

Interview with Dick Erstein

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DICK ERSTEIN

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Q: This is August 7, 1989. My name is Jack O'Brien and I am interviewing an old friend and colleague, Dick Erstein. Dick, if you begin quickly by giving your full name and other vital information we'll get on.

1951: Entry Into the Information Program, IEE, A Predecessor of USIA, Then in State Department. Radio Officer, Greece

ERSTEIN: I'm Dick Erstein. I entered the Agency when it was still part of IEE in the Department of State in 1951 and was assigned as radio officer to Greece. Greece at that time was pulling itself out from the devastation of World War II. The British were not in a position to help Greece as they always had in the past so the United States filled the vacuum, as part of the Truman Doctrine.

Q: It was during that period that the Greeks were receptive to American activities and enterprise. For example, a very important Voice of America relay station, Salonika, now known as Thessaloniki. Could you explain how that fit into our overall relations with the Greeks.

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ERSTEIN: The 50-kilowatt transmitter that the Voice of America established at Thessaloniki in about 1950 was the only broadcasting facility that VOA had access to that could broadcast to that whole southwestern area of the Soviet Union. An arrangement was made that eventually that transmitter would belong to the Greek government; in the meantime we ran it.

My job in Athens was as radio officer. And as the Voice of America just had technicians in Salonika, I was the one in the Embassy who had responsibility for negotiations with the Greek government. When the proposal was made to station a US ship with a transmitter in the Eastern Mediterranean, Rhodes was selected and the Greek government acquiesced to our stationing the Coast Guard cutter Courier in Rhodes and using large shore areas for reception antennas for the relay and transmitting through special equipment that had been put aboard the ship, in return for more parts for Greek radio stations, and more Greek radio broadcast time on our Thessaloniki station.

Senator Joseph McCarthy Era—and His "Gumshoes," Cohn and Schine Q: While you were in Greece, and you were in Greece from 1950 to 1955, you were visited by two men named Cohn and Schine. Some of our listeners may not know who they were nor for whom they worked. Quickly we might identify them as agents, in effect, of one Senator Joe McCarthy who was raising holy heck about everything as far as the Foreign Service was concerned. I wonder if you could tell us, Dick, about your experiences with them in Greece.

ERSTEIN: Senator McCarthy disliked USIA intensely. He felt it was, at that time, ridden with bad apples, Communists. Messrs. Cohn and Schine were his staff assistants, Roy Cohn who was a lawyer well known for taking unpopular cases at large fees, and Schine who was the son of a New York state hotel owner and large contributor to McCarthy campaigns, made a trip on behalf of Senator McCarthy throughout Europe and the Near

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East. They had been in Paris, in Austria, and in Yugoslavia, had been interviewed by the press at each stop, and uniformly told everybody how bad USIS was, a waste of money.

When he arrived in Greece he was greeted by the then-Ambassador, Jack Peurifoy, a very colorful person who was non-career and had connections throughout Capitol Hill. He had Messrs. Cohn and Schine to his house for dinner the night he arrived and in a fatherly way told them that they were being very foolish in condemning every USIS post that they had visited. They would gain much more credibility, according to Peurifoy, if they saw a good post that they said some posts were good. When they got back to the hotel that night, Cohn and Schine were called by the Associated Press stringer in Athens and while it was never known, undoubtedly Ambassador Peurifoy suggested he call. While they had not yet seen anything USIS, Athens, they reported that the post in Athens was the only good one that they had seen.

1956: Deputy Policy Officer, Voice of America, Washington

Q: Dick, after Greece, what was your assignment?

ERSTEIN: My assignment was to the Voice of America as deputy policy officer, which job I held for two years and then another year as deputy program manager. Those were very interesting and still cold war years. One of the major events of the year was the Hungarian uprising that was forcefully put down by the Soviet Union. Another was the landing of the American troops in Lebanon, which was the last major American military involvement of that type in the Near East. And consequently it was a problem keeping all of the many languages at the Voice, focusing on the same policy guidance that was supplied to us by State.

National War College, 1958-9, Then Country Public Affairs Officer, Ghana, 1959

Following my assignment to the Voice, I was assigned for a year to the National War College. In the same year that you were, Jack.

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Q: And after that wonderful year, what was your next assignment?

ERSTEIN: I received my first PAO assignment—to Ghana. I was there for two years and the situation in Ghana changed rapidly. For the first two years there still was a British Governor General, and Kwame Nkrumah, the then Prime Minister, acted as a colonial prime minister, loving the countries of the West. The moment that Ghana became a complete republic, the attitude changed completely and the US and all of the Western allies were frowned upon. And that was a period in which close ties were developed between the Soviet Union and Ghana. This was especially disturbing for us as Kwame Nkrumah the first prime minister of an independent African country, was also head of the Organization of African Unity. He exerted great influence over other newly established governments.

Q: What restrictions, if any, were placed upon USIS activities in Ghana during that period?

ERSTEIN: There were no formalized restrictions but in the press and on the radio we were attacked strongly, without any opportunity for rebuttal. The people of Ghana didn't absorb the anti-Americanism of government. It was relatively easy to work—film shows, scholarships and many other ways that we reach people directly.

Q: Did you have an exchange program?

ERSTEIN: We had an exchange program that went on uninterrupted.

Q: What was the caliber of your local employees? Were they reluctant to work for USIS?

ERSTEIN: Not a bit. And most of the people in the Ghana government were quite friendly towards the United States. The virus had not gotten down far enough from Nkrumah to make working conditions difficult.

1961: CPAO in Federation of Rhodesia(Now 3 Countries: Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia)

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Q: So after two years in Ghana you received what assignment?

ERSTEIN: After two years in Ghana I became public affairs officer of the old Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. After World War II there were three separate countries that the British Government put together as a federation: Southern Rhodesia, which was rich in farming and tobacco; Northern Rhodesia, that was rich in minerals, copper and others; and Nyasaland, which was rich in labor, excessive people. However, the federation soon fell apart because while it made sense economically it didn't make sense to the aspirations of the people. They were dominated by the white parliament that met in the capital city of Salisbury. Therefore the Federation broke up in 1963, and at the end of 1963 three separate countries emerged: Zimbabwe from Southern Rhodesia, Malawi from Nyasaland, and eventually Zambia from Northern Rhodesia. They erected borders and took on all of the trappings of independent separate states.

Q: What was the official US attitude towards the breakup?

ERSTEIN: We did not interfere with the breakup. In fact, we saw that continuing the Federation couldn't work. After World War II, the British formed the Federation rather starry-eyed feeling that it was a perfect match economically and so it would work out socially. They also thought it would be an example of a harmonious multi-racial society which it never became. The British sent down many settlers to that area, artisans, bricklayers, carpenters and so on, because the Africans didn't have those skills. Once these artisans from Britain settled in, found they had a nice cottage with servants, much fresh milk, and sunshine, as opposed to the smogs and bad living conditions in such English cities as Birmingham, it was hard to uproot them. That is why it was so difficult for independence to come about as compared to Ghana which was in an unhealthy area on the West Coast of Africa, steamy and full of malaria, where the British never did settle. They just went down there to work and kept their homes in Britain.

Breakup of Rhodesian Federation Caused Difficulty for USIS

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Q: During this breakup, did we Americans, particularly USIS, find ourselves in the position of being caught between conflicting interests?

ERSTEIN: Yes, especially insofar as Southern Rhodesia was concerned. Northern Rhodesia, which became Zambia, and Nyasaland, which became Malawi, established governments and there were no problems in our relationship with them. However, the British would not give independence to the Southern Rhodesia whites who had control of the government. So Southern Rhodesia made a unilateral declaration of independence, known as UDI. UDI meant that the British government did not recognize the government of Southern Rhodesia. We stuck with the British and didn't either. This was after I had left the post, but the US diplomatic mission there was in the very difficult position of not recognizing the de facto government. They had to deal with it on matters of import duties, of matters of the pouch, but they were not allowed to deal with it on the basis of government to government.

1964: Washington as Program Coordinator for USIA African Area, Later Deputy Assistant Director, USIA, for Africa

Q: Well, Dick, by this time you had had two years in Ghana and you had had two years in the Federation and you were then assigned to Washington. In what capacity?

ERSTEIN: First as program coordinator for the African area during the years '64 and '65, followed by deputy assistant director for Africa in '65 and '66. In which time period I was able to travel throughout the continent and observed the varying degrees of development of each of the different countries.

Q: During that period were there fundamental changes in US policy toward Africa?

ERSTEIN: It received a little more attention. As new countries developed we opened new posts. It was a rather exciting time because it was the only time that I participated in a

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rapid expansion of an area. Most of the times, as all Agency officers know, you're always fighting budget cuts rather than receiving more money and personnel for your area.

1966: Deputy Assistant Director, USIA, for Administration

Q: Dick, what was your next assignment?

ERSTEIN: Ben Posner, who then was director of administration for the Agency and a civil servant, always had as his deputy a Foreign Service Officer. At that point his then-deputy had received a State Department assignment and Ben invited me to become his deputy. I was quite happy in the African area and felt I was doing useful work. However, I basically feel that Agency officers who are not specialists should be generalists in all aspects of the Agency's work. I had had program experience, some management experience, but not major agency administrative experience. And so I really felt that a generalist should have experience in all fields, I had no alternative but to accept Ben's offer.

Q: Did Ben give you any special responsibilities?

ERSTEIN: Ben's method of operation then was mainly his deputy would back him up, would be familiar with what he was doing, would meet weekly with division chiefs and act for Ben when he was traveling or out of the office. There were no specific areas that were assigned to me, as Ben was fully in charge of all of the areas of administration. The most interesting thing to me that happened during those years was that we first started getting into the then new world of computers. The Agency had no computers at all at that particular time and in fact most businesses did not.

Q: Let's get these years straight here.

ERSTEIN: The years that we are talking about were from, oh, 1966 to 1969. Ben, I think quite wisely, decided that the best way to introduce the computer to the Agency was for repetitive tasks rather than programming tasks and therefore we established a task force

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that was headed by Charlie Hardin, who was then Chief of the Agency Finance Division, to study the feasibility of putting onto computers such things as payrolls and time records. And during those years the team under Charlie Hardin studied which computer company was in the best position to fulfill our needs. And we came up with a contract with the Burroughs Corporation, which unfortunately is no longer in the computer business.

Q: So you had roughly two, three years there?

ERSTEIN: Two years, yes.

1969: CPAO Kenya

Q: And then what was your assignment after that, Dick?

ERSTEIN: After that it was Public Affairs Officer in Nairobi. There was a small hiatus between the arrival of Ben's new deputy and the then Nairobi PAO's departure, about two months, during which time I made a couple of inspections.

Q: What was the nature of our program in Nairobi?

ERSTEIN: We were very well liked by the people, by Kenyans. It was a very pleasant milieu. They made good use of our facilities. We were welcome wherever we went. For instance, while I was there we had the moon landing and shortly thereafter, as many posts did, we received a piece of the moon rock and traveling throughout the country into the most primitive areas the moon rock caused excitement and great admiration for the United States.

Another example was that the then deputy prime minister, Daniel arap Moi was nearly always available for our activities. He had been to the US on a leader grant. When Jomo Kenyatta died, Daniel arap Moi became president of Kenya and as of this date is still president of Kenya.

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Q: And so you had how many years there?

ERSTEIN: Two years.

General Observations on the African Scene

Q: Dick, as we leave Africa, do you have any general observations or conclusions you'd like to record?

ERSTEIN: The main impression one gets in Africa during those years and today is one of diversity. Some of the countries had an English overlay, some had French, and some had even Belgian or Portuguese. There was great diversity in the quality of the local employees. In some countries you were starting from scratch with people with little or no education. On the other hand, when I arrived in Rhodesia there was a good number of the leading senior employees who were of English extraction, very competent. One of the best secretaries I've ever had was an English lady in Salisbury. In Kenya, even years after the independence, the USIS librarian still was a German who had come there as a refugee during World War II, and he was kept on after mandatory retirement because we could not replace him with any Kenyan or African who had any library management experience. About six months before I left, we were able to hire an African employee who was a graduate of the Library School in Uganda to replace our librarian who then retired to Europe. This was as late as 1971.

1971: Deputy Chief of Research, USIA, Then Retirement, 1973

Q: So Dick, after this time in Africa, you were reassigned to Washington. In what capacity?

ERSTEIN: As deputy chief of research. Here again I welcomed the assignment because it was a facet of the Agency I had not worked in before. And after two years as deputy chief of research I came up against the age 60 mandatory retirement.

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Q: In the research job, did you have any special responsibilities, any subjects that you were particularly concerned with?

ERSTEIN: Not particularly. I was working with the chief of research at that time who was Larry Hall. He and I worked closely, dividing up the work as it developed.

Erstein Assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses of Agency Research

Q: This may be a good opportunity to ask whether that experience led you to believe that USIA over the years has done enough in research? Has it done well? What are some of the weaknesses and strengths of our research as you then saw them?

ERSTEIN: I think the strengths were of a number of professional researchers who were civil servants who stayed there and were able to professionally carry on projects. The weaknesses, however, were that many were civil servants and did not necessarily understand research and cultures abroad nor did they understand at first hand the nature of USIS programs. So not always were we able to mesh professional research standards with the needs of our posts.

Q: Well, any other general observations, Dick, before we close this machine down? This has been very good, very interesting. You certainly had a varied career, and I assume you have no regrets. Is that correct?

ERSTEIN: I have no regrets. I frequently have thought to myself if I were to pick a career again, I would do just exactly what I had done.

Q: You suppose your wife and daughter could say the same?

ERSTEIN: Oh, yes. Even though my daughter suffered many of the problems of Foreign Service kids with different education systems, not adequately preparing them for college.

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Q: Yes, we've both been through that. I want to thank you very much, and I think we'll call it quits at this point.

End of interview