 William Cobb
Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

William Cobb

William Warren Cobb, Jr.

Interviewer

And what year were you born?

William Cobb

1949

Interviewer

And where did you grow up?

William Cobb

I was born in San Francisco on the Presidio. I was born into a military family; my father was a career Army officer and happened to be stationed in San Francisco at the time of my birth.

Interviewer

Where in Presidio?

William Cobb

Right at the base of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Interviewer

And did you grow up in Presidio?

William Cobb

No, I was only there for a month or so, and then he changed duty stations to Fort Hood and then about a year later came back to San Francisco. And so my sister was born in the same hospital that I was born in. And from there it

was off to several other duty stations in the United States and in Europe and in Asia.

Interviewer

So you grew up all over?

William Cobb

All over the world. Every couple of years my dad would come home with a set of orders and say, "Well, in one month we're going to pack up and go to this place." And so my sister and I, we'd always go to the map and try to find that place on the map, and off we'd go to some other part of the world.

Interviewer

Growing up, what were your ambitions or dreams? What did you think you were going to be when you got to draft age?

William Cobb

Well, I didn't think I would be drafted.

Interviewer

Why is that?

William Cobb

Well, because I was told from an early age, you know, you will go to college, you will go into the ROTC, you should follow the same footsteps as your father and become a career Army officer. So I wasn't really thinking about the draft. I wasn't thinking about much of anything, actually. I was just going through the motions of going to school. You know, in the military you live in a very tight-knit, very conservative kind of environment. So exposure to the problems or the issues that are facing the rest of the country don't really exist very much in the military.

Interviewer

What was your rank when you left Vietnam, by the way?

William Cobb

E-4. Specialist 4.

Interviewer

Tell us about how you did end up in the Army?

William Cobb

Well, in my senior year in high school, which was 1966-1967, my father was in Vietnam. He commanded an armored cavalry regiment as a full colonel. And through that year we corresponded by tape and by letter, and he found it increasingly curious that I wasn't mentioning where I'd applied to go to college. So when he came back to the States in the spring of 1967, as I was graduating, he said, "Bill, where'd you decide to go to college?" And I said, "Well, I haven't really thought about it. I think maybe I'll just take a year or two off. I've got a lot of traveling that I want to do." And his response was, "The hell you will. Don't you know there's a draft and a war on?" So since he was from Texas – he and my mom are from Texas – he'd been paying taxes all these years in Texas – he said, "You can get in-state tuition at any school in Texas. I want you to pick one out right now, and that's where you're going to go." And I had no idea where to go; I had no idea what to study. So I picked North Texas State in Denton, north of Dallas. I went there for one year, and I was miserable every day. I found myself uninterested in anything that I was studying. I was just not happy. So I quit after a year. And back then – this was before the lottery – so my draft classification went immediately from 2-S to 1-A, and the Army was very efficient in that regard; they got a hold of me very quickly and began the process of sending me to a physical and those sorts of things that you do before you go into the military. And what I decided to do at that point is rather than be drafted and take a chance of becoming a rifleman in Vietnam, I decided that I would turn around and join the military so I could pick what my MOS would be. I decided I wanted to go into aviation. I wanted to fly helicopters. And I passed all of the flight physicals except that one doctor discovered that I had a back injury when I was a kid falling out of a tree, and he said, "We can't put one of these expensive helicopters in the hands of somebody whose back might cramp up. So we're taking aviation away from you, but we're going to give you a choice of MOS, and we're going to reduce your enlistment to two years." So essentially I was a draftee at this point, but I could pick whatever MOS I wanted. So I picked military intelligence and then narrowed that down to interrogation, and then off I went to interrogation school in Fort Holabird in Baltimore.

Interviewer

Why military intelligence? Why interrogation?

William Cobb

Well, because I was very worried about having to be involved in combat. I didn't know how I would behave in combat; I didn't want to be shot at and I didn't want to shoot at anybody else. So military intelligence sounded like a good, safe job to have rather than being out in the field. So that's primarily the reason why I did it.

Interviewer

Your father's a military officer who's been in combat and in Vietnam. What was his opinion and how did that influence you?

William Cobb

Well, you're right, he'd been in three wars. He joined the military out of college just after Pearl Harbor, and he was a paratrooper behind Japanese lines in the Pacific. And then in Korea he was a commander up along the Yalu River when the Chinese came into the war. And he was also in some of the heaviest fighting in 1966, '67 north of Saigon, so he'd seen some of the worst of what war can offer. I think he really wanted me to stay out of Vietnam. I think having gone into interrogation – perhaps he had plans for me to go over and become part of an MI unit somewhere in Europe or to remain in the United States – but I don't think he really expected that Vietnam would be in my future.

Interviewer

Did he have an opinion about the war that he shared with you?

William Cobb

We rarely talked about the war. I do know that his opinion of the American mission with respect to World War II and Korea was different from how he felt about Vietnam. When he came back from Vietnam he brought with him a lot of the psychological damage that really is part of the territory of having commanded 7,000 men. Even some of his squadron commanders who were lieutenant colonels and full colonels when they came back were suffering greatly from PTSD. Even before the Tet Offensive of January 1968, there was an increasing questioning of why the United States was there. How would we know that we'd won the war? When would the war be over? And so forth. So he didn't talk about it very much, but I could tell before I went to Vietnam and after I came back – and really for the rest of his life – he died about four or five years ago of Stage 4 lung cancer, which I'm sure he got from having inhaled a lot of Agent Orange when he was in Vietnam in '66, '67 – but he talked about the damage that the war had done, and he talked about the people who suffered a lot from delayed stress and so forth. And I don't think he could ever really come up with a reason why the United States would spend so much time and spill so much blood in a tiny little country about the size of New Mexico half-way around the world. So I inferred that he felt about Vietnam much differently than he felt about Korea and World War II. But the thing about my dad is that even though he spent 35 years in the military and retired as a two-star general, he always took his uniform off at the end of the day. He was always just a civilian; he was just Dad at the end of the day, whereas a lot of military veterans, they bring the Army home with them. But my dad wasn't really like that, especially later in life. So I always regretted that we didn't have as many conversations about Vietnam. He and I traveled to Vietnam together in 1996 for a couple of weeks, and he shared a lot of stories about what happened, but I could never get him to actually say one way or the other whether

he thought the American mission in Vietnam was a good idea or not.

Interviewer

You got into military intelligence, but you didn't have to go to Vietnam. You volunteered for Vietnam?

William Cobb

That's right.

Interviewer

Why and how?

William Cobb

Well, it's a fairly personal issue. When I got out of interrogation school in the winter of '69, '70, I had lost my best friend in a car accident. And as a result of that I was mad at God, I was mad at the world, and I thought, "You know, maybe Vietnam is in my future. Maybe this is my war." I just felt like taking a risk, if that makes any sense. So I went down to the company clerk's office, and I said, "I understand you have a form that you can fill out to volunteer to go to Vietnam?" And he said, "If you're crazy enough to fill it out, I'll give it to you." So it was out of this sort of anger and anguish that I was feeling, sort of personally in my life, that I decided, "I'm just going to go to Vietnam and take my chances." So I filled out the paperwork, and within a couple of weeks I got orders to go to Vietnam. So they always give you a month or so off in order for you to say your goodbyes to your family. So my parents were then stationed in Germany, so I flew to Germany, spent a month with them. Had lots of questions about whether or not this is something I really want to do, and maybe I'd done something really stupid. My mother, to this very day, is upset with me for having done that because she had put her husband through three wars and now her son was crazy enough to volunteer to go to a war that she didn't have a strong opinion about herself. And she was worried that her luck had run out and that she might lose me somewhere in Indochina. So I said goodbye to them, I flew back to Oakland, and I got on an airplane a few days later. The next thing I knew, I was in Vietnam.

Interviewer

You were assigned to Saigon?

William Cobb

Yes, uh-huh. Interrogations in Vietnam – there are two levels of interrogation. There's the tactical level, which is the kind of interrogation that occurs just after a battle, and that's where prisoners are questioned for immediate sort of information like where did your unit go, how many weapons do they have, how many casualties did they suffer,

what are their plans for tomorrow? But when they find other prisoners or deserters in some cases, who have more long-range strategic information about long-range planning, those sorts of things, they will send them from the field down to this strategic interrogation unit in Saigon where the interrogations will sometimes last from two weeks to a month. And when I got to Vietnam I had no idea whether I was going into the field or going down to the city. And I was lucky enough to be sent to the city. So this would've been March of 1970. And I say "lucky" because by that point there really was virtually no war in Saigon any longer. You saw the effects of war with a lot of the refugees who were coming in from other parts of the country seeking safety and shelter and food and housing and so forth. But as far as people shooting at you or BOQs or other places where the military lived, there really was not very much danger at that point. So I was assigned to a unit called the Combined Military Interrogation Center – CMIC – and at that center, the South Vietnamese military worked on one side, and the Americans worked on the other side. And these were usually senior level North Vietnamese or Viet Cong officers or deserters, prisoners, who were sent there, who had a lot of information about specific issues. And I kind of gravitated towards a particular area of questioning that was endlessly fascinating for me, and I was able to then spend the next year doing interrogations with deserters and prisoners who had a lot of information about political training and about morale. Because the American military could never quite figure out how the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese could maintain such a high level of morale living in such terrible conditions out in the jungle when the American level of morale, by 1969 or 1970, had fallen through the floor. We talked a little bit about racial problems and drug problems and insubordination, and by this point most American men and women who were in the country, our favorite motto was, "Stay alive for 365." There was no sense of the purpose of the war. The only purpose of the war was to stay alive and get out of there with everything intact. But we could never figure out what is it that drove them. So I was able to spend most of my year with a lot of deserters and a number of people who were prisoners, talking with them about how they could endure such terrible circumstances out in the jungle week after month after year with that sense of patience. And so that's what I did for the year, is to interrogate and to write these interrogation reports about that.

Interviewer

What was your conclusion how they could do this?

William Cobb

In a nutshell, it was because there was a reason for them to fight the war. As one Vietnamese historian asked me when I went back there to give lectures in 1998 said, "Do you believe that the Americans have a sense of patience and mission to stick with a war for as long as it takes to win?" And I said, "Well, you know, the Americans have never really fought a long war –" up until 9/11 anyway. But I said, "I think that we probably could, but we certainly didn't have that idea about what the purpose of the war was in Vietnam." Whereas, for the National Liberation Front

and for the North Vietnamese, their sense of struggle against foreign governments and foreign military goes back 2,000 years, and, in many cases, Vietnamese grew up with a sense of a constant sense of struggle going back from the Chinese to the Mongols, to the French, to the Japanese, to the French again and to Americans. So the answer they gave me was, "In a way, we've always been at war." And this sense of military character is sort of built into the Vietnamese personality in a way that it's not in most Americans. So for you, you have to go through a heavy sense of indoctrination to be given the reason why you're going to Vietnam. Whereas, for most Vietnamese, the sense of getting rid of any sort of foreign power in our own country and restoring a sense of independence is a struggle that goes back two millennia. So that's the way that they could endure that. And for them, the sense of victory, the sense of how you know that you've won is not by winning battles; it's by surviving one day after another, after another. So from the very beginning, the Americans had a different sense about how do you measure success in Vietnam? What is a victory in Vietnam? And we measured success by body count, not by taking and holding territory. They measured success by simply surviving one more day and realizing that perhaps at some point the Americans would run out of patience, and the American people back here in the United States would demand that the government end the war and bring the men and women home.

Interviewer

Within that you had people that had surrendered or defected. Why would they do that?

William Cobb

Many of them did because they wanted to be reunited with their families. It is true that many of them succumb to some of the propaganda and leaflets where we said, you know, "If you come over to our side, as a Hoi Chanh," which is a deserter, "we will treat you well, and we'll reunite you with your family and probably send you someplace safe where you can be with your family." So there were a number of people who thought that they'd had enough of the fighting, and they came over. But most of them stuck with it for as long as was necessary.

Interviewer

And you're also learning the Vietnamese language also, aren't you?

William Cobb

Yes but not formally. Because, being a draftee, your military commitment is only two years. Language school in the military in Monterey, California is nearly a year. So do the math. The military's not going to send me to Fort Ord for half of my active duty commitment to learn the language of Vietnam. It was more efficient for them to send me to two months of interrogation school in Baltimore than send me to Vietnam and assign me a translator, an interpreter, when I got there. So they could get the intelligence information out of the prisoners or the deserters without having

to send me to language school for a year. So I picked up various phrases by being in Vietnam; my vocabulary probably one- or two-hundred words just as a way of getting around life in Saigon. But I used very little of it in the interrogations. In fact, I would say that a number of the people who were senior-level North Vietnamese officers who'd been captured or left officers were people who had studied outside of Vietnam and spoke several different languages, including English. So sometimes a portion of the interrogation would occur in the English language because they're pretty proficient in my own language.

Interviewer

So you're interrogating people who have been to war. Aside from the culture, what did you learn about regarding the psychological damage of being in the war?

William Cobb

Do you mean along the Americans or among the Vietnamese?

Interviewer

Both.

William Cobb

I found that when I got there, the more time I spent in interrogation sessions, the more I began to understand the Vietnamese perspective of the war. I refer to going to Vietnam as the worst best year of my life because as a 20-year-old and 21-year-old kid, my eyes were really opened for the first time. As a dependent in the United States Army growing up on military posts, I knew very little about what was going on in the rest of the world. It's a very confined and a very conservative environment there. I lived all these years in a very conservative, enclosed environment. Life on the military post is very different than living in civilian society. And one example I was going to give of that is that in the early 1960s I lived on Redstone Arsenal which is in Huntsville, Alabama at the time of the desegregation crisis in the public schools in northern Alabama. One day my mom took me off post to do a little clothes shopping, and there were marches in the streets, and the police were out. And I said to my mother, "What in the world is going on here?" And she said, "There's a whole crisis with regard to racial integration." And for me, I'd never known color my entire life because President Truman desegregated the military back in the late 1940s, so, for me, there were no racial issues. But that's just one example of how life is so much different in that environment. Well, in Vietnam, sitting there hour after hour, day after day with these men – mostly men – who were talking about why they were fighting for their country, my eyes began to open, and my mind began to open, and I began to wonder, “Why is it that the United States is here? Why is it that we've suffered so many casualties? What will mean success in Vietnam?” Having begun to study some about South Vietnamese politics and the South Vietnamese

government, I realized that the people who were in power in Saigon were every bit as corrupt as we were accusing the Communist Party of being in Ha Noi. So I began to go through this bit of a, kind of a conversion process in my own mind, which led me to – I still did my job every day, don't get me wrong about that – but in my mind and my heart, I began to wonder, “What is the purpose of this war, and why is it that the United States is here? And why is it that so much bloodshed is occurring even between Americans?” I mean, one of my first memories of being in Vietnam in the spring of 1970 was looking at that cover of the "Newsweek" magazine following the Kent State shootings when that young girl was kneeling over the body of somebody who'd been shot and killed and thought, “My God, what's going on?” I thought we were fighting the Communists, and I find out now that Americans were killing other Americans. And I saw the ravages of racial problems in Vietnam, insubordination of the drug problems that were occurring and that a lot of these drugs were being supplied by South Vietnamese to Americans who were getting American GIs hooked on heroin and other sorts of drugs, and they were just a mess when they came back. And it led me to really question the veracity of what the United States government was telling me about why we were there. Never questioning my patriotism or my love of country, but beginning to really question what it was that the government was telling me about the reasons why we were in Vietnam.

Interviewer

How do you interrogate somebody? How is it different from the motion picture notion of what an interrogation is? Tell us about that process.

William Cobb

Well, you learn as much as you can through biographical profiles that are done when they first arrive at the center, so you know a lot about their family; you know a lot about their history; you know a lot about what they've been doing. You portray yourself as their friend, that you want to help them, that you want to try to understand the war from their perspective and that you're going to do whatever you can to try to reunite them with their family. In other words, you try to gain their trust. Also, one thing that I did is to try to portray to them a sense of the fatalism of their circumstances. The more you cooperate the faster the interrogation will be over. And there's a sense of fatalism, it's like it doesn't really matter what you tell me because we're going to win the war eventually, so you may as well just go ahead and tell me the truth. So if you can gain their trust and appeal to that sense of fatalism, you'll find very often that they're quite cooperative. The other thing I'd mention about that is the stories that I've heard coming out of Abu Ghraib and the waterboarding in Guantanamo Bay and so forth, and many of these techniques have actually been defended by the former administration – I never saw anything like that occur in Vietnam. And whenever I did walk by an interrogation room where somebody was being slapped or shoved or put in a humiliating position or something, I would immediately report that person to the commanding officer, which often would get me in trouble because the person who was mistreating the prisoner outranked me and would come to me later in the day and

say, "What is it that you're doing? We're trying to win a war here." And I'd say, "Well, there's a certain thing called the Geneva Convention that dictates the proper treatment of prisoners. So if I see you do this, I'm going to report you." And by the way, it's not necessary to treat people that way in order to get them to cooperate. Just gain their trust. Get them treatment for the malaria that they have, buy them their favorite brand of cigarettes, get them a fresh baguette from the French bakery that's just down the street. If you can win them over by their trust, then you'll find that they're actually quite cooperative.

Interviewer

Do any particular interrogations come to mind and what you learned from them?

William Cobb

I think the ones that stand out the most were the ones whose lives reminded me most of my own; that they were sharing with me their own dreams for family and for education and for future and for being able to take care of their children. So it was the people who could transcend or break through the politics or the military issues. And actually, in some cases kind of turn the tables on me by saying, "Don't you want a safe and happy environment in which to bring up your kids? And don't you realize that as long as this war goes on that nobody is safe?" And all the Vietnamese want is for the fighting to stop. And it was those sorts of people who were not arguing with me, but the people who were talking about larger meta-level life issues were the ones to help me to sort of open my eyes and realize that I had some deep questions about why we were here. So I can't give you the names of any particular person but to characterize interrogations in which we had that kind of conversation, in which we were sort of looking into each other's hearts and talking about common desires and common futures and wanting a good education and safe environments and those sorts of things. So those were the ones that I remember really the most.

Interviewer

So you're changing through all this?

William Cobb

I am. In one way in which, I think, I changed the most was we lived in an old French hotel that had been converted into an MI living area – Military Intelligence quarters – surrounded by concertina wire, guarded by MPs. And after being in Vietnam three or four months, two or three of my friends and I decided that we wanted to experience Vietnamese life more. So we actually rented an apartment in a Vietnamese neighborhood right in the heart of the city – and no one said that we couldn't. I road my bicycle – I have a photograph of it – I road my bicycle to work every day I did my job. I just figured that what I wanted to do was I wanted to learn more about the Vietnamese, and living in this strictly military environment I found myself being affected more and more by this kind of anti-

Vietnamese sentiment. As you know, many American veterans came back to the States with some pretty negative feelings about, not only the war, but about Vietnamese people and about the country. And if you ever said to them, "Hey, would you ever think about going back to Vietnam?" they'd kind of look at you like you were crazy. And I didn't want this to happen to me, so I figured I could do my job, and I could live in a Vietnamese neighborhood, so we rented an apartment right in the middle of the city. And the kids would come over every day after work because we had the only apartment that had couches and beds, so they thought this was like a trampoline. And they would teach us words in Vietnamese, and we would photograph them – that's where I began to take up photography at the time. And the Vietnamese women would come over and teach us how to cook Vietnamese meals. And so when I left the country, I had fallen in love with the Vietnamese people. I'd fallen sort of in love with the war, but I didn't leave with the same kind of prejudices and the same sort of stereotypes. And I'm so happy; I feel so grateful that I decided to integrate myself more with the Vietnamese society rather than to alienate myself because I knew if I did that, I'd come back to the States with some pretty powerfully negative ideas about the Vietnamese. So, for the rest of the year, I lived in this Vietnamese neighborhood with two of my friends.

Interviewer

What did the Vietnamese think of the war?

William Cobb

They wanted the war to end. By 1970, 1971, most of the Vietnamese seemed to be less concerned about which side won the war and seemed to be more interested in just making the fighting stop. So whoever could end the war so that the streets would be safe, the places wouldn't be bombed, we could improve our infrastructure, improve our educational system and not have to send off our men and women into the military – on whatever side it happened to be – it seemed to be that they were becoming increasingly apolitical and more interested in just getting the war over with. And that's what I sensed more and more from them. There was never any animosity directed at me or the friends I knew when I was walking around on the streets of Saigon or walking through the parks, you know, taking pictures. I saw the terrible affects of internal refugees because the more that the cities became battlegrounds later in the war, the more of those families came to Saigon because they were looking for a place to live. They were looking for a job, they were looking for food, they were looking for medical care, and they weren't getting it in the cities that were being destroyed in the fighting, so they were coming to Saigon. And they were living in these rat-infested sorts of shacks. And I took a lot of pictures of them, and they were always very willing to pose for those photographs because they didn't see me as the enemy, they saw me as a person who'd been sent to Vietnam who was simply doing what he was told to do. And so there really was no animosity. In fact, when I went back in '96 and went back in '98, I was welcomed in every town and every city from the south to the north – from Saigon all the way up to Ha Noi, just as I was in the area of Saigon when I was there in 1970 and 1971. It's a strange phenomenon

that the Vietnamese have a special affection for Americans. They see the war as a horrible kind of interruption in what otherwise ought to be a very good relationship. Many Vietnamese are aware that the United States was born of an anti-colonial struggle against Great Britain, and many Vietnamese sort of see themselves going through the same kind of thing. Whether it was the Japanese or the French or even the Americans who were there; they didn't blame Americans for what the American government was doing, they just wanted the war to be over with so that we could be friends again. And many Vietnamese, of course, know that when Ho Chi Minh declared independence in 1945 after World War II that he lifted a portion of the Declaration of Independence verbatim and began his speech with those famous words. And many Vietnamese school kids say, "Isn't that just proof that Americans and Vietnamese ought to be friends, and we just need to get this war over with? So we hope, when it does end, we hope that you'll come back and visit us again." That's sort of the way they felt about it.

Interviewer

Saigon is a big city with American GIs and money and civilian contractors and news people. What did you think of how we were changing their culture aside from the war?

William Cobb

Nothing very positive, to be honest with you. Because I could see in the South Vietnamese government a lot of corruption; I could see the degree to which vice had taken over in various areas of Saigon; the degree to which prostitution and drug abuse was really strangling the city; that many Vietnamese and Americans were suffering from the American presence there. And I read the papers, I read about what happened when various oppositional political parties would want to run a candidate against the current government and find themselves having disappeared or being in prison or being accused of something that they'd never done. And I thought, "Why is it that we're fighting and dying to support a government which seems to be pretty darn corrupt?" But it was depressing for me to see the degree to which the brothels began to take over. The degree to which these young girls who were 12-, 14-, 18-years-old were coming from small towns, taking jobs in these bars and becoming prostitutes in order to support their families back in these small villages. And I thought the reason why this is happening is because the Americans are there. I also saw that the way that the economy was developing in South Vietnam is that we were turning a country that was one of the greatest exporters in the world into a country that was importing just about everything. And we weren't creating a middle class in the process of doing this; we were creating an aristocracy that had prostituted itself to the American military. So if you were a high-ranking official in the South Vietnam government during the South Vietnam military, then life was good. But I was wondering, “Where's the middle class? Where are the people who are struggling to form a life like the middle class in the United States?” So the longer I was there, the more I saw the degree to which the American presence there was stifling growth and progress. Not that I was an advocate at all at the way the war ended – and I regret to this day that the Communist Party still has

pretty much a death grip over – you know, it's a one-party system in Vietnam – but still, I didn't see the presence of the Americans during the '60s and '70s as having advanced the cause of democracy or middle class or a capitalist society really at all. I found the Americans being there as creating more dependence on the part of the Vietnamese. So the more money and the more time we spent, the more they were just relying on us to do everything for them.

Interviewer

You're in military intelligence. On the other side of the coin, there really was a big bad Communist effort somewhere out there really doing nasty things. You must have seen some of that. Can you address what kind of threat there was by Communism and totalitarianism?

William Cobb

Yes. The most evidence I saw, the threat that was posed by the Communist Party, was most apparent to me as I began to read about the post-war Vietnamese society and the mistakes that were made by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Because when the war ended in – well, it ended twice, didn't it? It ended in '73 when we signed the peace treaty, and then it ended again two years later when the North overwhelmed the South. But the mistakes that were made by the Ha Noi government were to try to turn Vietnamese society into some sort of modern Marxist state that turned its back on traditional Vietnamese culture and traditions. Within a four or five year period realized that that was a mistake by discouraging Vietnamese women from wearing the traditional áo dài dress. Like that's part of the past – we're not part of the past anymore, we're part of the future; traditional music, traditional dance, the subjects that are learned in school. I think that those were huge mistakes I think that were made. But since then, they've liberalized a lot more because in some cases they've had to, in some cases it's because they've realized that with the collapse of the Soviet Union that they need to incorporate more liberal economic policy, they need to give people more of an incentive by allowing more private enterprise. I can also tell you that by the '90s – and I've talked with a number of these people – that when the war ended, the party began to throw wholesale Catholic priests in prisons because they considered religion dangerous, and they considered the existence of Catholic parishes – which are all over Vietnam – to be a danger because they'd be spreading an anti-Communist message. And they would also then confiscate the entire parish – which often had a lot of land associated with it, it might have a big coffee plantation or something like that – they would take the land because the Communist Party needed to raise money, and they realized that real estate was the way to do that. And they'd throw the parish priests in jail because they were considered to be dangerous. They would limit the number of Catholic masses that could be said per week, or they'd shut entire churches down and not permit church services, which would then force the Church to go underground. And I've talked to priests, and I've talked to parishioners on my trips back there who said that on Sunday morning they'd have to hide their church clothes under the seat of their little Honda motorbike and travel off into the country where a group of people would get together to have a church service – it might be Roman Catholic,

or it might be something else – because they knew if they were caught with church clothes that means that they were Christian, and if they were Christian then they were, by definition, enemies of the state. But by '96 and '98 I saw that a lot of these parishes were being returned to the Church, and many of these Catholic priests were being freed from prisons, and there were no restrictions any longer on the number of church services that could occur because the Vietnamese government realized that the Church was not an enemy of the state and that they needed to give back to the Vietnamese more a sense of their traditions and their religions and so forth, and that was a way of building a healthier future for Vietnam, not by trying to take a lot of that away.

Interviewer

What was the feeling from these prisoners, especially that they had just arrived regarding communism and Ho Chi Minh? And then secondly, how did your friends that you hung around with feel about the whole Communist domino theory?

William Cobb

Many of them felt differently. By the time I got there Ho Chi Minh – he had died in September of '69, and I got there in March of 1970. Even though there was a lot of ambivalence about the war, there was a feeling – Ho Chi Minh wasn't seen in the same way that, say, Stalin was seen in the Soviet Union. He had a different kind of reputation. He had built an image of himself as more of an uncle, like Uncle Ho. More of a grandfather figure.

Interviewer

That's very Asian, isn't it?

William Cobb

It is very Asian.

Interviewer

According to the Vietnam people or the people you interrogated considered him Uncle Ho?

William Cobb

Yes. The people we interrogated, most of them had a very fond feeling about Ho Chi Minh, and they considered him more as a father or an uncle or a grandfather figure. It's as though Ho Chi Minh, even though he was the founder of the Indochina Communist Party – converted to communism way back after World War I – there was something about him that appeared as more like a family figure than somebody to be feared as part of the whole Vietnamese Communist Party apparatus. So he had built this kind of image of himself that was different from the way in which

people like Stalin and others were feared in other countries that were controlled by a one-party system. And many Vietnamese, of course, after 1975, when I went back, many of the people, they knew the story that Ho Chi Minh in his will said that he wanted to have his ashes spread throughout Vietnam so that he could be returned to the people, he could be returned to the country that he'd fought so long for independence for. And what happened? They built a mausoleum and that little man lies in a glass case to this very day because the Vietnamese Communist Party realizes that the value of Ho Chi Minh was not to do what he wanted in his own will, but to preserve his body so that he could be used as a tool for the advancement of the ideas of the Communist Party even to this very day. So if you go to Ha Noi right now, you can walk through that mausoleum and see that little man with that gray beard just sort of lying there in a glass box. So the Vietnamese, they know that. They see him as separate from the party. They see him as a man who sacrificed and struggled all of his life to restore independence for the Vietnamese. In fact, many of the people I interrogated and people I've come to know since I've gone back in the '90s would sort of separate Ho's nationalism from his communism. They very clearly see that there are two sides to the coin in a much different way than they would have viewed Mao or what would have viewed Lenin or would have viewed Stalin, where the political ideology dominates their personality. You know, theoretician that Mao was dominates who he was. But for Ho, the people saw him less as a Communist and more as a man who struggled from boyhood simply to restore independence and to get foreigners out of Vietnam. And that Ho would appeal to any country, including the United States. I mean, Ho wrote many letters to President Truman after World War II begging him to do something to try to prevent the French from coming back into Vietnam. All of these letters he wrote to Harry Truman were like, "We share a common heritage, and I'm a strong nationalist, and I'm involved in this anti-colonial struggle." And Ho could never understand why none of these letters were ever responded to. And the reason is because we were involved in this Cold War, and the only thing we could see about Ho was the Communist part of him; we couldn't see the nationalist part.

Interviewer

What do you think of the idea that we were obligated to back up an ally from World War II?

William Cobb

That's true. And I think that makes the point that Vietnam – and many of the people I interrogated would remind me of this – that Vietnam, for the United States was never really about Vietnam. Vietnam was always secondary to something else. It sort of seems like Vietnam dominated all of American society as we now look back on the 1960s, right? But Vietnam was just one small battle in the larger Cold War. And so many of the people I would talk to would say, "Why this obsession about a country when the most important area to you is Europe? And we know the reason why you backed the French after World War II is because you needed French cooperation in the Cold War because you're more worried about the Soviet Union, you weren't really worried about Vietnam." So I think that's very true.

Interviewer

The hot part of the Cold War?

William Cobb

Right.

Interviewer

Your observance in Saigon of the GI; you sound like you were a very thoughtful and introspective 20-year-old, and then there's all these other guys going to bars. What are you observing around you?

William Cobb

Well, I think what I learned early on when I got to Vietnam is that I saw Americans react to Vietnamese in a very negative way. And I primarily saw this among those members of the military who spent most of their tour out in the bush and would come to Vietnam on a three-day pass and get just as wasted as possible.

Interviewer

Into Saigon?

William Cobb

Into Saigon. They would come into Saigon on a three-day pass and just get as wasted as possible. And I got to the point where I didn't recognize them, and I didn't want to be like them. What I began to appreciate – and maybe some of this comes from the fact that I grew up living in other countries, so I was always taught, whether I was living on Okinawa or living in Austria or wherever it happened to be – my parents always encouraged me to get to know the society that we were living in, to learn a little bit of the language and to appreciate their history. So I think that really affected me when I got to Vietnam is that I wanted to get to know more about them. So I figured that the best way to do that was to embrace them rather than to turn my back on them. So I think it was partly my upbringing, it was partly my getting to know the Vietnamese that I was talking to in interrogation sessions. This sounds sort of weird, but it's like I was learning from them as I was talking to them. And it was also through the development of the love for black and white photography. There was really nothing to spend money on in Saigon except electronics equipment and camera equipment when you go into the PX. So I was buying a lot of lenses and camera bodies, and you could go to dark rooms out on Tan Son Nhut Air Force base, which is the main Air Force base near Saigon, and you could use dark rooms and the chemicals for free, and they were open 24-hours a day. So I fell in love with photography, which means I fell in love with the people because they were always the subjects of my photography. And then I'd go in at night, and I'd spend the entire night developing film. And that would send

me out the next day to take five more rolls of film. So the more I did that, I more I realized that the Vietnam wanted that relationship with me. So it was just sort of a natural development for me, rather than to see them through the lens of animosity, but rather to see them through the lens of love and trying to appreciate their culture. The other thing I'd say is one reason I did this is because the more I began to see – I'm not trying to be critical of the American military or the American government but just critical of the war – I was never convinced that we were playing a constructive role in Vietnam, that the longer I was there, the more I saw that we were playing a destructive role. So what I wanted to do for the months that I was there is to do as much as I could to try to repair the damage that was being done by the war.

Interviewer

You're seeing something terribly wrong in the way we're waging war as you grow up. Your father's a general. Tell us what your impressions are just militarily about what we were doing.

William Cobb

Well, growing up as an Army brat, you grew up in an environment where you didn't ask questions; you simply took on faith what you were told. And that's not a criticism of the military because the military can't function like a democracy. The military has to function on this sense of hierarchy, and when people are told, "Do this," you do that. So I never questioned why we had gone to war; I had never questioned what the tactics and the strategies had been; I'd never questioned the presence of the military; and I never questioned the fact that the United States military seemed to have a presence around the entire globe and why that was. I just accepted that that's the way it was supposed to be. It was sort of like the status quo is the way that things are supposed to be, you just don't question those traditions. So what was so freeing about being in Vietnam was that I began to permit myself to ask those questions and to make those comparisons and to wonder about how different would this war be if we actually had a popular democratically elected government in South Vietnam. In other words, what if it were more like a struggle that the American colonies went through back in the 18th century? Would that change the popularity of the war? Would that change my commitment to being willing to sacrifice myself for this cause? And it was a very freeing experience to be able to do that because my mind was now opening up as my eyes were opening up. And I found myself now living on my own, outside of the influence of my parents and the conservative military environment, feeling like I was born again, in a way. And that I liked. And it was not the kind of feeling where I was developing a hatred for my country. In fact, I was developing more of a love for my country. I was just becoming more skeptical about what certain members of the government were telling me was the purpose why we were in Vietnam. And so the more I thought about it, and the more I talked with other people like my roommates about it, the freer I felt to explore intellectually these questions that I'd never permitted myself to ask myself or to ask anybody about before.

Interviewer

When you saw Saigon fall on television, what did you think? What was your reaction?

William Cobb

Well, I was very angry. I should fill in a little bit, just for a second, that when I came back to the States in 1971, I got an early-out from the military because Richard Nixon was winding the war down. If you had five months or less of active duty remaining, you could choose to just get out of the military, to be separated from active duty, which is essentially like a discharge because I don't know of any Vietnam veterans who ever showed up at reserve meetings. So when I got back, I got an early-out. And my parents were living still in Germany, I hadn't seen them in a year and a half to two years. And I had all this money saved up from living in Saigon so I thought, “Well, I'm going to go over and visit them.” When I went to Germany my dad was the American commander of the American sector of West Berlin, back when the wall was up. He was the commandant of the American sector of Berlin. So I went back just as he was changing doughty stations. And I was just going to stay week or two, say hello, then come back to the States and deal with the issue that I needed to finish college somewhere. But I fell in love with Germany, and I spent the next year and a half just traveling around. I worked in Germany, and then I traveled everywhere in Western Europe. But the more I was there, the more I read about what was happening in the war, and the more critical I became of why the United States was there, and the angrier I became. What drove my anger was the number of people who were dying, the number of Americans and Vietnamese who were dying for what seemed to be a wasted cause. So I stayed there for a year and a half. I came back to the United States. It was very difficult for me to be in the States because I felt as though I had nobody really to talk to about the war. I couldn't really express myself. This nation was so polarized that you were either in favor of or you're opposed to; there was no gray area. There's no discourse about the war. I couldn't imagine that you could even teach a course on the Vietnam War at a university campus back then because it would be chaos the entire time. So I remember that psychologically I was having a very difficult time mostly because I was sick at heart that we continued to pour more money and more blood into what seemed to be a wasted cause. And at the end of the war I was living in Colorado, I was living in a ski resort on the western slope. It was the best decision I ever made for my mental health. I had a friend who lived in Steamboat Springs, and he said, "Come on out and live with me." He was a Marine veteran, actually; had spent four years in the Marines. And I was still grappling with having to finish college, and I was following day-to-day as the North Vietnamese tanks were getting closer and closer to Saigon – and I even had a map on my wall where I had little pushpins, and I would sort of follow the progress of the North Vietnamese – not that I was hoping that they would win, but what I was desperately praying for was an end to this. And I didn't so much care about who won – although that was pretty obvious by that point – I didn't care so much about who won, I just wanted the killing stopped. And so, by the time that final pushpin went in at the Presidential Palace in Saigon when the North Vietnamese tanks rolled in, I actually felt relief. Not because I was pleased with the way the war had worked out –

and I'm still displeased to this very day that the Communist Party does not invite any sort of oppositional politics, so I'd like to see that changed – but I felt relieved because all of the people that I knew, all of the people who died in that war, that there wasn't going to be any more killing as long as there wasn't any sort of bloodbath like what took place in Cambodia. And there was a little bit of that, and I even knew people who were put in re-education camps and were able to escape with their families, came to live in the United States or other places. But mostly I just felt relief because I knew that in the spring of '75 that most, if not all, of the death was going to stop and that Vietnamese sovereignty would be restored to the Vietnamese people. Even though I would prefer that it not be the Vietnamese Communist Party, at least I knew that foreign domination had ended in Vietnam. So those are two things I was pretty pleased about, actually, at the end of the war.

Interviewer

Were you also angry?

William Cobb

I was angry that the war had gone on so long, and I was angry because at the veterans that I knew, the people who suffered the physical and psychological damage from that war, that were… I won't say mistreated by American society – although I'm sure that a lot of that sort of spitting image did occur, I'm sure – but there was something worse than that. The damage of apathy. The damage that the country had turned its back on the people who were there is worse than spitting on at an airport. And the lack of facilities to treat PTSD and physical. It's that story from "Born on the Fourth of July," the way Ron Kovic was treated when he came back from Vietnam. That's one thing that made me really angry. And not that I expected a ticker-tape parade down Broadway or anything like that – I didn't really care that much about that – I just wanted an acknowledgment by the American people that these men and women had gone to do something that maybe they didn't completely agree with, but they'd done what their country had told them to do. And then what do they get when they come back? They're told to put their uniform away and put the medals away and pick up that relationship with their girlfriend and go back to the factory and forget that this ever happened. That's one thing that really made me angry because it's part of our history. How do we forget that?

Interviewer

How can we recognize them today?

William Cobb

We can do it by treating the current veterans as well as we can. I think we learn from history not by trying to turn back the clock and changing the way things had happened but by changing the way that we behave in the present.

So the fact that the GI Bill is much better than it was during the Vietnam period, the fact that the VA hospitals and the PTSD clinics and the welcome home parades for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan – there's a night and day difference between what happened in the '60s and '70s and the way that the men and women are treated today. So I would say the best thing that we can do for Vietnam veterans is to make sure that we never treat men and women like that again. And I think that there should be more resources directed towards whatever ills Vietnam veterans are still suffering in American society. And I know several veterans here in Utah who go to many sessions per week, still, all these years after the war.

Interviewer

You seem like you were such a composed young man. You really had it together. Didn't you do anything bad over there?

William Cobb

Well, I can tell you that before I went, when I got to Oakland – you spend a couple of days in Oakland before you go – and I got to the Oakland Army base, having flown over from Germany, and I was about a day early. And I handed my orders to the sergeant at the desk, and he looked at me, and he said, "Don't you realize that you've got one more day in the world before you report to this? Don't you want to go out and get drunk tonight and party all night long?" And I thought, "Well, okay, I'll do that." So I left the base, I went into Oakland, I got a hotel room, and I sat there and stared out at the street in Oakland pretty much the entire night. And the next morning when I woke up, I decided that I'd made a horrible mistake, and I couldn't go to Vietnam. So I went down to the railway station and put my duffel bag in one of the lockers, and I got on a bus to Los Angeles because I'd heard that law students at UCLA were doing draft counseling for people who were refusing to go – people who didn't want to run away to Canada, for example, but wanted to fight this legally. So there's a bad-boy story right there. I went all the way to LA – and that's a long trip – and I got to the UCLA campus late in the afternoon, and I saw the line forming outside the law school. And as I got closer to the entrance, I heard voices in my head that were people saying – like my parents – who would find out that I had refused to do what was the patriotic thing, and these voices were saying, "Oh, your son, he was the one who ran away, the one who didn't do his patriotic duty." And these voices got so loud in my head that by the time I got up to the door I decided I can't go through with it. So I took a taxi to LAX, flew back to San Francisco, and I reported that night to that same person. And this is a story that to this day my mother does not even know. My dad never knew that I did this. But if you're familiar with the writer Tim O'Brien who wrote a very good book called "The Things They Carried," he tells the story about nearly running away himself. And so the bad-boy in me was not having the courage to do what I thought was the right and moral thing, which was to say, "I can't just go to this war if I disagree with it." So I did what I was told to do rather than what I believed to be the right thing to do. And yes, there were a couple of times in Saigon when we went out with a lot of the guys and had a few beers

to drink.

Interviewer

That's a great story. You're Catholic?

William Cobb

No. I was for a little while. In fact, I grew up Army generic Protestant. If you've ever been on an Army base, there is a Catholic mass and a Jewish service, and then there's this protestant service. And so I grow up sort of non-denominational Protestant. When I got into high school I decided that I needed to have some religion, and my best friend was Roman Catholic, and he said, "Why don't you come talk to the priest?" And I did. And so then I was baptized into the Catholic Church. And it was that same fellow who was my best friend who died in a car accident, which caused me to renounce religion and to go down and fill out the paperwork to go to Vietnam. So that's how angry I was with everybody. I thought, “How could God allow for my best friend to die? What did he do? What kind of religion did I just join that would allow this 21-year-old guy to fall asleep at the wheel outside of Washington, D.C. and die?” So I was Catholic for a little while and then ever since then have been non-religious.

Interviewer

Did you observe the Buddhist priests and all that violence going on in Saigon? Or was that over in 1970?

William Cobb

Yes, the self-immolations had occurred in '63, '64, '65. I had read about them in the paper, but I thought that this was just very extreme behavior, people who were like mentally unbalanced. We don't know much about this story, but there were several American self-immolations beginning in 1965. There were at least eight men and women who burned themselves to death in this sort of Buddhist tradition. I never read about those stories. One of them occurred right outside of Robert McNamara's window at the Defense Department. But those stories never really made the paper. I only read about them years later when I decided to become a historian and to go to graduate school and study the Vietnam War. That's when more of those sorts of incidents that occurred during the war began to occur. But by 1970, '71, there really was not very much of that going on in Saigon at all. I didn't hear any of those stories.

Interviewer

To an eighth grade class, if you were to say in a statement: The Vietnam War was…?

William Cobb

The Vietnam War was a tragic mistake because the United States lost a sense of what it was for and became more obsessed about what it was against. So we lost an idea about what the traditional values of a democracy are and began to pay too much attention to what we were opposed to. So anti-communism became the mission there rather than the promotion of democracy. From an eighth grade class all the way through high school and into college, I don't think I would really change that message. I would also say that the Vietnam War revealed a mistake that we made…

The Vietnam War is not an indictment of the United States or American democracy, it just means that the United States needs to be informed, it needs to pay attention, it needs to engage in discourse and debate and shouldn't be afraid to challenge the notions of the American government. In fact, it's our patriotic duty to do that. So I would say to eighth graders, rather than being quiet, get out, be informed about what's going on in the world, and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Interviewer

Thank you so much.