

## Interview with Patrick E. Nieburg

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PATRICK E. NIEBURG

Interviewed by: Allen Hansen

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*Q: This is Side 1, Tape 1, of the first session with Patrick Nieburg, being conducted February 4, 1988 at his home. The interviewer is Allen Hansen. Pat Nieburg joined USIA in 1962 and has served for more than a quarter of a century in a variety of positions in Latin America, Europe and Asia. Early in his career he worked in Bolivia and Brazil. He was in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Then served in Germany, Sweden and Turkey and later was the Director of Radio in the American Sector which is known as RIAS. RIAS is a joint operation of the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany. His last assignment before retirement was as Director of Foreign Language Broadcasts of the Voice of America.*

Events Leading to USIA Foreign Service

Pat, let's begin by telling us how you happened to join the Foreign Service.

NIEBURG: Well, in a way that was almost accidental. In 1961, I ran for Congress in upstate New York. During my campaign speeches in pursuing that office I made the statement that Americans should give serious thought to some public service. In other words, while I was not advocating really a public service service in the United States, I

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think that people should give a little of themselves to their own country in return for what the country offers to them.

Now, that may sound a little squashy and high falutin'. But I felt very strongly about it. So after I had lost an election in November 1961, I was approached, actually by the Kennedy campaign, to join the government. I was offered what was then to be an AID directorship in a Latin American country. I thought about it and I was of two minds quite frankly, because I had said public service, yes, but I did not feel that I really wanted to become a "political appointee."

I went back to them and said, no—if there were a position where they would offer me the opportunity to enter into a career service, regardless of what my future intentions were, in a normal way so that it doesn't look as a payoff for political services rendered in the past, that I would seriously consider. And indeed I was then approached by USIA to join USIA.

*Q: In a career capacity?*

NIEBURG: In a career capacity. We worked out a modus operandi in the sense that the offer was based on what my salary was quite a few years before that particular time. The recruiters were always very stingy and prided themselves in getting people cheaply into the Service. I .. decided I would go ahead anyway because my intention was really to do my stint of public service and get out and get back into the newspaper field. I had no intention really in staying with the government. And I remember that there was a good deal of pressure on the part of my family who never considered that people in government earned a living. So I did not want to be the exception in my own family, but said, all right, public service for two years. Yes, but not necessarily a career.

As it turned out I wrote down my curriculum vitae and the languages as I spoke. True to government fashion, after telling them that I was bilingual in German and in Swedish and that I was fairly fluent in French, they sent me to Spanish language school which I found surprising because I thought that the government would take immediate advantage of

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what I had to offer and be productive. So instead I went to language school for which I am eternally grateful because I love Spanish and I enjoy going to school. It was a pressure period since I hadn't been in school for quite some while, but I enjoyed it thoroughly.

Assignment in Bolivia

*Q: And your first assignment was Bolivia.*

NIEBURG: And then following, of course, the idea to send me to language school and learn Spanish was that I was assigned to Bolivia of which at that point I knew .. absolutely nothing.

*Q: What was your position there?*

NIEBURG: I was going to Bolivia as the Information Officer. And it was in a sense a very exciting time because it was at the start of the Alliance for Progress. All kinds of fascinating things were happening, the creation of “the Wisemen”—of the idea of getting the Latins themselves involved in their own planning and policy processes in helping them help themselves.

*Q: Was that in 1962?*

NIEBURG: That was in 1962. The usual problem had happened, one of the clearance process. So that while I made my application early in 1962—I think it was in the winter—my actual appointment did not come about until May which did not really bother me very much because I was very much engaged then. I was Associate Editor of a monthly newspaper, an economic newspaper, called Economic World.

It was a fascinating publication because it had such people as Paul Hoffman and others on the Board of Advisors. We were really into the spirit of the early Kennedy era spearheading a lot of new ideas in terms of international economics, foreign aid and trade.

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So I was not at all in a hurry to join USIA. But my appointment finally came in May and this is when I .. actually came on board.

*Q: And what was La Paz like in those days?*

NIEBURG: Well, I would like to paraphrase that by giving you the reaction of a very good newspaper friend who came to do a story there and said it looked like a moonscape, something that at that point nobody had seen, nobody had landed on the moon yet. But if you imagine anything looking like a moonscape, the Altiplano sure came close to it.

We arrived, as you well know, at the El Alto Airport, a little bit better than 14,000 feet. And while we had been warned about altitude, it didn't really seem to affect me except that I had gotten food poisoning aboard the plane. So by the time I got off the plane I was in very poor shape. And my wife to this day, I don't remember what happened, but my wife settled us into a pension and called a doctor and for the next two days I was really not in La Paz. I mean, I was not really conscious of what had happened. But when I came to and I looked around, I said, well, if that's it, let's try it. And I must say that I look back today at La Paz and Bolivia as one of the really not just challenging but most rewarding assignments in my entire career.

I would like to say something here that may be ahead of my story. I want to pay tribute especially to my .. Bolivian colleagues and staff, and that includes as you have mentioned posts in Germany and Vietnam and in Turkey. I have never had in all of my career a more competent, more productive staff than those Bolivians. They were first rate. And they certainly broke me into the job and helped to show me the ropes.

*Q: How long were you there?*

NIEBURG: I worked there actually only two years.

*Q: And how many governments were in Bolivia during those two years?*

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NIEBURG: Well, during my stay, and that was very fascinating we had only one. As we talk, this is somewhat like completing a circle, the administration of Paz Estenssoro. Now, over 25 years later, he is President again. But we had a stable government then while I was there. Interestingly enough we had an ambassador who came out of the Labor Movement. He had very close relations with the President and the presidency. And there was no amount of work that needed to be done and was being done at that particular time.

*Q: Who was that?*

NIEBURG: That Ben Stephansky.

*Q: Oh, yes.*

NIEBURG: Who was pugnacious. He was anything that you might want to call him in terms of adjectives. But he .. was certainly an activist. And he was certainly also very, very engaged in the process of development. So that the whole embassy, or better the U.S. mission as a whole, embassy, AID, USIA, were really very much a coordinated, whole team in working on the processes that we were expected to perform there.

*Q: How were the relations between the U.S. government and the Paz Estenssoro government at that time?*

NIEBURG: Well, you might say in a way, and I hate to say this now because later on I was quoted on this by the papers since I had made these remarks not very judiciously to a news friend of mine. I said, you can be close without creeping into bed with the government. It had certain disadvantages. But certainly in retrospect I would say the disadvantages were outweighed by the advantages mainly by what you could do to be helpful in that particular society.

Brazil

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*Q: After Bolivia you went to Brazil. What year was that and what position did you fill?*

NIEBURG: We went to Brazil in 1983 and arrived there actually just two weeks —

*Q: 1963.*

NIEBURG: I'm sorry. 1963 of course. And arrived there just two weeks before the impending coup which we, .. of course, did not know was going to happen at the time of our arrival. I was to take the job of information officer and also double at that point as policy officer at the post. I should add here that in my day and age we were lucky because the embassy had not moved to Brasilia yet. We were still stationed in Rio. And it turned out to be one of those absolutely delightful posts. And, of course, anybody who knows Rio knows what I'm talking about.

I remember very vividly though while we were still hunting for a place to live, there were various incidents that showed the tenseness of the situation—the political situation that we were under. For example, in front of the hotel where we lived the Army decided to make a strong point and occupied it with a platoon of troops.

But in Brazil things don't work quite that way. There was a football game going on, on the beach and the game was tied. So all the players prevailed upon the Army to wait until at least one or the other team would score a goal. The match would be decided. So the Army stood down, waited and then, once the final deciding goal was scored, they leisurely occupied the strong point as they were ordered to do. I mentioned it really not in a jocular fashion. But it showed that there was an approach, a civilized way of looking even at military operations. That was Brazil! I would not have thought this possible let's say in a Portuguese-speaking Latin American country, let alone in Europe which I know very well. And from then on, after I started to analyze it, my approach to Brazil and to Brazilians was changed to a point that I had a great deal of empathy, sympathy and liking for Brazilians.

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*Q: What was your position then?*

NIEBURG: I was information officer and doubled as policy officer. I would later, during my tour there, actually relinquish the information officer's job and concentrate on the policy officer's job which involved also, unfortunately for me, the drafting of speeches for the ambassador. He was a very prolific man. So there was a lot of work to be done in that particular phase of the job.

*Q: What was the situation with regard to U.S. Brazilian relations at this time? Were they warm?*

NIEBURG: Our relations were actually in flux when we arrived. There was the government of Janio Quadros who was a left-wing socialist with a great deal of reform minded programs on his mind. It did not sit too well with the Americans. A certain amount of American baiting was always present in this very populist and popular president. So the relations were really strained both because of their barbs at the United States, but also in terms of economic relations. The Brazilians thought that they could finesse rapid inflation, you know, by adjusting to it and not taking the hard measures that both the IMF and the U.S. government recommended to them. So one of the problems was, since we also had a very extensive aid program going, that the aid program not be swallowed up by the continuous inflation. And obviously there was friction there. Our ambassador, if anything, was a top-notch economist and a lovely person.

*Q: Who was that incidentally?*

NIEBURG: That was Ambassador Lincoln Gordon who later became President of Johns Hopkins University. It was very difficult for the U.S. in the substantive arena. But I should mention again as I said before, Brazilians, and especially Cariocas, are such a lovable people that on a personal basis relations with Brazilians were excellent.

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*Q: What was the role of USIS in improving the relations between Brazil and the United States at that time?*

NIEBURG: Well, during the Quadros era and that was only a very short period during my tour of service because it lasted only two weeks, the policy to this point had been that we needed primarily to document and explain our economic policies. Because some of them seemed harsh. Some of them seemed politically very difficult for Brazilians to follow. And it was up to USIA through examples—through proper means in terms of exchanges on the professorial level to try to explain our motives—make Brazilians understand why it was that we advocated what we did. We had to attempt, in our explanation, to put our economic issues advocacy within a framework that could be politically acceptable and doable for Brazilians.

Brazil, even then at the threshold of an emerging nation, presented all of us with a tremendous substantive challenge. It was not enough for a USIS officer to be an impresario of “events and programs.” You had to be solidly grounded in substance and issues before hoping to be at least somewhat effective in your information/cultural work. In those days, there was no such thing, nor would the Ambassador have stood still for it, as “when in doubt, bring in an AMPART.” The USIS officer and his colleagues in the Mission were it!

Transfer to Vietnam

Unfortunately, my tour in Brazil came to an abrupt end. The war in Vietnam was heating up, there were—in Vietnam—the first full-scale battalion size battles, and the major attack on the Provincial capital and airfield of Pleiku. I got an immediate—like to be there yesterday — transfer to Vietnam.

I need to mention one more anecdote in connection with this transfer. I do so because it reflects on the Brazilian character. If Brazilians like you personally, nothing is impossible.

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Conversely, if they don't, nothing is possible. As I was saying some very hurried goodbyes to some of my Brazilian friends—many of whom were genuinely shocked at my transfer—not a few of them asked what they could do to have this USIA decision reversed. I did not encourage them, feeling that I had signed on for world-wide service and that I could not renege when the going got rough. So my Brazilian friends actually mobilized the President of Brazil who, in turn, called Ambassador Gordon to ask him to leave one Pat Nieburg in Brazil. The Ambassador was somewhat surprised by this call—possibly suspecting that I had initiated this action—but firmly told the Brazilians, “Sorry, but my President needs him in Vietnam.” But I must admit I was touched by this demonstration of friendship by Brazilians in the highest echelons of the media and government.

Just the same, within five days I left Brazil and was on my way to Vietnam. To be specific, I was on my way to Pleiku, a place I had never heard of, nor knew where exactly to locate it on a map. Nor did I know what the job of Senior Field Representative, JUSPAO, for II Corp, meant. I ultimately found out—because essentially I created the job (it was a new position)—but not because anyone anywhere really told me, let alone briefed me on what my objectives were to be. But Vietnam, I am afraid, is too long a story to cover here. It would require a separate interview.

*Q: Did you have any combat experience during your stay there in Vietnam?*

NIEBURG: Yes, on numerous occasions. I was in various scraps that I, in a way, would almost prefer to forget today and was shot at more than once. But one of the things that I did want to point out is that for the Vietnamese—at least during that particular time—how important it was to have security in their particular location. And I remember going out on a one week patrol with a Green Beret patrol which was a civic action group rather than one of trying to ambush Viet Cong. We went into the villages and the medics would render medical assistance. They would show people how to dig a well. And I'm impressed to this very day how appreciative these villagers were, because these were solutions to practical problems of real needs that these special action teams, civic action teams, performed. It

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was also a test of my own mettle because I was not the youngest at this particular time. And to slush through the jungle 20 miles to 25 miles a day is not an easy task. But it was one of the most rewarding experiences that one can have.

### Psy-War Activities—One Failure

I remember another instance which I should mention here because it showed part of the operations of JUSPAO or USIA there. It was during the siege of a provincial capital which was just south of where I was located. I had gone there because we had intelligence that there was an impending attack by the Viet Cong. And indeed it came. I will never forget it because the Viet Cong used elephants with grapple hooks to attack the strong points in the barbed wire.

During that particular, eight hour, night of fighting, I flew a relay plane, flew in a relay plane I should say, relaying messages. We also had prepared, and that was part of the function that we had in support of the military, surrender leaflets that the Viet Cong could hold up to surrender to the military—to our military— when they came close to the wire. Well, I was back on the ground after a very heavy night of fighting and we had repulsed the attack when a second wave of Viet Cong came. Many of them held up the surrender leaflets.

But what happened is that after that heavy night of fighting, understandably probably, there was so much nervousness among the defenders that fire was opened, and a lot of people were killed right at the barbed wire— still clutching the surrender leaflets. Well, you can say that can happen in the heat of combat, but I can also tell you that set back military operation in terms of getting surrenders or Chieu Hois for many, many weeks to come because the experience was that the people did have surrender leaflets and were never really given the chance.

Now—whether the military could have given them the chance and taken the risk of possibly being overrun—I'm not trying to be the judge. In the heat of the battle much is

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understandable. But one thing is sure, that in terms of psychological warfare, surrender leaflets did not work for quite a while to come.

*Q: After you had been out there in the boondocks did you then get transferred to Saigon and work there for a while?*

### Assistance to Foreign Media Covering War

NIEBURG: Indeed, they pulled me in after a while — toward the end of my tour to Saigon and tried to take advantage of some of my Latin and other foreign experience and languages. I was put in charge primarily of visiting foreign press. And I remember, since I had had the experience with the Green Berets, going out with a team of Venezuelan cameramen, television cameramen.

*Q: Oh, I remember that. I was in Caracas then.*

NIEBURG: And showing them around and showing them what really was the contradiction of Vietnam—and talking to the foreign press whether they were German or Dutch or Venezuelan or what have you. These people would say to me, “what you say is contradictory.” The minute they made that statement to me I would say, “ah, this is your first sign of wisdom. Because in Vietnam you learn to live with contradiction.” The reason that I say this is that you will go from a combat zone where you're actually being shot at whether by small arms fire or by mortar, and then you go up to a place like Da Lat and other provinces and there you would see, at the university, scientists working on an atom reactor as though there were no war at all. There was a normal market. There was normal life going on. And at night, sometimes fighting would break out.

So the contradiction of combat and what was normal was always present. As was the strange fact that during the time that I was there the one thing that did not happen that usually occurs in war ravaged areas, there was no famine. There was no hunger. Because the Vietnamese grow a great deal on their land, even in the arid areas. There was always

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enough to eat. And it wasn't just because the U.S. would send aid in terms of rice. A lot was grown and their diet was basically a good diet.

And I remember one thing. The famous Vietnamese fish sauce called nuoc mom, you know, which smells terribly but tastes very well was one of the main ingredients to give them a balanced diet because it contained a lot of protein. People ate a lot of it. So, basically between fruit and fish, and what they could grow on the land, there was no starvation. And that, at least, was something to be thankful for.

*Q: I recall I think it was that first meeting, he was a motion picture producer and television producer. He went back to Venezuela and his films were shown on television in Caracas and he had a special supplement in one of the leading daily newspapers and so forth. That was an excellent USIS project on both ends.*

NIEBURG: I felt that I was somewhat productive in that particular area because I could do something; a great deal, for example, with some Dutch newspaper people who since have become very good personal friends; with some of the Germans who came out. So it was an international effort. But while you couldn't say—it would be hard to make the general statement — that it brought support for the U.S. position, it certainly mitigated against some of the great criticism that existed during that particular time.

Evaluation of U.S. Policy Judgement  
Re Vietnam Involvement

*Q: Sort of wrap up here on Vietnam, would you like to make some comments about looking at it in perspective now, the whole experience and our involvement there?*

NIEBURG: Let me just say very quickly in 1972 I was fortunate in attending the Senior Seminar. There were 17 of us seminarians who had served in Vietnam from the period of 1944 to what was then 1972. All people with different perspectives and different experiences and different functions in Vietnam. We tried very hard to draw on the lessons. One of the things that we agreed to—there was a whole range of people from super-doves

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through super-hawks represented in that particular group— that, given the circumstances that the United States was in, given the information that was available to policymakers at any one moment of life (without benefit of hindsight) we would make the same mistake again. We also found—and there was no disagreement among us—that not only were the motives of the policymakers justified and honorable, but that the best judgment was exercised with the information available. And we considered not only Vietnam, but what was going on in Indonesia, what was going on in Europe or other parts of the Far East. It wasn't a question of war-mongering. It was truly a situation where the facts as they appeared at a specific time could not be projected into the ultimate result that we finally experienced. But I think in retrospect if you ask me, “am I supporter of what went on in Vietnam” I will give an unqualified yes with one exception. That was the frustration that I think all of us experienced, that the political imperatives in the United States were such that when you started any program you had to show progress, or success within 48 hours, or else the program was abandoned. The one lesson that I think that we learned in Vietnam or should have learned is that we never even succeeded in either validating or proving wrong the programs that we introduced. Because none of them were carried out to the logical end. And that was one of the tragedies. We jumped from horse to horse to horse without ever really knowing where we were going, knowing what we'd done right or what we'd done wrong.

### Germany—Usefulness of Vietnam Experience

*Q: Pat, on your next assignment, that was Germany, and by then you were somewhat of a Vietnamese expert having lived and worked there during the Vietnam War, did you use this background on your assignment to Bonn?*

NIEBURG: Indeed it turned out that I would. But I should say to you while I was “rewarded” with a Bonn assignment, so was the ambassador in Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, I had hoped to escape from him because I had a run in with him in Saigon during a cocktail party—and there were quite a number of those amongst the Saigon warriors, ..as we called

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them. I had been imbibing a little bit more than I should have, felt no pain. And I talked to the Ambassador. And I asked him, Mr. Ambassador, do you remember when you were running for Vice President in the 1960 campaign? And he said, sure. I said, well, I was running for Congress at that particular time and you came to my district and talked. I was a Democrat. And after you came to my district I think I picked up a couple of hundred votes.

Well, he looked at me and he did not feel amused at all. I had felt no pain. I didn't give it any further thought. But you can imagine that when I was transferred to Bonn I was rather pleased to escape Ambassador Lodge. But lo and behold he too was rewarded for his faithful service in Vietnam and became Ambassador to Bonn. Since I was information officer, and also press attach#, my job also involved some speech writing. I remember being called to his office to discuss a speech. He saw me. He said, not that man. Get him out of my office. I could hear him today because I was so pleased. Speech writing was not one of my favorite occupations. So I was relieved of that particular duty.

While I was in Germany—because of my relationship with Ambassador Lodge—I tried to spend as much time out of the office as I could. Actually I arranged for a very ..extensive, almost continuous on-going lecture program on Vietnam and Vietnamese problems and questions. I lectured at universities, at political clubs, at civic organizations. I remember very vividly being invited by the student body of the Free University of Berlin to talk about Vietnam. When I arrived, there were police. There were police dogs. There was a huge banner of the Viet Cong. And there was a very rowdy group of students and they did not want to let me speak. Which was all right with me, but they had invited me to come in the first place.

They told me, dammit, we know this is a bunch of lies and we don't want to hear about Vietnam. We want you to talk about the Brazilian government's genocide of the Amazon Indians. Well, that may have sounded facetious. But I told them that I was quite willing and quite prepared to talk to them since I had served in Brazil. That ended the argument. I must say I never got to give my speech on Brazilian Indians in the Amazon Basin because

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the crowd got so unruly. Eggs were thrown. Objects were thrown. I was ultimately rescued by the police and their dogs and went back to my hotel.

That was not one of my more successful lecture pursuits. But I lectured widely and I hope judicially in the sense that I came prepared with a great deal of ..background material, of history and tried to really give a historical approach to these various problems and to defend U.S. Administration policies as best as I could. There was a lot of logic to it. Certainly my heart was in it. So the Agency actually saw fit to reward me for this particular effort.

*Q: This was in what year?*

NIEBURG: That was in '66 to '69.

*Q: Did you lecture in German?*

NIEBURG: In German, yes. Since I am bilingual in German. That surprised many of the audience. Of course, they all remarked that I had somewhat of a Prussian accent which is quite true.

Sweden: Controversy with the Charg# d'Affaires

*Q: Now, after Germany you then went to Sweden.*

NIEBURG: That was a strange happenstance. Relations with Sweden had soured. In other words, U.S.-Swedish relations had soured over a sharp turn to the left, including the U.S.-bashing that took place in Sweden because of Vietnam. We had decided, we being the U.S., not to send an ambassador to Sweden. So there was only a charg# d'affaires. The public affairs officer who was there during that period was of Swedish descent and heeded the charg# d'affaires' attitude which was, "let's draw the blinds, let the waves pound Gibraltar. Let's not do any ..battle, but hunker down and ride it out." Well, these were not the ideas of the management of USIA on how to cope with the Swedish situation. The

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PAO was due for a transfer. I was asked, again because of my language qualifications, to go to Sweden and take on this contentious job.

### Partial Success with Swedish Media

Well, I found myself almost immediately in hot water with the *chargé d'affaires* because I had a conference with all the major television commentators and executives about Vietnam. I insisted that we get a fair shake.

*Q: You were the PAO.*

NIEBURG: I was the PAO. Well, they (Swedish TV people) didn't take it kindly. But I did go on Swedish television. They gave me some very rough questioning. But we did very well. And slowly we even had some editorials in the press in support of U.S. policy. Well, there was also some criticism about the brash—what some people would call an American—counter-move. This was seized upon by the *chargé d'affaires*, who felt that USIS action in Sweden was counter-productive, in his viewpoint.

Well, USIA did not see it this way. I didn't see it that way. And we continued our work both in the information field and in the cultural center.

Well, one of the problems we did have was that there ..were demonstrations. USIS offices in Gothenburg and in Stockholm were fire bombed. That did not help, because I had to go back to the Agency for funds and repairs and all this. The *chargé d'affaires* certainly was not on the right track as far as USIS was concerned. He even tried to get the [U.S.] Vice President to come to Sweden to mitigate the situation. This, shortly before a Swedish election. I went out of channels to our then-Deputy Director Henry Loomis. I explained to him how this would be interpreted, viz., as U.S. support for those who were the main antagonists of the United States. The visit was squelched by Henry Loomis' intervention at the White House.

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Well, it was no secret, I suppose, to the charg# d'affaires that I must have been behind that particular move through various memos out of channel. So it was ice, ice, ice. It was truly an igloo. It was a little bit of a besieged mentality that we had. And USIA was cut off.

### New Ambassador's Cooperation Assists USIA Efforts

But in the end the charg# d'affaires was removed. So was his political counselor. A new ambassador came in, a marvelous man, a black man. Ambassador Holland was a novice in diplomacy, but was a personal friend of Secretary Rogers. He looked around and sized up the situation. He gave me not only full support, but said to me, "Pat, anytime you want to use me, use me in any way ..you see fit."

Well, it makes a great deal of sense for letting the ambassador be the spokesman rather than using the PAO as a middleman, especially in a country like Sweden where a black face carries extra credibility. And the Ambassador went out on our behalf, did a lot of public speaking, engaged in a lot of public affairs work. But in return, he also asked me to become practically his political counselor. This I was very hesitant to do, though I felt qualified for the job.

It could have made for a difficult relationship with the political section. By this time, however, a new political counselor had arrived. Luckily for me, it was a fellow by the name of Olson, a former New York Times correspondent, who understood the situation. He and I worked actually hand in glove so to say and it worked out very well. What was a very difficult public affairs program in the beginning turned into a rather productive assignment after all. But it happened only over the initial resistance of some of the State Department people who felt that nothing could be done and we should just ride out the storm; make no attempt really to present the other side of the coin.

### Washington Assignment; Deputy Director, Latin America

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*Q: When you finished your tour that's when you came for ..a Washington assignment, Deputy Director of Latin America.*

NIEBURG: Latin America.

*Q: USIA.*

The Binational Centers in Latin America

NIEBURG: And then I should just say—you know, if I look back it is funny—when you have a little distance and can see things in perspective—of all the things in Latin America none is potentially as fruitful and none as cumbersome as Binational Centers. Now, as you remember, Binational Centers were established by Nelson Rockefeller before and during World War II. They served a tremendously important purpose. And I think they did a tremendous amount of good.

But being binational in nature, the evolution of the centers meant that from being “almost exclusively American run” you started to develop boards of local citizens. They participated in running the BNCs as well they should have. But it also opened up these Centers to a lot of local politics, local shenanigans, and if I may say so in some instances some fraudulent practices where the money was concerned.

I remember in my particular assignment as Deputy Director, nothing was more difficult than two problems we had to work out with Binational Centers. It was really bad because it involved a great deal of lawsuits, legal ..work and ultimately a great deal of acrimony where there should have been friendship instead.

There are two facts to remember about BNCs. Many of its local board members were prominent personalities in their communities. They had reputations to protect. BNCs—especially through their English teaching—at times handled considerable amounts of money. There was a time when USIAS encouraged the Centers to be financially self-

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supporting, even become profitable enterprises. Problems arose when moneys were improperly handled, thus casting all kinds of aspersions on board members. Another problem arose when the BNCs English-teaching program competed with local language schools. In these cases, the charges of unfair competition could create serious political problems and cause unnecessary friction in a community.

*Q: What were some of the major things you recall from when you were Deputy Director of Latin America in regard to USIS programs in that area.*

NIEBURG: Well, I think we had too much of a tendency in terms of programs, to stay with the status quo. Latin America was one of our oldest public affairs programs. In many respects we suffered from success in that I think we had become a little staid. We had done things for a long time. They had been successful. And I don't think in ..many respects that we had changed sufficiently with the times.

I personally also regretted that during this, my time, at least for budget reasons, one of the most successful programs that I thought of in terms of Latin America—was the book translation program—was severely curtailed if not almost abandoned. I thought that was a short-sighted policy that did not serve us well. We could have curtailed other elements. Another good example was that we hung onto a film program at a time when the film program should have long been phased out. I had some problems with my principal over that as well as with some of the posts who found it a convenient palliative. But if you examine whether the film program really did persuade people rather than just entertain, I think we stayed with that particular medium or with this particular tool for too long.

*Q: Was this a period of time when the Agency was going through the throes of budget cuts again and there were difficulties as far as the Latin American area?*

NIEBURG: Well, we always had this specific problem. Although budget cuts were one, I should say that probably the most difficult thing that happened during my period were two kidnappings of USIA officers during that particular time. One was a kidnaping of Al

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Laun in ..Argentina. And you will recall that the poor guy was shot, severely wounded and took a long time recuperating. The other one was in the Dominican Republic with Barbara Hutchison where I was designated as head of the task force in Washington to help get her out of the clutches of the kidnapers. These were very intense, emotional days. But one of the most difficult things, apart from the negotiations themselves, was liaison with the families. Trying to explain not only what you were doing, but also the limits of what you could do. In other words, short of sending in the Marines and physically freeing her, what is it that you could do? We had a marvelous ambassador who was very heavily engaged.

*Q: You mean in the Dominican Republic?*

NIEBURG: In the Dominican.

*Q: Barbara Hutchison was kidnapped.*

NIEBURG: The Ambassador worked his butt off, and I think, ultimately, as the results prove, successfully. But it was a very difficult intense period of time. Also in relation with the Hill. I must say that I had some dealings with Senator Biden (of Delaware) which were less than salubrious. Senator Biden, while he had no specific suggestions that he wanted to contribute to the solution of the problem was continuously critical, snide, almost rude during the times that it was my duty to inform him of ..where we stood and how we did. Biden being from Delaware, of course, which was Barbara Hutchison's home state. We kept the Congressional delegation very closely involved and appraised of how things were going.

*Q: Fortunately both those cases I recall were resolved. We got our people back.*

NIEBURG: We got our people back. We did not pay any ransom. And we did not accede to any demand of the kidnapers. So that was the optimal case, if there can be anything optimal in a kidnapping to start with. But it was a happy ending in both of these cases.

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*Q: You were Deputy Director.*

NIEBURG: For both of these.

*Q: But in what period was that?*

NIEBURG: That must have been 1974 to '76.

*Q: And then you went to the penultimate assignment with USIA?*

Panama Canal Treaty Negotiations

NIEBURG: No, I should interrupt you there. I had a stint at the State Department as spokesman for the Latin American area during the Panama Canal Treaty negotiations. And I only mention that because that was the only time in my experience in the U.S. government or as a USIA officer where the constituency, in a sense, was more in the United States than it was anywhere else. Much ..of the work there involved persuading the Congress and the Congressmen's constituents, of course, who were often not very favorably disposed to what these negotiations hoped to achieve.

*Q: Looking back now in 1988 at the Panama Canal Treaty, do you have any opinions with respect to the signing of that treaty, where we are now?*

NIEBURG: Well, as you can imagine, when you work on one specific major problem that long you do a lot of research. And I did so. I became convinced that in the first place we never owned it (the Canal). So it wasn't really for us to give away. If you looked at the situation as it existed in Central and South America, I think we did the only reasonable thing, the only honorable thing that we could do. However, I think we would be foolish or naive to think that we will reap the glory of our act indefinitely. People always ask what have you done for me recently.

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So while you can say it did help us in our relations with the rest of Latin America I think it did more. It set a historical precedent of a major nation to give up something—that it believed it possessed though it didn't actually own it—in a reasonable, negotiated fashion. And I think that set a precedent in international relations that cannot be over valued.

So I was in complete accord with this. And when I worked on this I certainly had my heart in it. I also remember that my office had to prepare for the daily press briefings. I wrote the points for the Department's spokesman. It was strange to see that what was said at the noon briefings of State so often became the policy of the United States government. Because of the heavy public relations emphasis, especially with U.S. audiences, what was said at the noon briefing became U.S. policy.

I think it was rather interesting that even my Assistant Secretary, at that time, an absolutely brilliant man, would more often than not, buck what I had written back to Henry Kissinger himself to make sure that his back was protected. I was quite willing to take the blame. But I was, I suppose, too lowly a person to do so anyway. Many times, when I came to clear with him what I proposed to send to the Spokesman he would say—well, take it up to the seventh floor and let them make the decision.

There were also the usual problems of leakage. My Assistant Secretary loved the press, loved to talk to them. But if anything got out in the paper that did not look so well, or appeared not to look so well, the next day he'd say, Nieburg you leaked. So you also serve the purpose of being the lightning rod when things do not go so well.

*Q: Who was the assistant secretary?*

NIEBURG: Bill Rogers. An absolutely brilliant editor and a brilliant mind who was returned to private practice.

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*Q: When you left that job which was the second job in your Washington assignment, then you went to the assignment that was the longest one you had in your career.*

Istanbul, Turkey

NIEBURG: Not quite. I went to Istanbul.

*Q: Oh, you went to Istanbul.*

NIEBURG: I went to Istanbul as PAO. And that may sound funny because I say PAO rather than Branch PAO. Because while the PAO sits in Ankara, the capital, all the action except for the government is de facto in Istanbul. That is where the headquarters of the press is. This is where the universities are. And it turned out to be an absolutely fascinating assignment.

And for a man who had come dominantly out of the information field, I frankly found myself going in a different direction in Istanbul, without necessarily neglecting the information aspect of the job. I found that the most important job there was to build institutional bridges between Turkish and American institutions. I think if I look back over this particular job the greatest pride that I take, if it is an accomplishment, was a mutual university affiliation in ..bringing about a greater exchange of Turkish literature translations into English or English literature being translated into Turkish. Bringing about these bridges which really last way beyond a tour of duty, is ultimately more fruitful.

I was there during a very difficult period where political murders occurred at the rate of six a day, where our own USIA van was sprayed with automatic rifle fire, where my family and I were held up in our own apartment at gunpoint for four hours.

*Q: For political reasons.*

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NIEBURG: Well, we did not know. We did not know this at first. It turned out to be non-political. But with the political crime at a peak crime in general also increased. It got so bad that you couldn't have any function or entertain at night because people would not dare to come out at night in the streets, even if they were in a car.

*Q: What year are we in now?*

NIEBURG: We're in the year 1977, '78. Very difficult years for the Turks. But I need to point something out here which is terribly important. I found the Turks to have a political culture which is absolutely superior. Let me explain what I mean by this. In the press there were quite a number of newsmen, as there are in the press .. I think all over the world, who are very liberal, often left leaning reporters, editorial writers. There were some with whom, as you might imagine, I disagreed diametrically. We had acrimonious shouting matches. We had arguments. And yet, after each one of them the conversation was, "hey, let's get together; have dinner together with our families; go out together on the town." What I am saying is that in many places where I have served if there was political animosity or disagreement this was carried over into personal life. I found that in Turkey you could have serious political differences and still maintain a personal relationship which was warm and friendly. And I really enjoyed that very, very much. I can say to this day that many of the people with whom I also disagreed have remained personal friends who come and visit and I hear from them.

Turkey was also tough because of communications. I remember one occasion only too well, and, of course, this is all part of the Foreign Service. I don't remember whether you recall the headlines because they were not even reported in the United States since it occurred in Turkey—Turkey's worst train accident in which 128 people were killed. It so happened that I was on that train. I had been in Ankara for a consultation. Strangely enough somebody in the embassy had even asked me to carry a pouch and I had refused to. And I was glad I had, in retrospect. Two trains collided head on.

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It was during that moment of people being mangled, being seriously injured, that I developed a respect for Turkey that goes beyond words. People suffering—with tremendous amount of pain. And I have never seen people be so contained, to have so much dignity in adversity as during that particular moment. I have nothing but the utmost respect for the Turkish people and for those people on the train. I don't know how I got away. I got away with barely a scratch, luckily. But it is something that I will long remember. So, Turkey to me has had personal experiences that are not easy to forget.

Assignment as Director, RIAS—Berlin

*Q: This is a continuation of an interview with Patrick E. Nieburg, begun on February 4, 1988. It is now February 11 and we continue. Pat, your penultimate assignment was as Director of Radio in the American Sector known as RIAS. And you were there for five years. Can you tell us first how RIAS was established and then what it was doing when you were named Director?*

NIEBURG: Well, let me start by my arrival on the post before going onto RIAS which is located in Berlin. I was supposed to go a day or two for consultation to the Embassy in Bonn. We flew out of Washington to Frankfurt ..and everything was rather uneventful. We changed to a local flight. Just between Frankfurt and Bonn/Cologne which is less than a 20 minute flight.

*Q: Bonn and Cologne had the same airport?*

NIEBURG: That is the same airport. It serves both of these cities. And on that particular 20 minute flight our flight was hijacked. We didn't quite realize it until towards the very end of the flight when a man, very innocuous looking, had entered the cockpit and brandished a gun. We were on the ground already. And there we sat on the ground and we did not know what was really happening. We sat and we sat. And suddenly we saw armored personnel

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carriers arriving on the tarmac and surrounding the plane which had been kept at a good distance from the airport terminal.

As it turned out nobody really knew what was going on. We sat on that tarmac for about two hours. And finally, a stewardess came back and said, well, we've been hijacked. We said, "no. It can't be." It seemed just incredible. Everything was relatively normal except I understand in the cockpit where a man was standing with a gun threatening the pilots.

*Q: And this was Lufthansa flight?*

NIEBURG: That was a Lufthansa flight, a local flight, you know, just from Frankfurt to Bonn. Well, as it turned out there was a lot of activity we found out later in the tower. The minister, the German Federal Minister of the Interior, had gone into the tower and was negotiating with the hijacker. It turned out that the hijacker was an ecologist who had some queer demands. There was nothing political per se. But he wanted the Rhine River cleaned up. He wanted something done about acid rain. And he wanted publicity for his demands to save the ecology.

Well, to make a long story short, it took 4-1/2 hours—sitting. It was September and it was hot. The air conditioning had gone out. The airplane had run out of drinks. And our cat, the poor kitty, was really panting. Her tongue was hanging out and we were wondering what was happening. Finally, the police came closer, the armored carriers, and the man was taken off the airplane. Ultimately we could all get down off the plane.

Well, the PAO, Alex Klieforth, was there waiting for us. And he followed, of course, what was going on in the tower and knew it. When Polly, the children and I finally came down he said, "Nieburg, you always have a knack for entering stage center. But to make me wait four hours is unconscionable." And that was the end of that particular episode. But as you can see—from a train wreck to a hijacking—all of this is in a day's work in our kind of business.

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### The Vital Role of RIAS in Early Post-War Germany

Let me go back though to RIAS, because RIAS is a unique institution within USIA, and it takes a great deal of its budget. As a matter of fact, its annual budget runs over a million dollars which is not inconsequential if you consider what the budget constraints are.

Actually, the establishment of RIAS was a fluke. When our troops entered Berlin on July 4, 1945 one of the first things that they demanded of the Russians, who were already there was access to the local radio station—which also had served Goebbels and where Axis Sally had broadcast from—and demanded time on the transmitter. And the Russians said, nyet. And it was just one nyet too many.

So the Americans then wisely decided to establish their own radio station, not just for any kind of program of purposes, but really to communicate with the population who would be told at this particular point—garbage will be collected, rubble will be cleared, etc. These were the housekeeping chores for the Military Government.

And the way the Allies finally got RIAS started was by confiscating a number of mobile units, radio mobile units they had captured from the wehrmacht wired them and gerry rigged them together and then got on the air. One of the first people on the air was our colleague Mickey ..Boerner who used to regale Berliners with his Berlin “sign-on” “guten abend, liebe horer.” . And that became a hallmark.

Well, it didn't take the military government very long before they found some quarters. They requisitioned an undamaged office building and moved into a studio and worked with the postal authorities to establish a medium wave program transmission. And RIAS has been on the air since September 1945 which makes it actually the oldest post war radio station in what is now the Federal Republic of Germany but which was then all of Germany. Its initial purpose was to communicate with the population of Berlin.

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But smartly very soon the authorities—then the Military Government authorities—recognize that you can't live by bread alone and decided that Berliners need more than just official announcements, you know, an announcement of housekeeping chores.

So the first thing that was offered them was a regular hourly newscast, in German of course. It was a rip-and-tear kind of affair, from AP or UPI, or rather it was still UP then, reading the news. Mickey Boerner who got on the air would give them basically a pep talk in the form of an editorial. It wasn't much longer—and that for economic and morale reasons—that RIAS decided it ought to have a little entertainment to lift the spirits of a very ..dispirited bombed-out, devastated city. The Berlin Philharmonic, which had remained intact throughout the war and had survived it, gave its first performance on the RIAS airwaves for the Berliners.

### RIAS During Berlin Airlift and the East German Rebellion

Well, during the Berlin blockade the air lift came, RIAS served also a military purpose. It turned out that its signal was the homing beacon for the aircraft that came into resupply the city.

*Q: On the Berlin airlift?*

NIEBURG: On the Berlin air lift. They would hone in on the RIAS beacon and come into Tempelhof airport. Well, this went on for a long time. There was the uprising in East Germany. RIAS was often blamed for having started it. Whether they did or didn't, historians will have to decide. I question it because it didn't initiate it, but it reported it. And remember that was still before the Wall game. So literally thousands of people would come into the RIAS studios, report directly from what is now East Berlin and express their opinion and also (to a degree) broadcast what their demands or what their grievances were.

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Well, RIAS stayed on and stayed on the air and became what Berliners really thought of as their radio station under American control. There were a lot of ..German employees of course. But each section initially was headed by an American officer who was responsible for the content of it, of what was being broadcast.

In 1969 during Lyndon Johnson's period when there was a general retrenchment, it was felt in Washington that we could no longer afford to run RIAS, we were going to close it down. But the German government in Bonn resisted because it felt that RIAS was such a potent force in Berlin. In fact there isn't a Minister, there isn't a President of the United States who has not said that Berlin has a triad of forces. that is the American military presence, the U.S. mission which is the diplomatic mission, and RIAS. The U.S. presence stood on those three pillars, and RIAS certainly was the most audible. So RIAS in itself became a very, very potent political factor not only in U.S. German bilateral relations, but also amongst the local population and as morale boosters.

### RIAS Becomes a Joint U.S.- Federal Republic of Germany Operation

So, when under the Lyndon Johnson Administration, the decision was taken to phase out RIAS for no other reason than budgetary considerations—the political reasons weren't even considered—the German government decided that they needed to keep it alive Part of this was economic too because RIAS was a good employer.

To make a long story short, after protracted negotiations, in 1972 RIAS became a hyphenated U.S.-Federal Republic of Germany operation in which the German government undertook to pay all operating costs and the U.S. government would basically defray all the technical costs for equipment and engineering costs. That meant all costs—incurring outside of the studio—for transmitters, land lines, and so on, was an American charge#. Whereas all the rest—that was the lion share of the budget—would be defrayed by the Federal Republic of Germany through the Interior or rather Inner German Ministry.

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*Q: That part that comes from the U.S. government is in the USIA budget.*

NIEBURG: U.S. contribution to this is in the USIA budget. We have often tried to transfer it to the State Department. Because in a sense it was the State Department, more than anybody else that insisted that the RIAS presence be maintained. But we have never succeeded and it has stayed in USIA. I should say that in terms of investment or pay out, and I would like to put this right up front, and I certainly made that calculation while I was there, there was a listening audience of 14 million people listening at least three times per week. The cost of listener, in other words, the cost of conveying a ..message to an audience was 12 cents per year, per listener. In other words, it was the most cost effective single medium to reach an audience behind the Iron Curtain.

*Q: These 40 million listeners, some are —*

NIEBURG: Fourteen.

*Q: Fourteen.*

NIEBURG: Fourteen million in East Germany. And that did not count what listeners we had in West Berlin nor the fact that because as RIAS evolved it had not only medium wave frequencies but also FM and short wave, a short wave frequency, that could be heard as far as the Baltic. Romanian Germans told us that they could listen to RIAS. So there was a tremendous audience, German-speaking audience, behind the curtain that was listening to RIAS.

And it may be interesting to note that in the organization, and this is a hangover still from the Cold War era, the managing editor also carried the title of political director. So you can see here was a very highly targeted purposeful radio.

The problem that arose over time was with the Germans paying the lion's share of the budget for the operation of RIAS. Increasingly, as you can imagine the management,

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certainly the daily management, went to what we call the intendant who was the German head of RIAS and the counterpart of the American chairman. Under the ..agreement with the Germans, the Americans retained complete sovereignty over the radio station and program content. But the daily management, the hiring and the firing, went to the German counterpart of the American chairman. So you had—and have—a hybrid organization.

While in a sense the American, so to say, could “pull the plug,” that was the kind of overkill where you would say you can nuke them all the time. So this was a threat that had to be used or could be used only extremely sparingly to be credible. And that created, over time, a number of problems. My own predecessor, one of the most capable and admired chairmen of RIAS, had felt very constrained about using any kind of what you might call a substantive input. He hoped to project U.S. interests by indirection.

I had felt upon my arrival and a very thorough review over literally weeks and weeks of listening to at least those programs with political content, that we had abdicated much of our rights and our purpose. And I had to ask myself why should an American taxpayer basically pay for this? You could still make the point that in a sense RIAS projected Western values to an East European audience. But it was, in a way, so remote that we said, why pay for this out of American appropriated funds?

So when I set about, I tried to, and I did in ..effect, redefine the legal basis in relation to the management terms at RIAS. I exerted what you might call— and I hope it doesn't sound self serving—a greater American influence on the station, including bringing the Voice of America German service more into the program elements. I wanted more focused programs without being heavy or ham-handed. I think a little bit more of Americana was needed, Americana that was somewhat disappearing as the Germans felt in control—felt that Europe was their focus.

So it was a question of redressing the balance in the program more than anything else. That, in and by itself, was a Herculean task and a very unthankful task at that because

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we worked basically under German law though in Berlin there is the occupation and the occupation status still applies. We worked with trade unions. There was always the question of political fallout and I personally have been attacked publicly quite strenuously in Berlin for what some felt an over bearing American influence in that particular station on certain types of programs.

It was necessary to do so in order to justify the American input into that particular radio station. And ultimately we succeeded. But that meant working with unions, working with the management. And there was ..not—and that was something that had to be recognized — always a coincidence of interest between the Germans and the Americans.

So when you say balance, at what point do you give? At what time do you resist? It was a very subtle, very subtle and very difficult time to work because even including amongst the staff of RIAS, amongst our German colleagues, you had professional radio people, yes. But you had the whole spectrum of political opinion which was part of the emerging German democratization effort that we had implanted there but which now came back, in a way, to haunt us. An editor says, are you going to stifle freedom of speech? To what degree do you—can you—argue about editing? And this is a question which arises in the United States as well. So you have to be both subtle and have to be persuasive in your professional arguments.

*Q: This is Side 1 of Tape 2 of an interview with Patrick E. Nieburg. Pat as the U.S. government representative, American Director of RIAS, who did you report to?*

NIEBURG: Well, that is really a very difficult question to answer. And I think there are two answers to it. In terms of efficiency report, the PAO in Bonn was my boss and he wrote my efficiency report. But in ..substantive matters, in a way, I reported directly to the ambassador or alternatively directly to the Director of USIA. Having said that, I must say I never really reported to anyone because nobody really cared enough unless there was some trouble. If some prominent Berliners came to Washington and would tell

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Director Wick RIAS had turned “red.” or what kind of communist propaganda were they broadcasting, I would get a rocket from Washington saying what is wrong and usually I could satisfy them very readily. But otherwise really neither the PAO nor the ambassador, certainly not the Minister in Berlin, ever interfered with what I was doing. So in a sense these five years at RIAS were probably the best assignment I had in that I ran my own business as best as I knew how, without interference from the outside.

### RIAS Gets a Satellite Channel

The only caveat I should put in there is that once a year, of course, I had to defend the budget. But even there I had little difficulty because these were nuts and bolts requests for specific types of equipment that could be documented so that that was not so difficult. I should say that one of the things that I take great pride in is that I put USIA into the satellite business while I was there. With the help of my RIAS (German) staff, I managed to procure for the U.S. government a satellite channel on ..the European satellite. And that was the first time that any outside nation was permitted to have a channel on the European satellite. Ultimately, of course, that is of transcendental importance to our communication needs, especially if you consider the footprint of a satellite and what kind of an area it can cover. And it was especially important for any kind of broadcasting operation to Eastern Europe.

*Q: You said the satellite was for broadcasting or for receiving?*

NIEBURG: That was a broadcast satellite. In other words, you go from a ground station to the satellite. And the satellite goes back and broadcasts directly from space, not going back through the ground station, but doing broadcasting directly from up in space.

*Q: Who was able to receive that?*

NIEBURG: That could be done, of course, with slight modifications to receiving sets, directly into Eastern Europe. The question is while the technology existed in terms of

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broadcasting transmission, at the reception side there was still some work to be done. But we had clear indication that even Eastern Europe's new receivers were in the process of being developed so that when you talk in terms of future reception that was the wave of the future.

*Q: Now, the Voice of America as I understand it uses ..satellites for transmitting from Washington to relay stations, but as yet does not do direct satellite. Is that correct?*

NIEBURG: That is correct. The direct satellite broadcasting is not a problem in terms of broadcasting. It is more a question of development of the receiving sets.

*Q: And the political implication.*

NIEBURG: And the political implication. Of course, the Eastern Europeans were always very, very adamantly opposed. They feared a direct transgression into their national sovereignty. Even our obtaining a broadcast channel, the E.E. worried about U.S. intention and the European broadcast union had some serious reservations because of the East Block protests in that regard.

### The Unique Tie-In Between VOA and RIAS

I should say that while we were broadcasting in RIAS, the coverage that came from the United States was dominantly provided by the Voice of America German service. And that leads me in a sense directly into the Voice of America.

The German service of the Voice was unique in that it had only one function. It did not broadcast directly as all of the other services did. It serviced RIAS.

*Q: You mean it didn't broadcast directly to Germany.*

NIEBURG: It did not broadcast directly to Germany. You're quite right. But it did service RIAS and served as its U.S. news bureau. We had at least one or two RIAS staffers on

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the German service primarily for training and acquaintance with the United States and familiarization with our society. And we had American staffers, German speakers, who prepared the feeds from Washington to RIAS which were incorporated into the proper program elements.

*Q: How many hours daily did RIAS broadcast?*

NIEBURG: Well, that is a very good question. I should have addressed that at the very beginning. RIAS broadcast around the clock in AM, FM and with shortwave signals. Now, RIAS had two basic channels which were not identical. That gave us a tremendous program spread. One AM and FM channel were devoted dominantly to news and current events, whereas the other was more what you might call societal and cultural in program content.

In the short wave section we had dominantly pickups or repeats from the news and news feature programs. But it was a service that went around the clock 24 hours a day. I think there was one span of 14 minutes interruption in the middle of the night which we used for servicing our transmitting equipment.

Washington: Director of VOA Foreign Language Broadcast

*Q: Your final assignment, Pat, was as Director of Foreign Language broadcasts of the Voice of America. Since most VOA broadcasts are in foreign languages, that assignment must have kept you busy. What did your position entail?*

Nieburg Philosophy of Foreign Broadcasting

NIEBURG: Well, it was a newly established position. The Voice used to do with the program director who was in charge of all programming. Basically when Gene Pell became Director of the Voice of America, he recognized that there was a distinction to be made between the Voice of America's English language broadcast and VOA foreign language

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programs. It is simply not enough to translate from English into a foreign language and hope to have an effective program.

If you consider that we were, as a foreign language broadcasting operation, on the air 720 hours with 41 different language services.

*Q: 720 hours, what?*

NIEBURG: Per week. You can imagine that this indeed is a major operation and the major resources of the Voice are in the foreign language broadcasts, as it well should be.

But a major shift occurred with the arrival of Pell in recognition of what the Voice of America was really all about. The recognition was that while English is certainly the world's second language to most people, ..nothing will ever really substitute for broadcasting to an audience in their own language.

But when you broadcast to an audience in their own language you must change your outlook. You and I both know that a headline in a daily newspaper in Rio or in La Paz or in Islamabad varies from the headlines that will appear on the same day in the Washington Post and the New York Times. People's interests, people's focus change with geography. And one of the first fundamental changes that I instituted at the Voice of America reflect that different mentality in which we said it isn't just what the United States wants to project, but we have to address what is of interest to our audience. In other words, there was a change in mentality of our departing point. The departing point no longer was what do we want to say but really to recognize from the audience's point of view, whether it was in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, or in Europe, what do they need to know? What is their focal point of interest at a particular point? And the most important reflection of that change became audible in our case in the line up, the way we carried the news.

There used to be, before my arrival, that all services regardless of where they were broadcasting to had to take the direction from the central English news division and say if

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they started out with, “Today in ..Washington X, Y, Z happened,” everybody did that. Well, that is fine and is perfectly appropriate for an American station broadcasting in English. But it is very often meaningless to the African audience on an African West Coast or to a Latin American audience. So what we did is number one we changed the line up of the news item, not the content. That still came from the central news division. But we changed the lineup of what would be the lead story. And the lead story for Latin America may be quite a different one than the one we would have to Africa or to Asia or for Europe.

*Q: In other words, you gave it a different priority depending on the geographic area.*

NIEBURG: That is exactly correct. The other thing that you very quickly learn—it was a question that I had discussed with the BBC before taking the assignment at the Voice—is how do you exercise control over such a far flung operation—I don't want to call it empire—as the Voice of America? And there are various approaches to it. I personally favored the approach of making sure that in the hiring you get the most professional radio people you can get—and when I say radio, news people as well—who have enough professional pride to do the best job that they know how. Because effectively though you usually have an American who is the service chief (and you ..have American branch and division chiefs), there is no such thing as effective control unless you would want to spend tens of millions of dollars in bringing in outsiders to review scripts, to review tapes, to see what actually went on the air.

Ultimately, you have to rely on trust in the professionalism of the staff that you work with. And you have to give the professionals the tools and convey to them your trust in order to make them worthy of it. I must say that with very few exceptions I have been amply rewarded by the professionalism of the staff at the Voice of America. Whatever is wrong with the Voice of America, it is not its people. Most of the problems that arise in the Voice of America come out of the management ranks. I must say part of the problem is the revolving door of the top management then. I think there is a certain disdain by many Americans who are not attuned to working with a lot of foreign cultures and

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foreign broadcasters. These Americans are not being sensitive to their needs, to their preoccupation and certainly not being down with the troops.

The other thing that management is very prone to do is to go by numbers or impressive figures, to please people. Few people ask what is it really that we're saying and why are we saying what we're saying? I think very often we're losing sight of the purpose of the Voice ..of America. It is a major communications medium. And the question is simply that unless you maintain the highest degree of program quality and certainly also the highest degree of signal quality—and I don't want to underestimate the second—you are not competitive in the most competitive environment in the world, which is international broadcasting.

We're often trying to do too much when we don't have the resources and have never been willing to make tough decisions saying we must eliminate X, Y, Z in order to maintain the quality. We have nicked and dimed the services to death to the point where many times we cannot afford, for example, to hire a stringer to do a local report which gives vitality and credibility to a story because we haven't had the resources. And, of course, the dollar exchange rate effects us tremendously, because our stringers, of course, are paid on a dollar basis. And when the dollar goes down we are no longer competitive in that area.

A second point that I want to make very strongly is that the Voice of America's expansion has gone dominantly into the facilities of short wave broadcasting. The international development, however, is not in short wave broadcasting but is in FM stations. Now, FM stations have the great drawback that they are short range stations. ..But they are increasingly important because of their high sound quality and the entertainment value that you can put in there.

Give you a good example. Music sounds a great deal different on FM than it would on short wave. And we have not made adequate allowance for this in our long range investment programs to compensate for that.

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One of the things that I instituted and which I negotiated around the world was exchanges or rather the ability of the Voice of America to feed other national radio stations and networks with Voice of America material.

*Q: Tapes primarily and feeds?*

NIEBURG: There are two types of things. There is a tape program which is for non time sensitive material. But others, and this is even more important, were for direct feeds. And in many instances we got the host stations to pick up the cost for the satellite or for the transmission of the feeds. Thailand is a good example. Indonesia is another.

We even have an exchange program that I negotiated with the People's Republic of China which gives us direct access to their airwaves. And I must say it is not only for the signal—the number of frequencies are so limited—to the degree that you can get on the air on other station you also become more believable. I think ..the prime example in all of the world broadcasting that we do is in Latin America. We had more feeds, more placements in Latin America than we had direct hours of broadcasting.

So, with relatively little resources we managed to expand our actual broadcast hours tremendously. From a point of cost effectiveness, the tape and feed services were probably some of the most productive elements that the Voice of America developed. I am saddened to say that since I left the Voice, again for economic reasons, much of this particular service has been cut back for lack of funds. I think the wrong decisions were made in terms of where to economize or where to place your budget. But you know from your own experience that if you pick up a local broadcast it carries its own credibility no matter how accurate. The BBC, Deutchewelle or what have you or the Voice of America, when you're a foreign element there's always in the back of the listener's mind somewhat of a question mark.

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Now, there is good reason to maintain a lot of short wave services. While it is true that the advance of AM and FM has seriously cut into short wave listening, short wave listening is still the crucial element in times of crises. People will listen to short wave at any cost even if the reception is not very well received. In other ..words, even if you have static or fading they will listen to it to get information.

But there is a general trend throughout the world that radio is increasingly changing from an information medium to an entertainment medium. We found that out, for example, when we expanded our Arabic programs in the Middle East. Our main competitor was Radio Monte Carlo and France Inter which were purely music stations and then had commercials on the air. These were not government stations. These were also commercial stations. And we had a very difficult time and had to make very many adjustments before we could compete with this pure entertainment medium and convey some information. After all, we are not in the entertainment business in the Voice of America.

So there are tremendous challenges ahead. But one of the things that I want to reiterate time and again is the creativity and the ability and professionalism of the broadcasters that we have at the Voice of America. I honestly think we're second to none, including the BBC. We've outdone them. But we must learn to care for our foreign nationals who really do the bulk of the work for the Voice of America. And we still haven't come close to reaching our potential in that area.

*Q: There is a mixture at the Voice as there is in the ..rest of the agency between foreign service officer and civil service. Did you find any conflict in that respect? Any advantages?*

NIEBURG: As a foreign service officer I was expected, I think, by USIA to place foreign service officers as division chief or service chief. And in many instances where an officer has served in an area that may turn out to be the right decision. However, it is also quite true that foreign service officers usually know nothing about radio, about the workings of what makes a radio program click. They have to learn it. And the Voice of America,

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unfortunately has not been a good, fertile ground for promotions for officers who go into this service. So the Voice of America, judging by the type of people it has had assigned to it, has not done too well amongst the foreign service officers. The best and the brightest, so to say, did not gravitate to the Voice and that was unfortunate.

So as far as I was concerned, when I made personnel selection, I would go for the most competent person regardless of where they come from. And there the civil service or the Voice people from within the ranks certainly had a great deal to offer. I personally did not give preference to foreign service officers. If a foreign service officer, however, wanted to come to the Voice and had the qualification, I was only too eager to have ..him/her. But it wasn't necessarily my first choice.

I started, as I preached to my staffs, that the audience comes first. If they're the boss we have to do what is right for the audience. Whoever can meet that demand is the one who should have the particular assignment. I must say, one of the things in which the Voice has dismally failed is its management function to engender for itself its own following. And I say this in all honesty, distinct from the Agency and Capitol Hill.

Until such time that the Voice gets its own separate line item budget, it will always be subject to cuts which are so easy to make because the Voice is the largest block in USIA's budget. The cuts are injudicious and really injurious to the service. And I think it is high time that the Voice had its own budget and that the people at the Voice stopped pandering to the Director of USIA and start pandering to the Hill—to make the Voice into an institution that will truly serve the American people.

Mind you I said the American people and not just any government because it is and must remain an independent unit. And I must say that the Voice's charter has by and large kept it out of partisan politics. Thank God. There are all always attempts to draw us in. But increasingly, and there I certainly give great credit to the English and news division who of course are always in the forefront of the controversy. Because Congressmen and

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their staffs can hear English and can understand it whereas they can't understand foreign languages. So they are the first ones to be criticized. But they have resisted any kind of partisan interference in the Voice. And I think we have done reasonably well in that regard.

The charter, that was a bipartisan charter developed by the Hill, has stood us in very good stead and has protected the Voice of America. But to become an effective tool for the United States as a whole and for its people it must become ultimately an independent organization. I think as an appendix to the United States Information Agency, it is too subject to the vagaries that come with budgets ups and downs. It must stay the steady course including management and the selection of the directors.

I would hope that the directors would not become political appointees—and some of them in the past literally have been political hacks. But that you will get a professional director or somebody coming out of the profession who understands international broadcast. Then we'll have a contract, a term of office that will transcend the presidential election site.

*Q: What were the years that you were there?*

NIEBURG: I was there only, unfortunately, from '84 to '86. But it was a most intensive, and to me one of the most rewarding parts of my service. And I think rewarding because the old military adage that if you take care of the troops in the barracks they'll take care of you in combat. I have never found it more confirmed than I did at the Voice. Even today if I go into the Voice from one service to another I am welcomed. Unfortunately I still get too many telephone calls at home and try to consult with people without trying to interfere with those who now have the management responsibility.

*Q: I wonder if you would comment on or express your opinion about the editorials that the Voice now carries. Before the Wick Administration, the VOA, as I understand it, was like the BBC. It did not carry editorials. Is that correct?*

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NIEBURG: Well, the editorials are certainly a very controversial subject at the Voice and have remained so, which is understandable. However, if you considered that even the smallest of the services—which is only a one and a quarter hour broadcast time—if you take four minutes of that broadcast time for an editorial, in terms of distribution of time is inconsequential. In terms of time, a three to four minute block within a day I don't certainly consider excessive and I can certainly live with. Many people in our audiences have said that they ..found the editorial extraneous. But I must also say that if the taxpayer pays for this radio station, I think the people are entitled to expect that the government's point of view will be reflected in a day's broadcasting time. So I have personally no quarrel with it.

The question then lies in the execution of the editorial. And there we have been somewhat less than professional. Because the whole processes of clearances with various agencies depending on what the subject matter is has been so onerous we have not really been on time. Nor do I think should we have an editorial everyday of the week or of the year. Because if we don't have anything to say it seems silly to have an editorial on the Audubon Society—which once we did—just to fill the editorial slot.

*Q: Is there anything else we haven't covered that you would like to say before we end this very interesting discussion.*

NIEBURG: I think that the Voice of America, I really would like to just close with that particular plea. It's too important a tool for the United States not to be given the attention and support that it deserves. It has a great deal of bipartisan support on Capitol Hill and it should have the independence that it needs to function properly.

*Q: Thank you. This has been an interview with Patrick E. Nieburg, a retired counselor in the Senior Foreign Service of USIA. The interview was conducted February 4 and February 11, 1988 at his home in Arlington, Virginia. The interviewer was Allen Hansen.*

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End of interview