was all shot up, but he survived. Many, many months later this man, I forget his name now, defected to the Thai government. He came in—I forget how he came in—I think he came in on his own actually.

Jack had asked me if there were ever any threats against my life. No, there were no threats that I knew about, but, in talking to this defector, I asked him if he had seen any Americans out in the bush. First, he told me they used to lay an ambush along this one

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trail that went into the Don Yen forest. The trail we would have had to use going into that area. He said they watched it all the time. I asked him if he had ever seen any Americans down there?

He said, "Yes," and I asked him, "Who?" He pointed to me. He said they had seen me go by several times, past their little ambush there. I said, "How come you did not shoot?" He said, "Well, first of all, our policy was not to shoot Americans, but, secondly, we never shot at anybody unless we had explicit orders and the orders had to contain the name of the person that we were after, where they could be found and when they could be found at that spot." If those three conditions were not present, they would not open fire.

Just as an interesting aside, I asked him, "Did the Amphur know you were the guy who shot him up?" He said, "Yes, I told him." I said, "What did the Nai Amphur say?" He said, "He did not say anything. He took his 45 out—at this time all Nai Amphur were armed with 45's or 38's or whatever—laid it on the table between us and he said, 'That does not matter. I am going to ask you a lot of questions and you tell me the truth and it will be okay. If you do not tell me the truth, I am going to blow your fuckin' brains out.'" (laughter) I said, "What did you do?" He said, "I told the truth." (laughter)

Q: Any other anecdotes that come to mind?

SUTTER: Just one other story that I think illustrates the isolation of many of the villages into which we went.

Early on in my tour there in Nakhon Phanom, we were visiting a very isolated village. I was with my Thai information assistant. As the custom was when you first got to a village, you got together with the village head man and some of his principal associates and they conducted a tour around the village and showed you all the high spots. Sometimes, if it was a large group, such as the one that I was with this time, we would split up and one

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group would go off with the Nai Amphur, the head man, and another group would go off with one of his assistants.

After we had done our tours, we got back together and my assistant came to me and said that a bunch of old ladies in a part of the village where he was had come up to him and said they heard there was a farang in the village. He said, "Yes, that was right." They said, "Did you know him?" He said, "Yes, I know him." They said, "What is he like?" So he described me. At the end of his description he said, "And, he speaks Thai." Which he thought was a matter of some distinction, I suppose. This old lady just looked at him and said, "Well, what else would he speak?" (laughter) I think it illustrates the point that these were very isolated villages.

Estimate Of Value Of USIS Assisted Village Visits

Q: Looking back on that period, Will, would you say that you were satisfied by the efforts made by both the Americans and the Thai's in trying to combat terrorism, communism in the area?

SUTTER: I think so, yes. We had a lot of questions at the time that we did this, the BPAO's among ourselves. We were all young and feisty. I think we criticized as much as we applauded, if not more. One of the questions we always asked ourselves was, "What expertise did we have to be doing this particular work?" I think the answer was that we did not need a lot of expertise. What we needed to do was to make our technical resources available to Thai officials who had the expertise. As I said earlier, when the trips worked, they worked very well.

Changes In Thai Village Life Today

I suppose the bottom line and the real answer to your question is that the insurgency in northeastern Thailand eventually died. [The insurgency did die. One of the reasons was that the Chinese Government had rather extensively supported it in the period covered

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by this interview. As the Vietnam war wound down, and the US reopened relationships with China, that support stopped. The value of the USIS supported village program was that it helped contain the spread and success of the insurgency until larger political considerations regarding China, the Soviet Union and Vietnam led to cessation of external support.] The Thai government did manage to contain it and finally tamp it down. I revisited that area, I guess about fifteen years after the events I am recounting here. It has considerably changed from what it was back then. The attitudes of the people are much different from what they were.

In those days, the people really were isolated and alienated from the central government. Now, there is a much closer relationship between the people of northeastern Thailand and their government in Bangkok. A great deal of development has occurred. In those villages that I used to go into it would be rare then to find two or three short wave radios. Now, everybody has radios and many, many homes have television sets. So there are a lot of changes.

Yes, I think those trips did a lot of good. Again, not because we were so smart, but, we did the wise thing. We had the goods, the Thai's needed the goods and we made the goods available to them.

Q: Well, I think we are all proud of that period. Do you want to go on to the next step in your career?

After Thailand, Two Years In Moscow: 1973-'75

SUTTER: The other assignment that really stands out in my memory is the two year period I spent as an assistant cultural affairs officer in Moscow, from 1973 to the summer of 1975.

Q: Did you go there with or without any language preparation?

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SUTTER: I had ten months of Russian. The full load. It is impossible to go there without Russian—or it is useless to go there without Russian. Not just because you could not do your work, but also because you really could not experience the Soviet Union unless you could speak Russian. Some Soviets speak English. There are some that do, but not that many.

Q: So, what year did you go to Moscow?

SUTTER: I went in 1973. June of 1973. Just as the ice was breaking. This was at the height of detente basically. I think President Nixon had been there in 1972 to sign whatever agreements it was that he signed with the Soviets. That made a great difference in the working atmosphere in Moscow. My predecessor had a very difficult time getting into see the Soviet officials. I had almost no trouble whatsoever in getting to talk with them. The difference was not our personalities. The difference was the Soviets had been told that things were relaxed and that they ought to work a little more closely with us.

I was in charge of the educational exchange program, so I had to go frequently over to the Ministry of Higher Education to talk about details of the exchange. My predecessor had a very hard time getting in to see people. I had no trouble whatsoever. On a couple of occasions, when I had an urgent matter to discuss, and could not reach my contacts on the phone, I would simply go over there personally and just walk in unannounced. That was unheard of earlier, but the atmosphere had so changed that the Russians took this without any particular affront or difficulty. They were not uncomfortable. We always got our work done.

What really stands out in my mind, is President Nixon's visit in June of 1974. This was about two months before he resigned because of Watergate. He had come attempting to refurbish his image. Before that he had gone to Cairo. He had been enthusiastically received by President Sadat. There was that famous train trip from Cairo down to

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Alexandria. Then he got on the plane and came to Moscow. For no other reason than to get some good media coverage.

The Russians, really wanted to support Nixon, and were very anxious to keep him in power if they could, because they were used to dealing with him. They understood him. Like everybody else, they do not like surprises or new personalities who they do not know very well. So they went all out to make Nixon feel very welcome.

They gave him a big reception at the St. George's hall—in the Kremlin. It is a big reception hall with columns inscribed with the names of all the Russians who have been given the—I think it is called—the Medal of St. George, a czarist award. They have kept the hall for whatever reasons, and they use it for these ceremonial receptions. It is all gold and white.

I was invited. I attended. I can recall very clearly that President Nixon walked in along with Brezhnev, and Kosygin, who was then the President of the USSR, Gromyko was there, the Foreign Minister, and Henry Kissinger, who was at that time Secretary of State. They all marched in rather formally. They stopped about twelve feet away from where I was, while the band played the Soviet—first the American and then the Soviet national anthem—I can remember watching them.

First of all, they all looked like they had come out of a waxworks. They all looked deathly ill for some reason. I am not quite sure what the reason was, particularly the Russians. Although, Nixon was not looking in particularly good shape himself, the Russians looked like they had just stepped out of a waxworks or out of an embalmer's studio. They all looked, as I said, deathly ill.

Off to the side Was Alexander Haig, who was at that time, Nixon's Chief of Staff. He was wearing a gray suit and had a briefcase with him, which he was clutching to his chest with both arms and looking down at the floor, while they played the national anthems, as though he had great, deep, dark secrets on his mind.

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Of course, he did. He realized that Nixon was on his last legs—the Nixon presidency was on its last legs. I can remember very clearly the contrast between the grandeur as the national anthem was playing, and off to the side this grave presence. The evidence grieves Haig who knows all the deep and dark secrets, and “knows” what the real end is probably going to be. That has always stuck with me.

Shift In Soviet Attitudes After Nixon's Resignation

I forget what the term is—you know, “How fast glory passes.” I think there is a Latin phrase for it. [Sic Transit Gloria] It came to my mind the minute I saw that. It was a rather sad occasion.

Weeks later a colleague of mine came down, woke me up in my apartment and said that Nixon was on VOA—this was three o'clock in the morning, Moscow time—Nixon's on VOA and he is resigning. We all sat up and listened to VOA as Nixon delivered his resignation speech. It was quite a moment.

Q: You spent how many years in Moscow?

SUTTER: I spent two years there.

Q: Did working conditions change after Nixon's resignation?

SUTTER: They changed a lot shortly after I left, because of the worsening of relations between ourselves and the Soviets. Yes, things got worse after Nixon left. That is for sure. I am not sure there is a real close cause and effect relationship there. I recall talking to colleagues after I left and they had much harder times getting in to see their contacts than I had. People were beginning to be harassed again by the KGB. People, that is, who had close contacts with the Soviets.

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I was harassed twice myself by the KGB, because I had a very close friend—not close friend, but a good acquaintance—who was a well known dissident in Georgia—Tbilisi. Whenever I went to Tbilisi on business, I would always see this particular person. The KGB did not like that very much. They would come to my hotel room at eight o'clock in the morning and say that the hotel administrator wanted to talk to me.

I knew very well who the hotel administrator was. I went to this little room and there would be this “administrator” sitting up at a little dais, almost as though he were a judge. He was flanked by people on his left and right. There would be one chair in front of his desk. He would ask me to sit down. In this particular occasion, I had spent all night out with my Georgian friend. He said, “We noticed you were not in your room last night. Where were you?” He said, “We know you speak Russian.” I said, in Russian, “I do.” They had a translator there, because I knew the person who was the translator. I said, “I see you have an English translator here and I would prefer to speak in English.” He agreed to that.

Then he said, in Russian, very roughly, “We noticed you were not in your room last night. Where were you?” I said in English, “That is none of your fucking business!” I watched very carefully as the translator translated. He translated what I said exactly. (laughter) With that, the so called administrator softened his tone.

He said they were very concerned about my welfare, because something could have happened to me and, of course, they were responsible to the authorities in Moscow for my well being while I was in Tbilisi, etc., etc., etc. I said, “I do not know what could have happened to me, because there are no hooligans in Tbilisi, as you know. So what could have possibly have happened to me?” I said, “What happened was, my friend and I were drinking a lot and I know that the laws against drinking and driving are very severe. I insisted that he not drive me back to the hotel that night, but that I stay in his apartment instead. That is what I did.” With that, I got up and left.

Q: Did you travel with another American usually or did you go by yourself?

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SUTTER: No. On all these trips to Tbilisi, I traveled by myself. That is to say, not with another American from the Embassy. The formal rule was, you were supposed to travel with another American from the Embassy. But, on many occasions, I went down by myself. I was sent down by myself. It was not as though I was sneaking out. Often those rules were honored more in the breach than in the observance.

Life In Moscow As A U.S. Diplomat

Q: Tell us, Will, a little bit about the housekeeping side of working in Moscow. To begin with, where you lived.

SUTTER: We lived in Leninsky Prospect which is on one of the major thoroughfares. It was, as I recall, on the southeastern side of Moscow. It was out near where Moscow University is located. It was a big block of apartment buildings that were dedicated to diplomats. On my particular stairwell, I think there were almost all Americans. But, in other stairwells, we had East Germans, Czech's, French, Romanians. As I recall, there were Cambodians there. Yes, there were Cambodians there —not Cambodians, I am sorry, South Vietnamese. Because, when Saigon fell, I was in Moscow. I can remember the South Vietnamese diplomats leaving their apartments, packing up their goods and taking off, after the government had changed in Saigon.

Our apartment block was watched very closely. We had a KGB guard downstairs. He checked over everybody who came and went. No Soviet could come in to see us without first passing this guard. When we gave parties and invited some of our Soviet contacts, we would have to go downstairs and inform the KGB guard that Soviets were coming, to visit us. We would give him their names. When they came, they would show him the invitation that I had sent, and then he would permit them to proceed. But, no unauthorized Soviets could come into see us.

Q: In the office, did you have a Russian assistant, or more than one?

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SUTTER: We had a Russian assistant in the cultural section in which I was, yes. Her name was Asaya, a very attractive Soviet woman, with a rather tragic personal history, as I recall. But, the common belief around the compound in the Embassy, was that Asaya was the KGB colonel in the compound. It could well have been so. She was a bright, able woman. I can recall once, somebody caught her literally with her ear to the keyhole, listening to a conversation in there. They could be very clumsy at times.

We always assumed that every Soviet in the compound was reporting on us, and we acted accordingly. Sometimes it was useful, because we could sometimes pass messages back to the Soviets by using these people, you know, by dropping a comment in front of them, that you knew would get reported back—that you wanted to get reported back, particularly when we were in negotiations concerning visiting artistic groups from the United States, like the San Francisco Symphony, for example. If we were really frosted off by the attitude of the hotels, we would sometimes say that in front of our Soviet colleagues. They would pass it back, sometimes it was helpful.

Q: Did you listen to the Voice of America regularly?

SUTTER: We listened to the Voice of America all the time. When I was there, it was not being jammed. At least it was not being jammed as much as it had been. They did jam occasionally. The jamming station, as I recall, was about two blocks away from the Embassy. I can recall one of my first impressions of my tour there, was being taken by the assistant information officer to a window in the Embassy and he pointed to a tower, two or three blocks away, and he said that's where they jam VOA—or at least one of the sites. There are, of course, many in Moscow.

Q: How about cooperation, if any, with allied countries? For example, in your area, the exchanges program? Did you compare notes with, say the British, or others on that subject?

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SUTTER: We compared notes with the British from time to time, because they had a similar exchange to ours. We had the Fulbright exchange. We sent over, I think it was, about thirty graduate students a year. Most of them were doing their Ph.D.'s dissertations and needed to research the Soviet archives there. We would receive thirty graduate students from the Soviet Union, most of whom were in the sciences—the hard sciences.

The British had a similar exchange. So, yes, we would get together with them and compare notes about attitudes and the Ministry of Higher Education, problems and so forth. Not so much with the other countries for, I guess, a variety of reasons. They did not have the same kind of exchange with the Soviets that we did. The British did.

Q: Did you leave Moscow wishing to stay longer or was two years enough?

SUTTER: When I left, I felt two years was enough. I had three unpleasant incidents with the KGB, within, I guess, two or three months of my departure. I felt that was enough.

The working conditions in the Embassy were not particularly salubrious and that tended to wear you out. The work itself was rather demanding, although exhilarating, too. When I left—two years—I figured I had enough of it. I would go back, if I could go back under the same conditions that prevailed in 1973. This is to say, ease of contact with both officials and private Soviets. But, things had tightened up shortly after I left and I would not want to work in Moscow under those conditions.

Q: Anything more on your Moscow tour you would like to discuss, Will?

SUTTER: Well, nothing professional. I had this interesting contact with this Georgian dissident who, several months after my departure, was arrested and tried publicly by the Soviets. His trial was televised throughout the Soviet Union, as I understand it. He was jailed. He was a Georgian Nationalist essentially. He was the son of a very prominent Georgian writer. He disliked the Russians simply because he thought they were attempting

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to destroy Georgian culture. He used to use me as a conduit for sending things out of the country to a variety of places, including Amnesty International in London.

Q: Did you have to check with your superiors before doing that?

SUTTER: Yes. They were always aware of what I was doing. I checked with them, with the security people and, of course, the people in the political section of the Embassy. I always kept them informed of what I was doing.

Q: We can go to another phase of your career then, if you like.

SUTTER: No, that's about it really. Those are the most interesting points in my career. After that, I served for four years in Africa.

1975-'81 After Moscow, Two Years In Washington; Then Kinshasa And Mauritania

Q: What was your next assignment?

SUTTER: From Moscow, I came back to Washington. After a couple of years here, working in the—what was called the program development for the arts—I went to Kinshasa as the cultural affairs officer for two years. It was an interesting tour, but there is nothing particularly notable about it. After that, I went as PAO to Mauritania for two years. Again, for those interested in the exotic, it is an interesting place, but not particularly significant from the point of view of an agency career.

PAO In Vientiane, Laos: 1976-'77

I was also PAO in Vientiane, Laos, just after the Pathet Lao had taken over. Again, there were some interesting incidents between myself and Lao and the Soviet KGB, who, after a while became very suspicious of me. I used to live across the street from their Embassy. At some point, they discovered that I spoke Russian.

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Q: *What years were —?*

SUTTER: I was in Vientiane in 1976 to 1977. It was a shortened tour. I got there in July of '76. It was supposed to be for an eighteen month tour.

Q: *Will, we are in sort of a wrap up period of this interview, and you are free to comment or to make recommendations, or anything you please.*

SUTTER:'s Personal Policies For Foreign Service Work

A. Individual Officers Up To Threshold Of Senior Rank Should Be Specialists

SUTTER: I think you asked me about personnel policies. There are two things that have struck me during my career. One is, I think the Agency officers, at least in the early parts of their careers, ought to specialize more than they do. I know there is the old argument that it is better to be a generalist, you know, jack of all trades—master of none, rather than be a narrow specialist and master of one particular trade.

I am not sure I agree with that. I think we ought to become specialists in an area or a particular field. At least, up to the one level. If you have executive talent, it will manifest itself, whether you happen to be a specialist in Asian-American relations, European-American relations or Latin American relations or what. If you have executive talent, it will manifest itself.

In the meantime, you get the benefit of the expertise of the officer. Let us say the first twenty years of his career. If that is all he is going to serve is twenty years, then you have got the benefit of a person who is well-grounded in one particular aspect of American foreign policy. After that, they may broaden out. Take on wider responsibilities. I have not sat down and thought about this for a long time.

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Q: Related to that is a difficult, difficult problem of language training. You put a person into a tough language, Chinese or Arabic, for say two year minimum, and then you might expect to get at least four years in that country or that area. Then it can be argued that that should be extended. Well, the guy is a specialist, but he is out of the mainstream, in many respects. It is a tough one. Do you have any comments on that?

SUTTER: Yes. The mainstream is defined basically by management. If you define the mainstream to really be composed of several mainstreams, each of which is a particular area specialty. For example, if a guy has, in his early career, studied Chinese, has mastered Chinese—has had a tour in China—then, I think he really ought to continue on in that specialty for pretty much the next twenty years. Not always in China, of course, but assignments in Asia. His broad general expertise ought to be north Asia. His real specialty is Chinese-American relations, Chinese language, Chinese culture, and, his other assignments ought to be assignments that take advantage of that core expertise of his.

Again, if he has executive talent, which is basically what you are looking for when you get to the senior foreign service, that will manifest itself throughout his career. You can at that point decide, you know, after twenty years, whether that man has the talent to become a generalist, if you will.

Also, I do not think we do enough training in the Agency. I was struck, for example, when I became cultural affairs officer in Kinshasa, that I had had only one assignment in a cultural section before that. I was assistant cultural affairs officer in Moscow. It was rather specialized. Which was to say, I was in charge of the Fulbright program. I did a few other things, but basically, most of my experience was in the Fulbright program.

Now, I compare my experience and the experience of most other agency officers with the American military, for example. I am not about to say that the military is better than the foreign service. But, what I am struck by is that, nobody in the military becomes a battalion

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commander or a regimental commander until he has gone to service schools and learned certain professional skills. It just does not happen. That is all. Just because he was a good lieutenant, or a good company commander, is no reason to think he is going to be a good regimental commander, until he has had the appropriate training.

In foreign service, if you are a good JOT, that automatically seems to mean that you will be a good CAO or good IO. Now, there are a lot of professional things to be learned to be a good CAO or good IO or good PAO. The things that schooling can teach you—now, you can get it through experience, if you are good, you have had good supervisors, and all the rest of that—but, that is haphazard. I really think we ought to have a CAO school, an IO school and a PAO school, just the way the military has regimental—I forget what the nomenclature is, but they have schools for all the important steps—career steps in the military. I think the foreign service ought to have the same thing. The USIA ought to have the same thing.

There ought to be an IO school. There ought to be a body of doctrine that says what a good IO is, what things he needs to know and what kinds of things the Agency expects of him. He ought to be taught all these things as a core curriculum. We do not get that. I think it is to the detriment of the officers and to the Agency at large.

That relates to my feelings that people ought to be specialists rather than generalists, up to the senior foreign service level. At the senior foreign service level, okay, then you become a generalist. That is what the senior foreign service basically is about—that is the generalists.

Q: In bringing this up, Will, I do not mean to get into your own personal situation, but more a general observation, the New York Times reported the other day that the State Department now has computerized the needs of getting spouses employed overseas, where they can take advantage of both husband and wife. That is an extremely difficult problem. Clearly, in Sydney, Australia, you can have a person who is a biochemist and

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the husband is a political officer. That would not be true, I suppose in Mauritania. So this is a problem facing us, it seems, as we have more professional spouses. Do you have any observations on that subject?

B. Sutter Can Accept New Role Allotted To Spouses In His Own Case, But Is Puzzled As To Solution Of Marital Problems Under New System Generally

SUTTER: Yes, I do, because of my personal experience. My present wife is an Agency officer and, when we got married, I was PAO in Mauritania. She took a year's leave of absence without pay to join me in Mauritania. She would have had a very difficult time, except AID was looking for an administrative officer and gave her a contract, a very lucrative contract, too, to work as an administrative assistant for the year that she was there.

That is unusual. I can imagine a lot of situations in which the spouse is going to end up doing "make work" projects, simply to give the spouse something to do. I am not sure what the answer is to that. I do not really know. That may just be one of those anomalies of our culture. In the old days, the spouse went along as a loyal member of the team and pitched in and worked the inside while the professional worked the outside.

That worked as long as the general culture was one that encouraged and legitimized the spouse, usually the wife, being the non-working member of the team. That has all changed. I am not sure—I do not really know what the answer is.

In my next manifestation overseas, I will be going as the accompanying spouse. My spouse is now the Agency officer. I can well imagine, given my background and my interests, that there would not be many jobs that the Embassy could offer me that I would find attractive, or particularly fulfilling. It is not a problem in my particular case, because I will take care of myself. I am trying to establish myself as a writer, so I will stay home

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and write all day. It does not really matter where I am. But, if I were not a writer, if I were a physicist or an accountant there could be a real problem.

I could see that I would be very unhappy and I could see where a marriage might be put in jeopardy. I can well understand the dilemma that many American women, who have been married to foreign service officers in the past twenty years, have faced. Most of them are college graduates and have personal aspirations of their own before they got married. I am not quite sure what to do about it, unless you go back to the old culture, and we are not going to do that.

Q: Another tough one for the personnel people, it seems to me, is so many countries have security problems. I am told that it is not uncommon at the Foreign Service Institute for young children to be advised about the need in certain countries to go to school by different routes, so that they will not fall into a pattern that would cause kidnappers or others to take advantage of them. This is an extremely difficult one, as we know. You would have served, I suppose, in the nearest country that comes under that category might have been Laos? Or would that have been a concern there?

SUTTER: No, we never had that problem in communist block countries, because they controlled the atmosphere—they controlled their environment so closely. It could have been a problem in Mauritania, because there were factions in the country that were very much opposed to America's association with Israel. Any time a dust-up between Israel and the Arabs occurred, we would get a demonstration in front of the American Embassy in Nouakchott.

Again, that is just part of the territory. I think you have to go into the foreign with your eyes wide open. I think the worst thing you can do though, is to overreact, and to make of these threats more than they really are. God knows there are real dangers—personal dangers—to people. The facts are too eloquent to deny that.

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On the other hand, we can make too much of them and make our lives more miserable than they have to be. I am thinking of Moscow, for example. Some were so concerned, because they were afraid that their apartments were bugged by the Soviets—well, they were all bugged—everybody knew they were bugged. My attitude was, “so what,” if the Soviets want to waste tape and time listening to my domestic garbage, that is their problem, not mine, and I was not going to worry about it. If they really wanted to know what I thought about Brezhnev or anybody else, and wanted to listen to that, fine and dandy. It was not going to inhibit me in the least. On the other hand, of course, there were certain things I would not mention in my apartment. I do not really think you should make too much of the security thing. Be realistic about it, but do not overreact and do not let it rule your life.

Q: Well, Will, we have covered a lot of territory. I think there is a few more minutes left here, if you have any closing statement, as they say in the courtroom, if so, why don't you make one.

SUTTER: Not guilty.

Q: (laughter) Not as charged anyway.

General Summation Of What Sutter Thinks A USIA Career Is All About

SUTTER: I have enjoyed my tour with the Agency. I think the thing I enjoyed about it the most was the people I met. I also liked what I thought was the mission of the Agency, which was essentially to present the best of America to both its friends and its foes abroad. I always thought that that was an important job to do. I always thought it was a fun job to do, an interesting and very challenging job to do.

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Where I became discouraged was when I saw cynicism creeping in or careerism taking the place of that enthusiasm. Things I always thought were just a bit more appropriate to the State Department's foreign service than they were to USIA's.

What I liked about the Agency, when I joined it was a sense of family and a sense that we are all engaged in an important double mission. I still think that is what the Agency is all about.

I like to see people succeed in the Agency who have had that same enthusiasm; who were taken with that mission. We all had careers to make. But I do not think careers should be the central part of it. It is just presenting America to its friends and foes around the world. That is a real important thing to do.

I was reading the biography of Thomas Jefferson recently, which discussed his time as the envoy of the Confederation of American States in Paris, the envoy to Paris. Jefferson published a lot of different articles about the United States and different aspects of it, and he had exhibitions of archeological artifacts in his home there in Paris. It struck me that Jefferson was the first PAO, he was the first cultural affairs officer that the United States ever had.

What struck me was that Jefferson thought this was important to do. He thought that talking about this neat country was both interesting and important to the people to whom he was accredited. I really think he sort of lived and defined the USIS mission, long before there was a USIS or USIA. I think the mission stands today. Basically, a good USIS officer is a guy who felt the way Jefferson felt about his country and did the kinds of things that Jefferson did to promote better understanding of it.

Q: Well, Will, I think those are appropriate closing remarks. I thank you very much for what I have enjoyed—a very pleasant interview. With that I think we will call it quits.

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SUTTER: Thanks, Jack.

Some Illustrative Reminiscences About Incidents In Laos With Sutter

Q: On February 24, 1988, my name is Jack O'Brien. Will Sutter has more to say on his experiences in Vientiane, Laos. Will, go ahead.

SUTTER: I just want to recount one incident. It illustrates a point.

Very often agency officers ask what is the value of showing various aspects of American culture, films, for example. What freight is it really carrying—what political freight, and so forth? That is a hard question to answer, because you just cannot tell. But, when I was in Vientiane, the Lao mounted an annual national fair and invited all the embassies to participate. I decided, with the concurrence of our chancery, that we would participate. I mounted a big pavilion and put the bicentennial exhibition in it. Outside, I put up a big movie screen, on which I showed, at nighttime, which is when most of the people came to the fair, old American silent films—basically, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton films.

The Vietnamese had a “big” movie screen. The biggest movie screen in town mounted in the middle of the field on which this fair took place. They were showing films taken of American air attacks on North Vietnam, including some really, really obnoxious scenes. I can recall one scene very clearly of an American pilot's helmet, which they were kicking along the ground. It clearly had the top half of his head in the helmet.

They were kicking it along the ground like a football. This was the point, I think, of their film show, that the American's were real beasts and so forth and so on. They would have a small crowd watching these rather grisly scenes, while half of Vientiane would be over at my pavilion watching Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, just laughing themselves silly at these films.

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It has always been a lesson to me. Yes, okay, these guys are universal—Chaplin and Keaton are universal. And, you did not have to know English to appreciate those silent films. Maybe it simply illustrates the old adage that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. The point is—yes, there is sometimes a point to using these rather attractive aspects of American culture, and it carries a lot more freight sometimes than we may think.

It certainly did for me in Vientiane that week, when we had big crowds watching our films and just the old die-hards watching the Vietnamese films. It got so bad as a matter of fact that the Vietnamese finally pressured the Lao government to stop showing films at the fair.

Q: What other activities were you permitted in Laos? Did you have a library at that time?

SUTTER: No, they had closed our cultural centers down. I did have a kind of library. We brought all the books back to the Embassy compound and had them in a big room that we called the library. But the Laotians could not come onto the compound, so it was useless.

I culled it and took out what I thought were still useful books and donated them to the—what was being grandly called in those days—the University of Vientiane. I donated them to the English language faculty. As far as I know they are still there.

Q: Was radio a factor?

Communist Pathet Lao Listened To VOA And Avidly Read USIS Info Bulletins

SUTTER: They listened to VOA, yes. I also put out an information bulletin every day. Surprisingly, well, not surprisingly I guess, I sent several copies up to what I used to call the Kremlin, the headquarters of the Pathet Lao Government and the communist party. They had occupied the old AID building. I think I sent twelve copies up to the party offices. They were avidly read, avidly read, by those people up there.

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As a matter of fact, on days on which for one reason or another we might miss delivery, we often got a call from the party wanting to know where their information bulletin was.

Retrospective Comments On Zaire (Kinshasa)

Q: I forgot to ask, Will, before you return to Laos, in Africa, at both posts where you served, just give us a general idea of the nature of the programs that we were able to carry out there.

A. Nature Of USIS Program

SUTTER: In Kinshasa was a straight, what I call orthodox, USIS program. I have always used that word "Orthodox" ever since my experience in Thailand, which were so unorthodox. But, we had an information section, a cultural section. We had a small center with a library and an auditorium. We brought in speakers, all of them spoke French, on various aspects of the U.S. We showed films. We held exhibits and so forth.

We had a Fulbright program which was not really as big as it ought to have been. We had a very active IV program

Q: IV?

SUTTER: Yes, that is the International Visitor program. I think we had about 24 international visitors a year from Zaire.

B. The Great, But Largely Unused, Potential of Zaire

What stands out in my mind from my two years in Kinshasa is my impression of Zaire itself. I think it is a potential powerhouse. I am willing to bet—come back fifty years from now—that we are going to see Zaire as one of the principal countries of Africa, and possibly one of the principal countries of the world. It has enormous natural resources. It

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has a bad political system. That is largely because of the chaos following independence and, an inexperienced government, plus, of course, the rather heavy hand of Mobutu.

Q: Did you have good local employees?

SUTTER: They were not bad. Nobody compares to the local staff we had in Bangkok. But, they were not bad, they were not bad.

One of the things I was about to say was that I was struck by the riches of human resources in Zaire. The number of people who had Ph.D.'s from French or American universities, and the quality of their minds was quite striking. I could not put together then and I still cannot today, the phenomena of this rather rich pool of people, well educated, smart, who are subservient and passive in the face of the rapacious Mobutu dictatorship.

But Mobutu is not all bad. He has done some rather interesting things in that country. But, still, you would think that a country with the pool of human resources that Zaire has would not have submitted itself to such a government, but it has. I do not know quite how to explain that. They are more oriented toward French culture than they are to American culture, which made it very interesting for me as cultural affairs officer.

Their bias was toward culture. That, therefore, gave us an entree with American films, American literature, and so forth. By nature and by training, they were interested in these subjects. We had some rather interesting exchanges with our audiences in Kinshasa. We had a branch post down in Lubumbashi. I think it was by Lisbanville or Stanleyville.

Mauritania Compares Badly With Zaire In Potential

Q: How would you compare that program with the one you found in Mauritania?

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SUTTER: Oh, no comparison. Mauritania is a country in the process of dying. It was a one person post. There really was no reason to have a post there, and shortly after I arrived, I recommended that the Agency close it.

I was not being disingenuous, because I really enjoyed being there, and did not mind my two years in Mauritania. But, I saw no real reason for USIS to be there. The population is evenly divided between Arabs and black Africans and is run by the white Moors—the Arabs.

The Moors are very parochial, inward-looking people. Their horizons do not extend any farther than the world of Islam. They have no interest whatsoever in the Western world, except as a source of aid. The blacks do. The blacks are basically Francophone, and the Moors are oriented to the Arab world. The blacks—now, if the blacks were in charge, it would be a different place. But, because the Moors were in charge, it was difficult.

Near End Of Mauritania Tour, Sutter Discovers Key To Establishing Vital Contacts With Moors

They did not restrict me and they were always very friendly and very welcoming. Toward the end of my tour there, I finally found out how to really make it with my contacts. The national newspaper published a long poem about the plight of the country. The country is drying up and blowing away, because of a severe drought over the last thirteen, fourteen years.

So, this little civilization is slowly dying. This writer wrote this long epic poem about the death of the civilization. He wrote it in Hassanya, which is a dialect of Arabic. It was published in the paper in French. I was taken by it, so I translated it into English, just for myself. I wrote a long report about it back to USIS-Washington, and the State Department. Essentially I said that the poem had the impact among the Moors of a similar statement about nuclear war in the United States. The consequences were about the same thing.

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The point of my story is, I was unclear about some of the French terms he had used, because these were sort of Arab words he had worked into French. I could not find any good definitions. So, I went to the newspaper—I knew the editor well—and said that I was translating this guy's poem and that I wondered if somebody could give me an explanation of some of the French terms.

They were actually flabbergasted and just pleased pink, that I would be translating, that I was interested in this guy's poem. It turned out the guy is their greatest poet and the Moors are people who love poems. At that, we just caught on like a house-a-fire. This was two weeks before I—no two months before I left. If I had done that when I first arrived, my relationship with these guys would have been much, much better.

They wanted to introduce me to the poet, so that he could sit down with me and talk about the poem himself; explain what he really meant and all this business. They were just pleased as punch that I translated this thing into English. I gave them a copy of my English translation, which, when I look at it now, it is not all that good. The point is, that once you take an interest in the things that interest them, that really strike them, they are ready to meet you.

Second Tour In Thailand: 1984-'86

Q: We have covered, Will, your—we will call it—Thailand One, we have covered Moscow, two posts in Africa and Vientiane (Laos). Do you want to turn back to Thailand Two?

SUTTER: Well, I suppose basically, the only real interest is in the comparisons I was able to make between my first and my second tours.

Q: Let's get some dates on that.

SUTTER: My first tour in Thailand was from 1967 to 1971. I returned there in December of 1984 and left in December of 1986.

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Q: What was your assignment in the second tour?

SUTTER: The second tour, I was there as a regional project officer. The regional project office supported the cultural and information operations of our Embassy in Vientiane, Laos. When I got there, I found out there were not very many cultural and information operations in Laos and that my job was really rather very empty. Since I had in-country experience, I then helped the post on a number of in-country projects mostly up in the northeast where most of my Thai experience—previous Thai experience—had been.

From the point of view of an Agency assignment, it was not very interesting. The only interests, of course, was the comparisons that I was able to make, both between USIS Bangkok then and USIS Bangkok that I had known in my first tour and the Thailand that I had know in the 1960's and Thailand that I had seen again in the 1980's

Contrast Between USIS Program And Status Of Country Development In Thailand In 1960's And In Mid 1980's

USIS Thailand was considerably different. When I got to Bangkok in 1967, there was a big counterinsurgency operation, 13 branch posts, well over 30 American officers, really a humming compound down there on South Sathorn Road in Bangkok. It was really, really an exciting place to be. I suppose some of my fondest agency memories come from those days. Some of my deepest impressions about the Agency and what it is, what it is about, and the quality of the people that were in it, also are rooted back in that first tour in Thailand.

When I got back to Thailand in the mid 1980's, I found what I again will call an orthodox USIS program. High quality program, under a very high quality PAO, but the assignment was not the same. You really cannot go home, I guess, as Thomas Wolfe says. You really cannot do it. I was not really trying to go home. I mean, my orientation was toward Laos, not so much Thailand.

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But, anyway, I spent a lot of time in the northeast, revisiting places in which I spent my early career in. There were great differences—economic improvement, cultural differences. The region was firmly integrated into the national politics, which it had not been when I was there in the 1960's. There was no question now about its loyalty. I would like to think that some of those changes were, at least, helped along by some of the stuff that I and my colleagues had done back in the late 1960's.

Personal Evaluation Of USIS Contribution To Thai Progress

I do not want to say too much for what we did back in the late 1960's, but it was, it was a great operation, filled with enthusiasm, good will—more enthusiasm than skill at times, I am afraid. But, nonetheless, you know, I think our enthusiasm caught on to the Thai's. I think we convinced them that we really were interested in helping them to better govern their country and that we really did not have ulterior reasons. Obviously, of course, we wanted Thailand as a base in the war against Vietnam, but beyond that, the Thai's were persuaded, I think, that we were really true friends. That was, and is, a big achievement.

I think that is what the Agency is all about, to convince America's friends around the world that we really are true friends, which is not to say that we do not have other interests as well. We do, of course. It is stupid to think otherwise. But, nonetheless, we do have a sincere friendship for them. We mean well for ourselves and for them. This came through, I think, in our relationship with the Thai's back then.

In Retirement Sutter Evaluates USIA 1987 Vs USIA 1966

Q: That brings us up to the end of your second tour in Thailand. Did you come back here then for an assignment, or did you retire at that point?

SUTTER: No, I came back to retire. I came back in December of 1986 and I knew I was going to retire in May of 1987. So, I came back and took an assignment in the books

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program and worked for awhile on a book exhibit for Moscow, because of my Russian background.

And, then I retired in 1987. There is nothing particularly remarkable about the—well, yes, there is nothing remarkable about the assignment. I noticed great changes in the Agency from which I retired and the Agency I had joined in 1966. Changes not for the better, as far as I am concerned. I know that every old geezer sits down and says how much better it was when he was younger and all the rest of it. I am sure that I am as guilty of that as anybody else. But, having said that, I still think that some of the things that have happened to the Agency in the last eight years are not for the better.

Basically, I am talking about the number of political appointees who are now occupying positions that used to be held by career foreign service officers. I think everybody accepts the idea that the director of the Agency has got to be a political appointee, and his immediate associates are political appointees, and to have the director of VOA as a political appointee. No question about that. It is good that it is that way.

I am talking about people down at the deputy assistant level who are now political appointees. Jobs that were always held by professionals in the past. I think that this change weakens the Agency. Weakens, I think, the officer corps. You know, what do you think professionals are aimed at?

More importantly, from the point of view of the Agency and its mission, you are losing a lot of experience and you are losing a lot of well trained, tempered judgment. It is sad. It is sad to see. I recall we had a “dog and pony” show in the E Bureau, as they call it these days, in which the director of E—who in the old days was a professional—is now a political appointee. Fair enough. Let us say that the director of the E Bureau ought to be a political appointee. I would not argue that.

Q: E stand for what?

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SUTTER: It is the cultural bureau. I am not sure why they call it E. It is education and culture, I guess.

Q: Is it the old CU at State?

SUTTER: Well, CU is melded into that, Jack. It is the old center's direction and other things.

Q: ICS?

SUTTER: Yes, I guess so, yes. I am sorry I am not familiar with the new nomenclature, but there are quite a few E Bureaus these days. It is the bureau that runs the centers that has the Fulbright program, that has the IV program—the International Visitor program. What else does it do? It has the book program. Basically, all of the cultural aspects of agency work is under the E Bureau.

In the old days, the head of the E Bureau was always a professional. The last one I can remember was Hal Schneidman, who is well known to many people in the Agency. Now the head of E Bureau is a political appointee. Okay, I can accept that, but all his deputies, the head of the IV program, the head of the Fulbright program, the head of the cultural centers program, are also political appointees. Now this is a level where you need experience and professional competence and you do not have it. Not only that, my feeling is, many of these people are more interested in after Agency careers. They are simply in the Agency as a stepping stone to something else.

That is okay. That is the American way, but it still is not doing the Agency any good.

Q: Mr. Sutter asked to delete a discussion of an incident highlighting the decline that politicization of the Agency has brought about. Therefore this closes the interview.

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End of interview