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Celebrating USAID's 50th Anniversary: The Early Years of USAID

Written by Bette Cook

As the Agency reflects on its fifty years of service to this nation, I recall my personal history in development, which began over fifty years ago at the International Cooperation Administration, carried on through the creation of USAID in 1961, and continues today.



After serving a tour in Vietnam with USAID in the early stages of the war, Bette Cook toured the United States as part of an effort to inform Americans about the agency

At 19, I was told by the State Department that I was too young to be hired for overseas assignment. But, when I arrived in Tunisia with my husband Mel, who was assigned to the American Embassy military attaché's office, I was hired as Foreign Service staff. The American secretary at the United States Operations Mission, or "USOM," was required to leave the country quickly because of an indiscretion with a married local Embassy employee, and a replacement was needed immediately. I welcomed the opportunity to work after a few months of performing the functions of a diplomat's wife, which included assisting the

American ambassador and his wife at charity events, teas, lunches, receptions, and the major July 4th celebration.

Tunisia was newly independent from France (1956). The Tunisian people were educated and pro-Western, the American community was small and welcoming, and our home was beautifully situated on the beach near Carthage. Our weekends were filled with caravan trips to different beaches in the country, diggings in Carthage to find Roman mosaic tiles and other antiquities, baseball games between Embassy staff and Tunisians who learned the sport from U.S. troops during the war, and flying around the country in a small airplane piloted by my husband who had earned the country's first pilot license (Tunisia Aviator License #4; the first three licenses were honorary).

We frequently experienced hazardous landings while avoiding camels walking on the desert landing sites or World War II temporary metal airstrips. The agency's staff was small, dedicated, and managed a successful economic and technical assistance program, that began in 1957 until the country's economic advances led to graduation from USAID funding in 1994. I was not surprised that freedom-loving Tunisians would be the spark that ignited the Arab Spring in the

Middle East early this year, and I was especially pleased with the recent successful democratic elections in the country.

In 1963, I arrived in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). I had been in Saigon only a few months when Vietnam's President Diem was assassinated. The attack on the president's palace, which was near our home, lasted all day and night. During a lull in the shelling, General Stilwell sent a military escort to rescue my son and me from our house and take us to a military compound near the airport. We spent the night there in a blacked-out residence surrounded by American troops.

This was but the first of several near misses that would come to forever color our memories of our time in Vietnam. While watching a championship baseball game between the top teams of U.S. servicemen, two of the five stolen U.S. Air Force bombs planted by the Viet Cong detonated under the bleachers where we were sitting. Fortunately, the other three bombs, including one immediately under our seats, were duds and we received only minor injuries from falling debris. On another occasion, a bomb exploded inside a movie theater as we were stepping out of a taxi to go inside. Then, the swimming pool we frequented was bombed only minutes after we had left. This third miss caused me to seriously weigh the risks that our assignment was posing for our young son. Soon after, we were voluntarily evacuated to the United States.

This did not end my involvement with Vietnam, however. Back in Washington, I joined the newly-established Vietnam Bureau in 1965. As a member of the Congressional Affairs and Public Relations Division, I spent the next four years in Washington and traveling around the country explaining USAID's Vietnam programs to the Congress and the public. I served as an on-air spokesperson publicizing USAID's recruiting visits to cities across the country to enlist people in "The other war: The war against hunger, poverty, illiteracy, and disease."

Following the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, there were restrictions on economic activity. President Clinton normalized diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1995 and USAID opened an office there in 2000 to help accelerate Vietnam's transition to an open, market-based economy. Today Vietnam is one of the world's rapidly-reforming economies. The experiences and lessons from 1960s, particularly the importance of the civilian-military relationship, continue to inform our work today. Development is now recognized as a vital part of the "three Ds" of national security: defense, diplomacy, and development.

Bette Cook joined the International Cooperation Administration, a predecessor of USAID, and has served for 42 years both in the foreign service (in Tunisia and Vietnam) and the civil service (Vietnam, LAC, and LPA bureaus). She's known for her 15 years of managing the Congressional Budget Justification preparation and submission, and on the Hill for her continuous flow of information on the Agency's humanitarian assistance efforts. After three years of retirement, she rejoined the agency as a congressional liaison officer. Ms Cook lives in Alexandria, VA.