

Jacques Leslie
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Madeleine Coddling '25

CODDING: So this is Madeleine Coddling, today is May 2, 2023. And I am conducting this oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam project. I'm conducting this interview with Mr. Jacques Leslie. This interview is taking place in person in Carson Hall on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Mr. Leslie, thank you so much for being here and speaking to me today.

LESLIE: I'm happy to be here.

CODDING: So I was hoping we could start at the beginning. Could you tell me where and when you were born?

LESLIE: I was born in Los Angeles [CA] in 1947.

CODDING: And who were your parents?

LESLIE: You mean? What did they do, that sort of thing?

CODDING: Their names, Yes. What did they do?

LESLIE: My father was a lawyer in Beverly Hills [CA]. He eventually became a judge for a short time, but decided to go back to being a lawyer. He was active in Democratic Party politics. He was on the Finance Committee of the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles in 1960. My mother was a screenwriter, and actually one of the first female screenwriters in Hollywood. She wrote a radio show for quite a long time. And then it turned, it became a TV show for a couple of years in the early 1950s. Called a date with Judy. Sort of an early situation comedy. But I think that I got the writing bug from my mother and interest in politics from my father, and journalism was the perfect way to combine those two things.

CODDING: Yeah, it was a perfect intersection. And what were their names?

LESLIE: My father was also Jacques Leslie, I'm Jacques Leslie junior. My mother's was Aleen Leslie and unusual name. A-L-E-E-N.

CODDING: And were you close with them would you say?

LESLIE: No, I wouldn't say that. My father was difficult, he could be angry quite often. He did have a tender side to him. My mother was also I'd say even more difficult. I'm trying to think how I can put this appropriately. Oh she was. Oh, I guess the fairer, the honest way to say is that she was pretty narcissistic. And that made it difficult to be her child.

CODDING: Yeah, yeah and did you have any siblings?

LESLIE: I have one sister who IS six years older.

CODDING: What is her name?

LESLIE: Diane.

CODDING: And were you close with her?

LESLIE: No, no, not too. And she also became a writer and wrote a novel that got some attention that was based on my mother, WHO was also quite a character. And so she captured a lot of that.

CODDING: So she read about your mom. Yeah.

LESLIE: Well, with under the cover of fiction,

CODDING: Of course. And what did you do when you were younger? In Los Angeles?

LESLIE: What did I do?

CODDING: Yeah, what did you like to do as a kid in your childhood?

LESLIE: Oh, oh, I love baseball. In fact, I think I learned a lot of writing from books that I treasured, called *The Fireside Books of Baseball*, which were anthologies of the best writing about baseball. And in fact, some of the country's best writers have written about baseball, those essays by John Updike and Zane Grey and Red Smith. On and on, and it was a pleasure to read those books. And then there was even a story about dice baseball, which I immediately took up when you would roll the dice that would say, whether somebody's got a hit, or was out, or so on, and I spent hours playing that game and then creating statistics for each player and so on. When I was about, oh, I don't know 10 or 11. That was a pastime. But I did. What did I do besides baseball? School. I I enjoyed going to school and learning.

CODDING: Did you go to Beverly Hills High School?

LESLIE: I did. And we had many children of movie stars and so on. And also quite a few others who became stars in their own right. Rick Dreyfus comes to mind he was in, was it Jaws he was in? I forget. But there were, there were a bunch. I can't even think of them at the moment. But there were the sons and daughters of Groucho Marx, Danny Kaye. Those are the ones that come to mind now.

CODDING: That makes sense. Do you feel like, well, Beverly Hills specifically, but LA [Los Angeles] in general was just full of movie stars, writers, actresses.

LESLIE: No, I mean, I knew I lived in a fairly rarefied environment. And even most of the kids who went to Beverly Hills High School were not related to any stars, or even in any way to Hollywood. And they were more my friends than the others. So I was, I mean I was fairly aware that that was not a lot of the world. Although, for my parents, it was a big part of their world. My father had a bunch of Hollywood clients among his clients.

CODDING: Right. And did you feel like your parents had any expectations of you to sort of, not to become famous, but become, you know, important in your career later in life because of being surrounded by so many important children and important people?

LESLIE: I don't know about that. I know, my father wanted me to become a lawyer, and I think, take over his practice. But that wasn't something I was interested in. And just the thought of a law book made me want to go in the other direction. So he was disappointed in that. And I think I wanted to be independent as well, not, not under his guidance.

CODDING: That makes sense. Did your mom want you to be a writer like her?

LESLIE: That wasn't something she talked about? No, I don't think so in fact, she, she complained a great deal about the difficulty of writing, what it put her through. And she reached a point in her early 60s, as I remember, when she said she'd had enough and she was quite happy to do that. Whereas, you know, I'll go on writing until I die. I wouldn't know what to do with myself. If I didn't have a project, or something to do.

CODDING: Yeah. Yeah. And I know, you went to Yale University. I was wondering what sort of attracted you about that school? Why did you move across the country?

LESLIE: Well, to be honest, at first, I wanted to be away from my parents, I was happy to be on the other side of the country. I was delighted to go to Yale. I mean, I'm embarrassed to think that part of the reason was that I played water polo in high school, and it had a water polo team. But aside from

that, I think I was attracted to the prestige of the place, and felt I was bound to get a good education.

CODDING: And did you visit Yale before you accepted and attended?

LESLIE: No in those days it was much less common than it is now? No, sight unseen?

CODDING: So were you excited to transition from high school and living in Beverly Hills to New Haven?

LESLIE: Oh, yeah.

CODDING: You were ready?

LESLIE: I was definitely ready.

CODDING: Did you have any concerns or expectations going in at all?

LESLIE: Oh, I think the concern that every freshman has, which is will I be good enough, smart enough for this place? Outside of that, no, I don't think so.

CODDING: So what was your experience in general? Like a Yeah, was it primarily positive?

LESLIE: It was mostly positive. I worked on The Daily News, and that's where I learned journalism. And I enjoyed that immensely. I eventually had a weekly column, which I loved writing. One of the things that was wonderful about Yale was the number of speakers who were constantly coming by, who were fascinating. And I love to go to those talks. One that stuck with me always, was one with Norman Mailer. And he talked in the Yale Law School Auditorium, which was the biggest auditorium at Yale, it was absolutely filled there people leaning through the doors trying to hear him. And he started off being as absolutely obnoxious as he could be, which I think he often did and, and assaulted students and said, Oh, you have a good football team. What else do you have? And he went on until somebody threw a wad of paper at him. And he finally said, you You threw that come up here? And they brought the kid up and said, Why did you do that and he said, I already said I thought I was being quite wonderful. And the kid said no, you were being obnoxious. He said, Oh, alright. Alright, go back to your seat. And he said something I have something I'd like to read to you. And He had his briefcase, and he pulled out a manuscript, and we had no idea what it was. And he began reading from it. And as he did, you could feel the audience turning from hostility to utter captivation. And it turned out to be the first chapter of *Armies of the Night*, which was his brilliant book about participating in the protests at the Pentagon in 1967.

Probably his best book. And that was a powerful experience for me. It just, it showed me the power of words, it as you can see, it stayed with me for half a century. So I had that was just, that was among the best of the things that happened at Yale.

CODDING: That sounds wonderful. And was that sort of like the moment, the pivotal moment of okay, I want to become a writer, a journalist.

LESLIE: I probably already reached that point by then I began, after I wrote a story or two at the Yale Daily News, I enjoyed getting instant feedback. I liked the process. I was in from that point on, and I interned my, in the summer of my junior year at the Washington Post. So I was already committed to journalism.

CODDING: Right, right. And what kinds of things did you write in your column at the Yale Daily News?

LESLIE: All kinds of things that was one of the pleasures of it, everything from [chuckles] analysis of the latest Beatles album, to, there was one that was about going to the Vietnam protest march in New York in 1968 I think it was, where Martin Luther King spoke. About education and what was valuable and what wasn't. It was a pleasure. And then, and I also occasionally wrote humorous pieces. And I love doing that. That's when I realized, afterwards how, how hard that is to do. And I mean I keep keep thinking, how can I, I need more material to make something funny. But I'd love to try that again. If I could just think of something that would work.

CODDING: Yeah. Yeah. What was your opinion at this point on the war? Were you very much anti Vietnam?

LESLIE: As a freshman, I don't think I questioned it too much. That was in 64 [1964], 65 [1965]. That was near the beginning of the American involvement. But the more I learned about it, the more I doubted it until by 67 [1967], I was quite certain that it was a horrible mistake, and participated in lots of protests. At one point, William Sloane Coffin, who was the chaplain at Yale, and it was quite well known. He was later charged with, I don't think it was treason, I can't remember what he was charged with, with he and Dr. Spock [Benjamin Spock] and a few other prominent people were charged because of their opposition to the war. He invited three of us, we were considered student leaders, to burn our draft or to turn in our draft cards. And we all thought about it. And we all said no, but it was, we all gave it some thought we just didn't want to deal with what that would mean for us if we had gone through with that. As it turned out, I was 4-F, because I'd had polio as a kid. And so I was not worried about being drafted, unlike all my fellow students.

CODDING: And was that some relief to you? Or was there a part of you that longed to be more active in the war in terms of draft?

LESLIE: Oh, no, I mean, there was no way I wanted to be drafted and I knew nobody who wanted to be drafted. And instead, it was all about figuring out ways of avoiding the draft. And some of them got quite creative. There was one friend of mine who was quite thin to begin with, and he read that there was a certain bottom weight that you needed to weigh in order to qualify for the draft. So he went on a diet, to the point where he was dizzy, it was just hard for him to function and the day of his exam, which he gloriously flunked, I saw him afterwards leaning up against an ice cream truck, quite happy.

CODDING: What was his friend's name? Do you remember?

LESLIE: His name was Richard Van Wagoner. Who was also on the Yale Daily News.

CODDING: Would you say Yale's sort of campus climate at this point was very much anti war, anti draft? Or was it a mix?

LESLIE: It, it wasn't mixed. But it wasn't exactly that, there were people who felt passionately that the war was awful, that it ought to be stopped. And then there were probably a much bigger number who, I would say, were principally careerist, and who weren't interested in much aside from doing their work and becoming a doctor or a lawyer or whatever. At that point. Well, in our class of 1000, students, about half became doctors and lawyers, it's quite different now. But that was a lot of them. And a lot of them just weren't so interested in politics and things like that. But among those who were, I think there was a lot of anti-war sentiment. And there were a few professors who were quite well known who led the way. A professor named Statinlin, a history professor, who also was charged with something I can't remember what happened to him. But that took some courage. And there were a few others.

CODDING: And would you say your interests sort of fell in the middle in terms of being career focused, also, including some of your anti war sentiments into that?

LESLIE: What was the first part of that?

CODDING: Do you think you would fall in the middle in terms of the career focus students versus those who were very passionately protesting the Vietnam War?

LESLIE: No, I was passionately against the war. And as I say, I was in demonstrations and so on and wrote about it a lot. Now, I, I mean, I didn't

see it as being an impediment to being a journalist. So in that sense, there was no conflict.

CODDING: Yeah. Remind me the years you were at Yale again?

LESLIE: From, I guess I got there in 64 [1964] and graduated in 68 [1968]. And those were years of maximum conflict over the war.

CODDING: Yes, yes. And what did you do on campus socially? Were you a part of any Greek Life organization or what did you enjoy doing there with your friends?

LESLIE: Yale had, it still has, senior societies often called Secret societies, the most prominent of which is Skull and Bones. I was asked to join and refused. Because it just seemed absurdly elitist. It was rumored to have a gigantic endowment, which just struck me as crazy. There were lots of famous Yale graduates who'd gone there in our class, George Bush, was in Skull and Bones. And my one regret about saying no was that if I had said, Yes, I might have found out something about him that could have kept him from being president. But, maybe not. In any case, I did join another one called Elihu, which was much more open. But aside from that, the main thing I did was the Yale Daily News. I played water polo at Yale too. And in addition to schoolwork that kept me very busy.

CODDING: Yes, I'm sure. What did you major in?

LESLIE: American Studies, which had a certain irony because when I graduated, I went into a program called Yale and China, which involved teaching English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong In Hong Kong. And I thought this would be my big chance to spend a couple of years out of the country before going back and becoming a journalist. in fact, and instead it opened the way to my becoming a foreign correspondent.

CODDING: Right and that was a fellowship you said, through Yale?

LESLIE: Yeah, where two students were chosen each year to stay for two years. So there were four of us at any one time. And we taught basically in the morning, and then had lots of free time. And I use that to study Chinese, because there was nothing better to do. And the lessons were free. And that opened the way to my being chosen to work for the *LA Times* with the idea that eventually I'd go over to China.

CODDING: And was it extremely eye opening to be in Hong Kong at that point?

LESLIE: Yeah, I mean, it certainly was quite different from anything I'd experienced before. I can't say that I loved Hong Kong. In fact, of all the places I ended

up living in Asia, it was my least favorite. At that time, It was very much a mercantile sort of place, that lacked the passion of China, which was then going through the convulsions of a cultural revolution, or even of Taiwan, where there was just as much passion against the communists in China and against the Cultural Revolution. Most people in Hong Kong seemed very concerned to just make as much money as they possibly could. And that did not appeal to me, particularly. But it was my first experience in Asia, it enabled me to begin traveling around Asia. And I liked all that.

CODDING:

Right, so you finished the fellowship in 70, 1970?

LESLIE: Right.

CODDING: So were you? How aware were you of what was going on in Asia? I know the Tet Offensive of 68 [1968] that occurred when you were at your fellowship?

LESLIE: No, no, that was while I was at Yale. The Tet offensive was in 67 [1967], wasn't it? Anyway, I guess. Now I can't remember, maybe it was [incoherent] now I am embarrassed I can't remember. In any case, no, I have a vivid memory of that, because about the most popular professor at Yale was an art historian named Vincent Scully, who just died a couple of years ago. And everyone loved his classes, they were hugely attended. And at some point, I found myself sitting in his car with him, as we talked about the Tet Offensive, and he began crying about it. And that's also something that stayed with me. So it was very much a powerful presence, I guess you're right It was in 68 [1968]. Yeah.

CODDING: Yeah. And what would you say were some valuable things you gained at you, like when you left? It could be classes or just realizations in terms of what you want to do with your life?

LESLIE: That's a tough question. It certainly exposed me to all sorts of things which I had no idea about, before I got there. It introduced me to a much wider world of politics, literature. I, at that time, I got really excited by what's now called narrative nonfiction. And that's something that I have done since then and thought of as an eventual goal. There is one book in particular by Gay Talese called the. Oh, am I gonna forget the name of the book, The Power? Oh, dear. Anyway, it was a book about the New York Times. It was a brilliant book about the way the New York Times operated. And that was another thing that got me very excited about journalism, but it was as much of the way it was written as the subject matter that was powerful for me. Many years later, I had a meal with Gay Talese, which was quite astounding, in its own way. Where he just he, he learned that I had gone into Vietcong territory as you read, and he spent the whole meal just kind

of cross examining me about that experience. And then when it was over, he just walked away, didn't even say goodbye. He's a strange fellow but a brilliant writer.

CODDING: Yeah, it sounds like a lot of people were influential in terms of your writing style at Yale

LESLIE: Yeah.

CODDING: So you had your fellowship from 68 to 70. And then I read in your memoir that you visited Saigon actually as sort of like a farewell to Asia trip and you didn't have a positive experience then?

LESLIE: No, I was frightened. I thought this, I'm getting out of here. I just I didn't have a sense of, I didn't even think that I'd be a journalist there. I don't even know if it crossed my mind. I just thought I knew somebody there, I went to visit him. He was a volunteer worker. And as I said, I remember going to a movie at an outdoor theater with GIs. Where someone in the movies said something like "everybody has the right to be a sucker once in his life", and everybody in the audience cheered. Because that was what they felt defined them. Yeah. No, at that point I thought, I'm done here. I'm probably done in Asia. But as you know, I then after a year as a freelance journalist in Washington, learned that there was, that the foreign editor of the *Los Angeles Times* was looking for someone who spoke Chinese, who was young, who could eventually cover China. And he chose somebody else as I explained. A fellow who was actually Bill Clinton's roommate at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. And as well as being the roommate of a close friend of mine at Yale, little also became a Rhodes Scholar Strobe Talbot [Nelson Strobridge Talbott] eventually became Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State. And Strobe was the chairman of the Yale Daily News. I was the vice chairman. We spent a lot of time together and Strobe told me that this fella, Frank Allor, who'd been picked by the *LA Times*, he'd been a draft dodger, and the foreign editor, Robert Gibson, arranged with his draft board and for him to come back to the country without being charged with anything. He did do that and spent some time on the *LA Times* foreign desk. And I think three days before he supposed to go to Saigon, committed suicide. I've never met him. I never knew why that happened. But after that Strobe me this position was open. The foreign editor's idea was that this person would go to Vietnam, and learn journalism. There under the tutelage of the bureau chief felon and George MacArthur and then would be prepared to go cover China, which was then beginning to open up to American journalists. As I said, once after I got to Vietnam, I thought, this is like putting someone in the World Series to prepare them for the regular season. It really didn't make much sense. But once I was there, I definitely did not complain.

CODDING: Yeah. And what year did you end up going to Vietnam? Or when did you, when were you first employed by the *Los Angeles Times*?

LESLIE: In late 71 [1971]. And I spent a little time on the foreign desk, and then went on January 1, 1972, to Saigon and having an affiliation, for some reason made a huge difference to me. It gave me a mission and I mean I knew why I was there. I had people who were aware of what I was doing. I wasn't so frightened anymore. And immediately just became utterly fascinated by the richness of what was happening in Vietnam and the layer after layer of it, it definitely felt like you can never get to the bottom of it. And all this. I took to, from the beginning,

CODDING: Right, and what is this richness we're talking about? What did you see there, like within your first few months of living in Saigon, that made you so hooked on the experience?

LESLIE: It was a subject that it was easy to become obsessive about and no matter who you met, the conversation was about the war. There are so many dimensions to the war. There are so many ways of understanding it. And so much inability to understand it. There was even a squalor in Saigon that I found intriguing, there were beggars on street corners. Some of them were lepers, and I always wondered how did they get control of their particular corner, because there was a way in which they were, as if someone had planned them where they would be spread out. And in a way that seemed to speak for something larger in Vietnam, which was that you, you couldn't see the most important things. It was 95% hidden. And in a way, what I did there was to try to uncover some of those hidden things. By the time I got there, the American role in the war was declining. It had reached a point where there are 500,000 American troops. When I got there, it was down to 100,000. And clearly, those 100,000 were on the way out. So there wasn't much point in going into combat with American troops. And in fact, they weren't even doing much combat anymore. It was mostly being done, excuse me, being done by South Vietnamese troops. And I, very infrequently went out with him. But there were all kinds of other things to do. And I'd say, it took me about a year to get my bearings to figure out what was possible. It also took a year to free myself, of my bureau chief George MacArthur with whom I did not, I shouldn't say we didn't get along, but he was very much a hawk. And he relied almost entirely on his CIA sources, calling them every day, not going anywhere. And to me, that was the worst kind of reporting. To me, you had to go see what you're writing about in order to do a good job. And I ended up going to about half of South Vietnam's 44 provinces. I was traveling all the time. And after a year or so, I had been told that he had to read all my stories before they were filed and tell me if I needed to make changes. And after a year, he said, you've reached the point where I don't need to do that anymore. He didn't enjoy doing that. So that was a great relief. And at that

point, I began doing this string of what turned out to be extraordinary stories.

CODDING: Were there any other American reporters with you? Sort of hand in hand going to the same provinces that you were?

LESLIE: I very often traveled with other journalists, there were a couple in particular, who are my good friends, Nick Proffitt, who was the Newsweek bureau chief, who I went in, not exactly into combat, but on the edge of combat for the first time. And another journalist who worked for Newsweek named Ron Moreau, who worked for Newsweek for, gee another 30 years, at least, until he got sick and sadly died maybe 15 years ago. Nick died before that, and I missed both of them. But I did a lot of stories with them. I did a lot of stories with a woman in Véronique Decoudu, who worked for Agence France-Presse. And it was, it was good to work with her because there are often soldiers who weren't particularly interested in talking to me, but they would talk to a woman. And her English wasn't so great, my French wasn't so great. But together, we could help each other out. And she, of course, went with me into Vietcong territory, which was really, still remains the most amazing day of my life.

CODDING: Right. And you mentioned, um, the first time you went into sort of a combat setting with Nick, what was that like?

LESLIE: This was in the beginning of the Easter offensive in the spring of 1972, when North Vietnamese troops went across the demilitarized zone, with a lot of divisions, and it was unclear how far south they would reach. And Nick and I, as well as Dave Elliott, a scholar who Ed Miller [Edward Miller] just mentioned, we went up there as quickly as we could to see what was going on. For a time, the North Vietnamese were stopped at a river. And I forget the name of the town. It's in the book, but they were on one side of the river and the South Vietnamese troops were on the other. We got within a few 100 yards of that river. And at that point, I was quite frightened. because I had no idea of how to gauge how much danger we were in. Whereas Nick was very nonchalant, and kind of made fun of me for my fear. But I began to realize that it's not as easy as I thought to get killed. That if you know what you're doing, you can minimize the risks, you can gauge when you're taking a risk, that you could be in much more control than I thought. And the longer I was there, the more I felt not exactly confident, because I never considered myself any kind of military expert. But I could at least have some control over when I was in danger. And that was partly the case, because in Saigon, there was no danger whatsoever. So each time I'd go back to Saigon, I was relaxed, I wasn't worried. And so I could even, you know, I could drive towards the battle, in the daytime, come back at night, take a shower, have a good meal, which I should add, is nothing like the way most journalists deal today where

they are as much a target as combatants. We were not targets, with some rare exceptions.

CODDING: And did you find that those military officials like the Americans, were they okay with you guys being there and reporting? Or did they feel that it was, you had an unnecessary presence and they were fighting a war, and then you guys shouldn't be as involved as you were?

LESLIE: There was a spectrum. But I think for most of them, there was a sense that we weren't on their side. That we had, the journalist have written so many stories critical of the war effort showing the deficiencies in the war effort that they felt we were a major impediment. But they were required to give us a ride in airplanes if there was room. And they did that. And I flew on a lot of military flights and in military helicopters, and on and on. But there wasn't a great deal of enthusiasm for journalists, I'd say.

CODDING: That makes sense. And what were your first few stories on?

LESLIE: Oh, gee, I mean, nothing very important. The first story was just about what it felt like to be in Saigon at that time, just getting out some of the complexities that I was just talking about. But it wasn't until the offensive began that I started doing stories of any significance. And when I went up to that, Frontline, for the first time, I began to do stories that were worth doing. I mean, they were particularly important that weren't just feature stories of some kind. And I spent that whole first year covering the offensive and in whatever way I could, because it was all over South Vietnam. And so I went all over the country trying to record how much progress the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, the National Liberation Front, had made, where they were stopped. And finding my way around.

CODDING: And then in chapter three of your memoir, you discuss the ceasefire after the Christmas bombings in December of 1972. I was wondering what the mood in Saigon was at that point?

LESLIE: Well, there was a huge amount of tension, because nobody knew what that would portend or what the Americans were going to give away. For the South Vietnamese government, it was a scary prospect. Because one of the major points of contention was whether the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front troops would be allowed to stay in South Vietnam. And in fact, they were. Well that was a major concession, and it eventually led to the collapse of the government two years later. So for supporters of the South Vietnamese government, it was a very frightening time. I didn't know what to expect. And as those negotiations went on, there was just a huge amount of tension.

CODDING: What did you think? Do you think that northern Vietnamese troops should stay in South Vietnam?

LESLIE: That they would stay, or that they should stay?

CODDING: That they should stay

LESLIE: Oh, I think they should stay. I don't think I had a strong opinion about that particular point. There were. I mean, there were, there were so many facets to those negotiations, I thought that, in the end, no matter what happened, the communist would win. That the South Vietnamese government was too compromised by its corruption, and that without the support of American troops and American bombing, that it would eventually crumble. And that's what happened. So, at that particular point, I don't know that I had a strong opinion. But it seemed pretty clear to me that what was happening was what was called the decent interval that Kissinger, in particular, was negotiating a way for the Americans to get out without being blamed for the immediate collapse of the war. And that's exactly what happened. I think he knew that it was only a matter of time. But that if American troops left, Nixon could claim that they left with honor, which was the phrase he always used. And so that was the main issue to him. It was a political problem, a domestic American political problem, rather than considering the welfare of the Vietnamese.

CODDING: Right and what was your opinion on Nixon's War and Peace strategy?

LESLIE: Oh, I thought it was entirely cynical. I had no admiration for him whatsoever. I mean, I reached the point where I thought we should announce our intention to depart, negotiate how we can do that without, you know, everyone, without the chaos that happened in Afghanistan, for example. And do it but of course, that didn't happen. And I knew it wasn't gonna happen.

CODDING: Did you feel that a lot of other American journalists and GIs felt similar to you?

LESLIE: A lot of American journalists, certainly not all of them. There was a spectrum of belief from my bureau chief on one side to people like me on the other. Among soldiers, I think that same spectrum existed among draftees, I think there was mostly the sense that they wish they hadn't been drafted, that they wish they had never been to Vietnam and just couldn't wait to get out, rather than having any strong belief about the war, which they knew very little about. And they spent their time when they weren't in combat, and only something like 1/10 of them ever went into combat. They were on American bases, they didn't have any interaction in

the rest of the country and know much about what's going on. They just lay mostly [incoherent] want to get out with their lives intact.

CODDING: And what about you, did you want to leave?

LESLIE: No. No, I was expelled from South Vietnam. And at that point, I had done a lot of powerful stories. And it had reached the point where people were starting to come to me with more outrageous stories, and I wished I could have stayed there and kept on doing them. I mean, I think there was also a certain relief, because it was dangerous. And when I was doing that, the story that finally got me kicked out, which was about the smuggling of artillery shell canisters by South Vietnamese generals. I was told that my life was in danger. So when I was kicked out, there was a little bit of relief. But I also knew that, if my life had been in danger, the time to have killed me would have been while I was doing this story, not once it was published. So once it was published, I wasn't too worried.

CODDING: Right. And can you tell me a bit about your time, what year did you end up going into the Vietcong territory?

LESLIE: That was in February 1973, in the second or third day of the ceasefire.

CODDING: Okay. And what was that like?

LESLIE: That was astounding. In the previous year as the offensive was going on, I had a wonderful interpreter, a man who had been in the South Vietnamese Navy and had been wounded, I think three times in the Navy, and then was out, but was very honest and decent. And I found him, I think that was also through Dave Elliot. And, and he became my interpreter. George MacArthur, the bureau chief, had a young Vietnamese woman who was supposed to be an interpreter, but she didn't even want to leave Saigon, she was of no use to me. And so I found my own. And he was courageous. And at some point, as the offensive was winding down, and we began to hear first rumors about negotiations going on. And so we had this crazy idea that we would go through the Mekong Delta, and try to figure out if we could learn what the Vietcong, the National Liberation Front, were telling people about the ceasefire, whether they were telling people to prepare for a ceasefire. And in a way, it was a crazy idea because most Vietnamese in the Delta were not about to tell anything like that to an American journalist, that can only get them into trouble. But Mr. Long, his name was, entered. And that was, this was a story I did with Véronique. He entered us to a couple of people who he said he knew who could help us. And we asked them our question, and they rattled off 25 points that they had memorized, which seemed to come from NLF [National Liberation Front] headquarters, there seemed to be no other explanation. And they included things like, you know, bury your weapons

when the ceasefire happens. Fly NLF flags when the ceasefire happens, on and on. And we kept trying to think, is there some way we're being set up? Or how, how is this happening, but all we could figure is that for whatever reason, these guys were telling us the truth. And I wrote a couple of stories based on what they said. But our big question was, can you take us into Vietcong territory? Because that was, that was the story that every American journalist wanted to do. And they said, Yes. But not until the ceasefire started. So we made a plan with them that on the second day of the ceasefire, we would meet them, I forget, six in the morning, eight in the morning, in the delta. And they would take us and on that day, and I should say that, as that day approached on the first day of the, of the ceasefire, which I should add was not in many parts of Vietnam, really, a ceasefire, in fact, after combat was greater than it had been before in many places. But I'd heard that there were NLF flags that were flying in the Delta. And so we went to see these guys, and they said, We can't take you, there's too much police activity or be too dangerous for us. So we thought, Alright, well, maybe we can go on our own. We said, if we go in on our own, will we be in danger? And they said, No. So we began driving down the main road through the Delta, looking for NLF flags, and we thought we would just walk towards them. And the first time we saw them, South Vietnamese troops were fighting to get them taken down because they're such an embarrassment. That here at the main road and the flags, right on the main road. How could that be, they were claiming that they controlled so much territory. So we just kept going. And eventually we saw a flag in the distance. There was no combat going on. So we started walking towards that flag through rice fields. We met a farmer. We asked him if it was safe to go to that flag. We just said that I'd like to take a picture of the flag and he said, no it's safe, I can guarantee your legs meaning that there are no mines along the way. And so we walked towards that flag. And at one point we stopped, um, there was a canal. And as I remember, we, there was someone who took us on a boat across the canal. And then Véronique was getting sick, I think she had a cold. And so we asked if we could just stop inside somebody's house, and she rested for a while, they gave us water. And we went a little further. And suddenly, there seemed to be no people around and we had the sense of being watched. And that went on for a few minutes. And then people started coming out and kids came out. And we talked to them. And I think we'd agreed to say that I would say that I was Canadian, thinking that might be a little safer than saying I was American. And we could speak French to each other if we needed to. And we've said that we were journalists. And they welcomed us and said, let us take you to our village chief. So we got into a sampan in a much bigger canal and went down that canal. And there on the side of it were the proverbial Vietcong and black pajamas and AK-47s. And this to us was just beyond astonishing, this was a site that no journalists experienced in the course of the war. And they just looked at us. We were introduced to the village chief, who was very

welcoming. He had, there were what were called peace supervisory troops from four countries that were supposed to, they didn't even call them peacekeeping troops. They were just supposed to supervise the ceasefire, although they ended up not doing very much, but they were expected to show up. And so he thought that maybe we were part of that contingent, but when we said we were journalists, that was fine with them. And he said he wanted to take us on a tour of his territory. And we walked around with him just being amazed by one thing after another. We passed a cemetery with gravestones that had red stars on them. We were amazed that this cemetery existed, so close to route 4, the main road through the Delta, just a mile or two away, almost within sight of the road. And it was so secure, that they could put a cemetery there without fear that it would be destroyed. We just couldn't believe that this that we passed into another dimension felt like. We had a meal with the village chief that evening in the middle of a rice field filled with bountiful amounts of food. I said to him, how does it feel to be sitting here? And I think by that time that it said it was an American, eating with an American after fighting against them for so many years, and this was a man who had lost his thumb fighting against the Americans. And he said, Well, we think there are two kinds of Americans. There are the American aggressors. But they're also people like Martin Luther King and Jane Fonda and the American women's movement. And we want to thank them for their support. Well, that this guy in the middle of the Mekong Delta even knew these names, was astonishing. And there are very few Americans who could have named three Vietnamese. It was very impressive, although I imagine he got this by listening to Radio Hanoi. Even so, it was a very impressive answer. After we had the meal, he said, we'd like to take you to a ceremony of peace in our honor. And we started walking on the little retaining walls between each rice field with a soldier in front and behind each of us to catch us if we slipped and fell, which we occasionally did, and they would kind of giggle. But it was, maybe a walk of an hour or so. in the middle of that, we were shelled with South Vietnamese artillery. We didn't know at first, whether they knew where we were, we left our car on the side of the road, would they be firing at us, but I think it was what was known as harassment and interdiction fire, which was just artillery that they would fire into areas that they don't have control just to cause havoc without any particular target. And as we walked, there were more and more people who gathered behind us until there were dozens of people and they screamed, dove into ditches. Nobody was hurt. We were taken to another house where we just collected ourselves for a few minutes, there was a giant NLF flag inside the house that covered one wall. And we went back and continued on. Until we heard people talking on loudspeakers. And we could even hear our names being announced on the loudspeakers and we got to a clearing. And to our amazement, there was a makeshift stage with an NLF flag as the backdrop, where there were skits going on making fun of the South Vietnamese government. And there was an

audience of several 1000 People in the middle of this cleared rice field, again, within a mile or two of the main road in the Delta. And we had no idea that this was going on. This was a drama troupe that traveled through the Delta. They didn't, I mean, contrary to what they said they didn't put this on in our honor. But this was happening in quite a few places, I think. And we watched that for an hour or and it was getting, by this point, 10 or 11 at night, at which point, the village Chief said, Would you like to talk to some high ranking cavalries? And we said, Of course we would. So we got back in a sampan, which was steered by an NLF soldier who was so confident of where he was, that he was singing to himself. And again, we were amazed by just their, their sense of total control over this area. And we were taken to a little, I guess it was a hut, where we were introduced to two guys, who were, we were told that they were high ranking, but they wouldn't tell us their names or what the rank was. And we had a very rhetorical discussion over the next hour, longer. We didn't learn much from them, and they would just kind of denounce the American effort. It wasn't very illuminating. But it was fascinating just that it was happening. At that point, I don't know, it was three or four in the morning. And they said, well, we'll, we'll take you to a place where you can rest. And then we'll take you back across the lines into Saigon territory. And we were taken into another, another house where we lay down, and the soldiers fell asleep. I did not fall asleep. And then that seemed like a total impossibility. And after an hour or so I realized all the plan was that we should make this crossing before the sun comes up, when it'll be safer, and the sun is starting to come up. So I ended up waking up one of these Vietcong guys, and saying, we need to get going. Not knowing what his reaction would be when I woke him up. But they put us inside another little boat with an old woman, pretending to be going to market, guiding the boat. And we were told that if anybody saw us, we should just act like it was normal. That we were there, nothing out of the ordinary. And we did in fact, past a couple of people coming in the other direction on the river or canal. And they stared at us. I think they knew better than to show any reaction, they just kept on going. We were told we'd have to walk by a South Vietnamese checkpoint. And we didn't know what to expect. But again, after we got out of the boat, we saw that check point, we walked by it as if it was perfectly normal for us to be there. I don't know if they even saw us, but they certainly didn't stop us and we got to the marketplace. Once we got to the marketplace, the woman disappeared. And we just walked to the, back to the main road, looked for a bus, got in that bus, waited for it to go to Saigon where it was going and went. At one point as we were waiting, there were South Vietnamese police walking around the bus. We wondered if they were looking for us. But they didn't go in the bus. And we made it back. And that was the most amazing day of my life.

CODDING: Wow. That's crazy. Did you think that, were you expecting that sort of response, that welcoming?

LESLIE: I had a sense that we would not be in danger. I believe those two guys who told us we wouldn't be. But all the other things we saw I had no idea about. And each one of them was a revelation. And I ended up writing three stories about that. The first one was across the top of the front page of the *LA Times*. And the headline was, " 'We are friends', Vietcong tells visiting U.S. newsman", which seemed kind of quaint, somehow, particularly the word newsman, not something so often used, but I was unbelievably excited that I just done this story. I wasn't 100% confident that my editor would even like the story, but he was thrilled. And they gave it maximum play. And that began my run of extraordinary stories. But that, that, was, for me, just astonishing. I tried to go back to Vietcong territory with Dave Elliot, in fact. And once the ceasefire began, there was a North Vietnamese contingent established in, at Tân Sơn Nhứt, at the Saigon airport. And once a week, we could go see them, and they would hold a press conference. So I talked to their leader and asked, Could I go back and we made a plan, and he told us where to go. In Cà Mau, the southernmost province in South Vietnam, and Dave and I went there, but we never found anybody we were supposed to link up with. And so it was just that one experience, and then it was another, at least 10 days before any other journalist did the same sort of thing. And then so many of them eventually went to where we'd gone that the village had put out word that he just couldn't take any more that he had other things to do. And my friend, Ron Moreau went in a different area and was there for much longer, I forget how many days, maybe 10 days or so and had a much rougher experience, and they were not so welcoming. So we were, we were fortunate. But as I keep saying, it was extraordinary.

CODDING: And how did you feel towards the Vietcong afterwards, compared to how you felt before you had that day? Was there any real shift?

LESLIE: I think by that time, I, was I rooting for them to win the war? Or I don't know if I'd say that exactly. But I admired their courage, their capacity to put up resistance against the monumental bombing that they endured without a tiny fraction of the weapons that the Americans used. And that's a symbol of resistance. And I, you know, I am not a communist. I don't think that's the proper way to run a government, but they also authentically represented Vietnamese nationalism. And that is something that the South Vietnamese government claimed, but could never achieve, because there was so much corruption. And they were compromised by their collaboration with the colonialists first, the French and then the Americans, and there was no way they could overcome that. So I don't think that changed a whole lot in terms of what I thought about them aside from being able to see them more clearly to have an idea of actually meeting them. Um, yeah.

CODDING: And how was the story or one of your, the first couple of stories you wrote about that experience? How was that received in America?

LESLIE: Well, one of the, I mean there was a certain amount of frustration that I really didn't know, for the most part. Communications are nothing like now, where I, you know, I probably would have received well, I imagined that story would have gone viral, to say the very least, I really didn't have much sense, except that my editor was delighted. And I knew it was, it was a great story. But there was still, I was cut off from, from the Americans, except from what I could read. And it was, we would get the *LA Times* I forget how many days late it came, but it was several days late. There was *Stars and Stripes*, the army newspaper, which actually ran a shortened version of that story. To my surprise, it was also carried in the *Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*. And I can't remember where else but that story was in, you know, dozens, maybe hundreds of papers. So I knew all that, and that was exciting. But I mean, all I knew, all I wanted to do was just keep on going and write more of these stories. And then there were others that were, to me. Well, I can't say as powerful, but extremely powerful. I mean, you read about them. The stories about political prisoners in particular, one where another journalist Martin Woollacott worked for *The Garden Inn*, the *Guardian* and I were smuggled inside the province. The hospital ward of a province Hospital in Quảng Ngãi, which was the most embattled province in South Vietnam. We were smuggled in by Quaker workers who ran a facility that created prosthesis for Vietnamese who lost their legs, usually by stepping on mines. And I've just established contact after 50 years with the woman who took us in, just in the last few months and that's been quite wonderful, too. I've, we've been exchanging emails now for months, but I haven't met her but we will meet some time in the next year. But in any case, we were told that in this hospital ward, there were women who had been tortured by electricity. They were, what were called political prisoners, although that's sort of a gray area, they certainly supported the NLF. And the torture had caused him to experience dramatic convulsions, sometimes months later. And in fact, there were straps on the beds where they could be tied down when they were undergoing a convulsion, so they wouldn't hurt themselves. And so of course, I started asking about these convulsions, and to my horror, that set them off. First one woman started having them. And then another one, and eventually five or six did, and it was bedlam. It was horrific. And I wrote a story about that. And, in fact, there later on there were prisoner exchanges, which we could attend where you'd go out to an army base and prisoners would be brought from, Americans would be brought from places in South Vietnam, that the communists controlled. And women who were considered I just, I guess, they were not all women. So people who were pro NLF were taken back to the other side. And this was the trading point. And as we were waiting there, a woman had the same kind of convulsion and I immediately recognized what it was, nobody, there were a

bunch of journalists, but nobody else had any idea. And some South Vietnamese doctor went around and said, Oh, she's just, I forget what his explanation was, but it wasn't the accurate one. And so I saw this convulsion happening again. And it was an indication that she had been tortured by electricity.

CODDING: Where was this? When you met these women who were tortured?

LESLIE: Oh, it was on some base. I can't remember where it was, it wasn't Saigon. And I also, there was a very courageous South Vietnamese Catholic priest, who made it his job to keep track of all of the political prisoners in South Vietnamese prisons. And there were 1000s of them. And so I talked to him. And just let them know that I was interested. And at a certain point, I got an anonymous phone call, which I figured was from somebody who knew him, saying, go to a certain hospital ward in a hospital in Cholon, which is the city that abuts Saigon. And I went with Ron Moreau, who spoke Vietnamese. And there in this ward were 13 men. All of them had atrophied leg muscles, couldn't walk, had scars all over their bodies from being beaten, had been in shackles for periods from five to eight years, which was how they lost their muscles and their legs. And yet, were the most transcendent people I'd ever see. Were, seem to have gone through death and come out the other side. They, half of their number had died in the tiger cages, the most notorious prisons in South Vietnam on an island. And they were taken out, I believe, because the south Vietnamese government, once the ceasefire started, wanted to show, I guess it was the Red Cross, that this very notorious prison was not, in fact, a place of evil at all, that it was empty. So they emptied these guys out and told them whatever you do, you may not go to Saigon. You may not talk to journalists. And of course, that's exactly what they did. And they were remarkable. They handed us a poem that they had written to each other. And I got it translated by Mr. Long, our translator, and I mean the last, it was a, this poem was a salute to one of their fellow prisoners who died. And the last line was, we wish you could be here to share your joy with us. That still gets me

CODDING: Yeah.

LESLIE: These were all amazing experiences. And, you know, most people, most Americans who went to Vietnam for whatever reason, regarded it as a horrible ordeal. For me, it was not an ordeal, it was a place of enlightenment. And I am forever grateful that I was there. It certainly changed me in all kinds of ways. It was a profoundly transformative experience. Um, yeah.

CODDING: DID you ever get too much, too heavy to write these stories, especially about like the prisoners of war?

LESLIE: No. I mean, afterwards. No, I went, when I was, after I was expelled from South Vietnam, I covered the war in Cambodia for another six months, then went to Washington during the time of Watergate and the energy crisis in 1973. Then went to India and was stationed there. Another utterly fascinating place, from which I also was kicked out. But I then went back to Phnom Penh as in the last weeks of the war, as the Cambodian government, or Lon Nol government was collapsing. I couldn't go back to Saigon because I'd been kicked out so I could go back to Cambodia and I was there, right up until the end. And left in an American evacuation helicopter, two or three days before the Khmer Rouge came in to Phnom Penh and conducted the horrible genocide that they did over the next two or three years. But it wasn't until after I, I quit the LA Times, because there were more crises that I covered in India. I covered the death of Francisco Franco in Spain, the death of Mao [Mao Zedong] in China. And I felt that I just had enough I needed to absorb these experiences. And I wanted to go back and work for the LA Times in the United States, but the national editor had no room for me. So I ended up quitting. And then I went through a long process where I got terribly depressed. It's something that a lot of soldiers went through, after you've been through something that intense. What else do you do? What do you do with your life? And it was very hard for me to answer that question. And I felt I'd gone through this intense experience, and no one, or very few people I know had any interest in it whatsoever. Another thing that soldiers went through all the time, and did not know what to do about it, did not know how I'd find something else to write about that felt as important as that did. I eventually met the woman who became my wife, I started reading her my stories and crying as I read them. That was when I experienced the emotion of them, which I couldn't do while I was working. And she encouraged me to write a book about it, that became *The Mark*, which took years to write and I wrote it and rewrote it and just didn't feel that I could get it right. And still, if I had a do over again, there are things I would take out of it, that were just in a way too personal and not relevant enough. But in any event, I did finally finish it and get it published. And at that point, I felt I was done with the war, and it no longer plagued me, at all. And I went on to other things. And for the last, I don't know, 25 years, I've been writing about the environment and environmental issues, particularly water and dams. Which as some reviewer of my book about dams said, was in its way, another kind of war to cover.

CODDING: Right. Well, I think your book is wonderful. And I also wanted to take a little, a few steps back towards your time in Cambodia if that's okay.

LESLIE: Sure.

CODDING: What year were you expelled from Vietnam?

LESLIE: I was expelled in July of 73 [1973].

CODDING: And was it, did you go immediately after from Vietnam to Cambodia?

LESLIE: Well, I spent a few days in Hong Kong just recuperating, and then I went on to Cambodia. I, when I was stationed in Saigon, I went to Cambodia several times that was how we usually covered it, just for a few days at a time, but I stayed there for the last six months of 73 [1973]. That was when American involvement in the war in Cambodia completely ended. As a result, what really of Watergate when Congress voted that American bombing and Cambodia had to stop. So it was an interesting time. Well, every time was interesting then.

CODDING: Right, um.

LESLIE: Now, I should say that I had a lot of affection for the Cambodians, there was a kind of warmth to them, that I didn't particularly feel from the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese were much more capable of taking care of themselves. They were much more skilled, more aware of the modern world where you had the sense with the Cambodians, that they were lost, and at the same time, they could be more violent than the Vietnamese; they would occasionally explode in bouts of violence. And that is what the Khmer Rouge represented to the ultimate degree. But there were a lot of wonderful Cambodians.

CODDING: Right, and when you arrived in Cambodia, what was sort of the expectation in terms of the Khmer Republic falling, did that seem like it was likely to happen in the near future that it seemed pretty far off?

LESLIE: Yeah, there were a lot of us who predicted that when American bombings stopped, in, I think it was just August of 73 [1973], just after I got there that the Phnom Penh army, which was much weaker than the South Vietnamese army, they could not hold up. But they managed to, I mean, not through any great strength of their own. But the Khmer Rouge weren't so strong themselves. And then the winter monsoon came, and then everything kind of ground to a halt. Everything turned to mud. So it wasn't until 75 [1975] that both the South Vietnamese government and the Lon Nol government and Cambodia began to collapse at the same time, and one said the other. But the Cambodian government had some courageous people in it, but it was mostly laughable and Lon Nol was not someone that you could take very seriously. And he had a stroke. He just did not exhibit any kind of authority. So we knew it was just a matter of time.

CODDING: So in a way that you view Cambodia as an extension of Vietnam?

LESLIE: In some ways, and then the cultures are utterly different. But in terms of their intertwined fate, yes. Yeah, I mean, if South Vietnam collapsed, the Cambodian government wasn't going to survive without it.

CODDING: And did you find yourself searching for like the same sense of, not danger but those deep truthful stories that you felt when you were in Vietnam? Was that where your head was at when you came to Cambodia?

LESLIE: Mm, that's an interesting question. It was harder to do and in Cambodia. Because first of all, there was so little territory that we could actually visit most of the countryside was controlled by the Khmer Rouge, there weren't very many places we could go, we didn't have a lot of sources we could talk to, we ended up spending a lot of time talking to diplomats in the embassies. And there was no American military presence. So it became a lot harder, I, there was one story that I tried to do and then chickened out at the last moment, and then realized that I'd been smart to do that. Where I and a few other journalists got on an LST [Landing ship, tank] that was going up the Mekong River to the Battle of Kampong Cham, which was then going on. And I think that trip would have taken, I forget how many hours, but many hours and there were probably Khmer Rouge controlling banks on both sides as as the boat went up, and it was highly dangerous and Cambodian troops who had very little discipline, were wild on that boat as we got on, and we're just waiting for it to take off and they were drunk, and they were dancing. And I just did not feel comfortable at all, this did not feel like a good risk to take. And I finally just stood up and said, I'm leaving. And at that point, I exposed my fellow colleagues who had also snuck on and they were not happy with me, because that meant that they were kicked off as well. But that was the right thing to do, that would have been too dangerous. And that's about the biggest risk I was prepared to take. And as it turned out, not prepared to take. We did, the Battle of Kampong Cham ended and then we were taken there in helicopters and we could look around. It was a rare success for the Cambodian army. And we spent a few hours there. And that was that. But no, it was not possible to do the kinds of stories that we did in Vietnam.

CODDING: So what kind of stories did you write in Cambodia?

LESLIE: Well, I wrote stories about the course of the war, the impact on the economy, whatever I could find. There was one day when there was a horrible bombing inside a movie theater. And we all rushed to go, to look at that. And I wrote about that. There were certainly developments that we could write about it. But it didn't quite have the same richness as Vietnam did, and I was only there for six months. And I've been in Vietnam for three times that long.

CODDING: Right. And so you left Cambodia in 1975, right before the Khmer Rouge took over?

LESLIE: Well the first time I left at the end of 1973, then came back in early 75 [1975] And was there right up to the end, which was in April 75 [1975].

CODDING: And what did you do in between 73 [1973] and 75 [1975]?

LESLIE: First, I was stationed in Washington and then India. And then actually in 75 [1975], first, I covered this horrible convulsion in Cambodia. After we were evacuated by helicopter, we were taken to an aircraft carrier in the Gulf of Siam, and then deposited in Bangkok, rested there for a couple of days, then went to Laos, covered the collapse of the coalition government there, and the takeover by the Pathet Lao in Laos. We were then, we didn't have our visas renewed after that happened. So we had to leave. And that was their way of expelling all of us. But the, that transition was peaceful compared to what happened in Cambodia and Vietnam. There was relatively little violence in the actual taking over of the government, although Laos, as you probably know, was just the most heavily bombed place in the world. Because it was where the Ho Chi Minh Trail was, where North Vietnamese moved their men and supplies south to Vietnam. But I covered that and that was at its own intensity, went back to Bangkok to once again rest for a day or two, picked up a paper saw that Mrs. Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India had been election, had been convicted on election malpractice charges, which meant that she could be removed from office or rushed back to India, which was where I was ostensibly stationed all this time. And covered that huge crisis, which resulted in her declaring a political emergency 10 days later, and throwing all her political opponents probably and many others, 100,000 people, in prison and suspending all civil liberties, including freedom of the press. So suddenly, we were told that we had to submit all our stories to sensors. And I tried that once and the story was just torn to shreds. So I began smuggling my stories out of India, either finding someone who is leaving who could take it out, or else they cut off the main means of sending our stories was through a telex. They blocked the Telex machine. So we, or I started dictating my stories over the phone at one or two in the morning each day. And at that time, the phones in India were horrible. And so I would lose the line three or four times in the course of dictating a story. And the operators would always get the line back and I always felt operators were on my side. Because I was amazed that I could, I never lost a story in India. But eventually, I was kicked out for all these stories. There was one about the cult of personality that had developed around Mrs. Gandhi. Another where I found a politician had gone underground to avoid arrest and I was told to meet at a certain street corner was picked up, blindfolded, driven around for an hour before being taken to where this guy was; interviewed him,

and then was blindfolded again, driven around for another hour, dropped at another street corner. But this was a guy who the Indian government was trying to find and arrest. So those two stories, I think, in particular, but just the fact that I was not submitting my stories to sensors resulted in my being expelled and I was the fifth or sixth journalist to be expelled from India during that time, during the emergency. And so then I went onto Spain and covered the death of Franco [Francisco Franco]. So in that year, I'd covered five intense stories. And after that I was just wiped out. I then went back to Hong Kong, was stationed there, I still couldn't get into China. And I covered Mao's death from China. And at that point, I just unlike maybe every other journalist who was excited to have this big story, the death of Mao [Mao Zedong] I, I was exhausted and just felt I had to come back to this country and, and eventually quit after a year there. So I could do that.

CODDING: And that was your original, or your expected assignment was in China, right?

LESLIE: Right.

CODDING: Before Vietnam.

LESLIE: Right. So I did it for a year. But it, it was very frustrating to be in Hong Kong, because, you know, after all, this firsthand experience that I had had, I couldn't even be in the country that I was writing about. So I had to rely entirely on diplomats coming out of China. anyone who'd had some interesting experience there, but it was nothing like being there. And I didn't like that, particularly. And doing a lot of reading of reports by, from embassies. And it became a much drier exercise.

CODDING: So you sort of felt that every story you wrote, and every country sort of got less and less interesting for you?

LESLIE: No, I wouldn't say that. I mean, sort of India was just as intense as Vietnam. India was fabulous, it's an amazing country. And the book that I wrote about dams, a third of it was about the world's foremost anti-dam activist, a woman in India. I was eventually able to go back there in 2001. It's not, so it was just Hong Kong that was not as stimulating or exciting for me as all the other places I've been.

CODDING: Right, and to go back to Cambodia, I just had one more question about that experience. You mentioned in your book, that after the fall of Phnom Penh, is that how you pronounce it?

LESLIE: Yeah some people say Phnom Penh.

CODDING: Phnom Penh, you visited the last FANK, or F-A-N-K, which was the Khmer Republic defense army, you visited the last outpost there in Cambodia, or one of the last after the Khmer Rouge started taking over. And I was just wondering, to the people you talk to there, what did they have to say? Do you remember how they were feeling at that point?

LESLIE: Yeah. That was a remarkable place. This was a little salient of Cambodian territory that overlooked the Cambodian plain was, oh, I don't know, 1000-2000 feet over it. And the only way you could get to it was to go through Thailand and cross the Thai border. And there was an army base there, excuse me, there just had been no way for the Khmer Rouge to reach it up after they had taken over the rest of the country. The ties weren't gonna let them go through Thailand to get to it. But these guys, more or less lost their mind. They, they made no sense. They didn't know what they were doing there. There was no government giving them any instructions. The commander seemed bewildered. And it seemed surreal. And very sad. And eventually, the Khmer Rouge did get there. And I'm afraid I don't know. I think I remember learning that they were killed. But they just had no idea what they were doing or how to save themselves or what they could do. It was a very sad story.

CODDING: And seeing that firsthand. Do you feel like you agreed with President Ford's decision to abandon the Khmer Republic? Or did you feel some frustration with President Ford for doing so and leaving Cambodia?

LESLIE: I'm trying to remember what I thought. It seemed on the one hand, that there was no way that that government was going to survive. And I should say that one major misjudgment of mine was that I had no idea that the Khmer Rouge would be the genocidal force that they turned out to be. If I had understood that, I would have thought about it quite differently. And in fact, one of my biggest regrets really of my life, is that I had an interpreter in Cambodia. And at a certain point, the U.S. Embassy put out the word as the end was nearing that if we have any acquaintances who wanted to get out of the country that they would help them to get out. And I told that to my interpreter, and he had a family with quite a few kids. And he came to me the next day and said that he and his wife had decided to do that. And I said, Are you sure, because if you do that, you'll be in a place that won't be your own country, you will be isolated, it will be difficult. And he thought about that, and then changed his mind. Well, as a result of that he was killed by the Khmer Rouge. And that was the worst, probably the worst mistake I ever made in my life. But what what I remember about Ford's decision was when the pullout was made, it, there was, there was no acknowledgement of what was about to happen as a result. And there are lots of people in Phnom Penh who are just utterly shocked. And he didn't really speak about this is the end of American support for Cambodia. He just didn't talk about it. But it was clear, that's what he meant. And so it

was just a very sad, painful time, whether that could have been avoided? I don't think so.

CODDING: Yeah. Do you remember going back to Vietnam? How, when the American troops withdrew? Do you remember how the Vietnamese felt then?

LESLIE: I went back in, when was it, 1995, I think by which time the Vietnamese had fought a minor war with the Chinese, they fought to get the Khmer Rouge out of Cambodia, and more or less, control the country after that for a time. So this was three wars ago, and they'd won that war. So they didn't have any animosity towards Americans, or at least not the ones who I met. They were quite happy to meet us. It was remarkable. And that's, that's been true ever since. There are, I went back a second time when there was a reunion of journalists to cover the war that was first in Phnom Penh, and then in Saigon. And we went, one of the places we went to was the tunnels of Cu Chi, which is maybe an hour from Saigon, where the Vietcong had dug a vast network of tunnels and lived in them, and would occasionally come out and fight, go back in. And so they were, they would just, became a tourist attraction. And they displayed this to us and, and these were a bunch of journalists, some of were whom had post traumatic stress. And they set off something that sounded like artillery, that just scared some of the—, I wasn't particularly frightened. But some of the people there were very scared. And they seem to have done that on purpose. So there was a little bit of revenge there. But for the most part, no, the Vietnamese, I mean, the great irony is, of course, that Vietnam and has become a highly capitalistic society. And when we were there, in fact, it was the 35th anniversary of the, the fall of Saigon, what they call the liberation. And so we walked by a Levi's store in Saigon, where it was 35% off. And that, to me, is the ultimate irony here, they won this war fighting against the capitalists and capitalism won in the end. And I'm afraid that's true.

CODDING: And when you returned home, how did it feel?

LESLIE: Which, you mean and after I quit the paper?

CODDING: After you quit the paper after, I guess, your assignment in Hong Kong?

LESLIE: Yeah. Yeah, I think I talked about that. But it was very hard. I just did not know what to do with myself. I thought I would start writing magazine pieces that turned out to be much harder to do than I thought. And it was hard for me to figure out what I wanted to write about. And it took a, a long, long time. I mean, once I wrote this book, then I began to see that the environment was a really important issue. I'd always felt that but I didn't feel that I wanted to write about it. But by the late 90s, I thought, this

is what I've got to do. And and once I did that, then I be, I became quite engaged again. And have been ever since.

CODDING: What year did you come home? Like for good? After you quit?

LESLIE: '77 [1977]. So I spent a long time writing this book, writing occasional magazine pieces. And having a family. My, my wife had two kids by an earlier marriage. So I had an instant family. And then we had a daughter of our own, who is now in Italy, with her family, an Italian farmer. And that's she does, in some ways, a wonderful life, but in some ways, she's feeling isolated. But, in any case, I my life changed quite a bit after I came back here.

CODDING: How were you received by your family in LA?

LESLIE: Oh I mean, they well, my father died in '74 [1974], just before I went to India. My mother was happy to have me back. But there was still a pretty distant relationships. I mean, that was not a major attraction about going home.

CODDING: That makes sense. What was her opinion about your writings? Because I know she was a writer herself.

LESLIE: I think she was proud of it. There was a time when I came home once for a visit after I was in Vietnam, when I was still working for the LA Times and about to go somewhere else. And they put on a party for me, but it seemed more. And they invited Jerry Brown, who I think then was the attorney general, not yet governor of California, and he came. But it felt like it was more for them than for me, it, it didn't feel like a real, a party that I would particularly enjoy. There was a sense of, that they wanted to bask, I think, in my reflected glory. That was about all that I, I felt. I didn't get this, a sense of great pride or even interest in what I'd done for my mother. She was too involved in her, her own world.

CODDING: That makes sense. Did you feel you had a hard time connecting with people after the war?

LESLIE: I did. Because that was still such a big part of what was on my mind. And it took such a long time to, to shed that. I began a kind of spiritual search, actually. And I've needed to understand my own feelings much better than I did. I thought, as I think I mentioned, I got terribly depressed for a long time. And I needed to know why that was happening. And that took years of therapy. And I think I finally did, and that was successful, but it took a long, long time.

CODDING: And at what point did you meet Lesley, your wife? Was that after the whole spiritual search?

LESLIE: Oh no, that was in the midst of it. It was in '78 [1978]. And in fact, she had had a somewhat different, I don't know if search is quite the right word. But she had been in a car accident where she nearly died in '75 [1975]. And her heart stopped. And she had the experience, a death experience. And that really changed her life. And in fact, I think that was something that drew us together because we both had some sense of being close to death. But in some ways, she was a guide for me.

CODDING: Makes sense. And at what point did you sort of feel you had mostly healed? I mean, obviously, it's a nonlinear journey in terms of healing for more, but at what point did you feel like okay, I can start writing again about things that interest me.

LESLIE: Well, I never stopped doing that. I was always writing something if it wasn't this book it was magazine pieces. And then the book that I wrote on dams, which took four years to write, and that was very satisfying, exciting. One part where it was about three members of something called the World Commission on Dam's who were all people dealing with the social and environmental impacts of dams, which were enormous. There are, people don't realize, something like 100 million people have been displaced by dams, just people living in places that were, where they were pushed out by reservoirs. And then a much bigger number, maybe half a billion people were living downstream and lost things that they valued, that were no longer in the river of fish or plants that grew by the riverside. So this felt very important to me, it was not being written about. And so I was that book was in India, Southern Africa, and Australia. And that was enormously satisfying. I won a big award, it was very much worth writing. And I've been writing about water and dams ever since. And I'm about to plunge into another book about dams on the Klamath Basin, as I mentioned.

CODDING: And did you feel that the environmental issues that you now write about and are now interested in, did you always have an interest in those? Or did you sort of push it aside because you were writing about, you know, war coverings?

LESLIE: I didn't write about it, but I had a sense that it was important. I remember, one of the speakers at Yale, actually a speaker I brought to Yale to give a talk, who mentioned, you know, ecology is going to be the thing. And I, I, that was the first time I'd heard the word, I respected this guy, and he must be right. And he was absolutely right, as we all know, and more right than we could possibly wish. And so it was in the back of my mind, but I didn't have much awareness of it, until maybe the late '80s. Then I began to

read more and more, first about the ozone layer and the disappearance of that, and then about climate change. And about water, and I, I wrote a piece that really did change the course of my career, a Harper's Magazine cover story in 2000, about global water scarcity. And that took six months to write. And the more I learned about it, the more I realized that the, the center of every conflict over water, there seemed to be a dam. And that led to the book on dams, which are just magnets for conflict.

CODDING: What year did you write that book?

LESLIE: It was published in 2005. And since then, I've written I became a, a, what's called a contributing opinion writer for the LA Times where, for a long time, I wrote about an op-ed a month, almost always on environmental issues, occasionally on political ones, but they wanted me to focus on the environment. So that's what I did. I lived in the Bay Area until two years ago, and then we decided it was time to leave. The fires drove us out, basically. My wife has asthma, and being close to that much smoke for such a long period of time was not good. We also had built a new house that we put a huge amount of money into and we've started hearing that our neighbors were having their insurance being cancelled because we lived close to a potential fire area. And we knew that if that happened to us, we'd be in big trouble. So we sold the house and moved to Vermont, where we're delighted to be, and built another house, which we love even more than that one. And we're thrilled to be here.

CODDING: And you said you, your wife, Leslie, had children before and then you had one daughter together?

LESLIE: Right

CODDING: What are their names?

LESLIE: Tristan, he has lived the entire time that we were in California as well. And most of the time not far from us. 20 minutes away. But once we left, he realized that he didn't want to be there any longer too. So he had, he is in the process of moving to Rhode Island. He's just put a bid on a house in Rhode Island, and will probably be there quite soon. We hope he gets this house. Our daughter Katie lives in Ithaca. She and her husband are building a house in Rhode Island so they will be there eventually. And then Sarah who's in Italy, with her, now I guess a seven month old baby and her husband who was a Slowford farmer in Italy but they may move in a couple of years. They may move back here. We don't know yet. But they're all, I mean, they're getting closer and closer and then we've all shifted eastward, eastward. Tristan has three kids. One of them his daughter, Maxine, is in Southern California going to CalArts and is becoming a graphic artist. He's a photographer. So he can be almost

anywhere. His wife is a teacher, but she can do it remotely. So being in Rhode Island will be okay with her, but their, their three kids the one, Maxine, who I mentioned. Another, there's a daughter who decided to become, to go to St. Andrews for college, which was something that we hadn't even thought about, but she's having a wonderful time there. And the third one is Joe, who all his life has aspired to be a professional soccer player. When all this movement began to happen, he said, well, I'd like to go to Madrid, where there is a school where you go to school in the morning, and you play soccer in the afternoon, and it's affiliated with La Liga, the prestigious soccer league in Spain. And that's what he's done. And he's become a soccer star on their 15 and 16 year old team. So he may actually become a professional soccer player. But they've all spread eastward. So we're, except for Maxine, who is still in California.

CODDING: That's great. And have you told your children about your experiences in Vietnam, Cambodia, in India and Spain and China?

LESLIE: I don't know if I've ever actually talked with them about those experiences, but I think they've all read the mark. I mean, certainly Kristen, Katie and Sarah have, I don't know if the grandkids have?

CODDING: Well, before we wrap up, is there anything that you would like to talk about or something that you might have brought up, but you didn't get into that you would like to know?

LESLIE: Let me think for a moment. No, the main thing I, I touched on this a bit, there was a, our 50th Yale reunion was five years ago. And there was a panel that I co-moderated about the impact of the Vietnam War on our class. And that was a very emotional experience for me, which I did not quite expect. We each of us could speak for three or four minutes, and I found as I wrote down what I wanted to say, and as I read it, and I reached the point about the, the women who had been tortured with electricity, I had to stop and gather myself and it was very powerful. And no other member of our class had become a journalist in Vietnam, there were relatively few who became soldiers out of a class of 1000, I forget now, but I think the number is maybe 70, who even set foot in Vietnam and out of that, maybe 20, who actually became combat soldiers. And out of that, one out of 1000, who was killed, which speaks to the ability of, of Yalies to avoid serving in the war, and knowing how to avoid it. But there was a really gratifying response to what I had to say and it was, was very hard night. Yeah.

CODDING: That's amazing. And did you feel like your peers at Yale had a very different experience? You know, the ones who've served since you said many of them or most or any of them became a journalist in Vietnam?

LESLIE: Yeah. Certainly, it was quite different. They were all soldiers. Most of them hated what they were doing, hated the war. There was a classic book that came out in conjunction with the 50th reunion. So I was asked to write an essay, summarizing all these experiences, and they all had received a questionnaire, asking them what impact Vietnam had on them. So I read hundreds of these. And I mean, nobody had anything good to say about the war. And they could just describe the instances of corruption. They saw just the horror of it, the madness of it. So they didn't have much positive to take away from it. Whereas I was very fortunate that I did. Absolutely.

CODDING: Yeah. Sounds like Vietnam and Cambodia and all those other places were really incredible, enlightening experiences for you can't even imagine. Well, I think we have been talking for nearly two hours now. So I just wanted to say thank you so much for taking the time and talking to me. I am so happy I got to hear your story from you directly. And I hope you have a lovely rest of your day.

LESLIE: Oh, thank you. You too.