

Interview with Blaine Whipple, conducted by Daniel Sah, May 2001. The interview began with Daniel showing Mr. Whipple a clipping of an editorial he had written to the Hillsboro *Argus* in opposition to the US war in Vietnam. The beginning few words of the tape are missing.

Blaine Whipple: . . . the Vietnamese War. Their news editor was Don (I've forgotten his last name) and he was one of these super-patriots with extremely conservative political views. His opinion was that you shouldn't question anything the government might say. He felt that the war was desirable, and that's all that was necessary for him. I didn't share his views. My position was that there was no real reason for the US to be fighting a war in Vietnam. And as a consequence, I would write letters to the editor, and I would make speeches, and even go in to some of these newspapers and talk with them and suggest that they ought to be changing their positions. I never had any success with that with the Hillsboro *Argus*. The publisher today is the same one that it was then. I found him a very interesting man, because he and I are joint owners of a project at the coast. And he tells me, "Blaine, anything you want on this project, I'm all for you. But politically, no way." (laughs)

Daniel Sah: What was your first reaction when you found out about the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War?

BW: My initial reaction? Well, I guess it wasn't much different from the average American at that time. It's only as the war continued and I started reading more about the war and why we were in it and what our goals were . . . I also saw the TV coverage about how horrendous it was, the destruction of the people over there . . . It just got to the point where I personally could not justify doing that to the country of Vietnam. The original reason we were doing it was because they were communist, and our position was that all communism was bad. And my position was that in some parts of the world, communism may be the best form of government, and if people make that decision, that's their decision to make. It's not the US position to say communism is bad; you've decided to embrace communism, and therefore we'll go to war with you and we're going to win, and we're going to change your political thinking. We're going to get you to conform to what we think you should think. I didn't agree with that.

DS: What made you so against the war?

BW: Well, if you had an opportunity to see what we saw every night on television, you probably would have been against the war, too, because it was constant bombing. They would show the firefights between the communist troops and the American troops, the defoliating of their forests, and it also showed many of the Vietnamese that we supported brutally killing people, and it just became what was generally known as the "killing fields." I couldn't accept that; it was just beyond me. We had a man in Oregon at that time whose name was Wayne More, a US Senator, who was the #1 person in the US to argue against us being in that war. I started to pay very close attention to what he said and what his arguments were, and came to the conclusion that this was a man who really knew (because of his position on the Armed Forces Committee) and he had an

opportunity to get background information that the average person didn't have. . . I just became convinced after listening to Senator Morse in speech after speech after speech . . . As a matter of fact, I came to know him very well, and we became just like "that." I was a pall bearer at his funeral. He was the conscience of the Senate because he would stand up and speak his mind, regardless of where the chips might fall. He was just such a powerful man, and his logic was so strong, that I agreed with him.

DS: How did life in Hillsboro change from pre-war to during the war?

BW: Change? Well, I don't think it really changed very much. The changes were more political than they were in terms of any lifestyle. Hillsboro was considered to be a very conservative community, and most of the people were of the type who didn't think you should take any issue with the government. The government was always right. But there were some of us who felt that, if there was ever going to be a change in the way people thought about the war, we had to go out and talk about it. So I did that an awful lot. People would come and listen, and little by little, we started to change people's minds. We would point out things to them, and they would see these things with their own eyes on the TV coverage, and slowly but surely, even the people of Hillsboro started to think, "Maybe we're not doing the right thing there. Maybe we ought to change our policy and get out of Vietnam." The general leadership of the town did not feel that way, but more and more people did, and the younger people in the high school and some of the teachers at the Hillsboro High School . . .

DS: So you took the step to show the people a different perspective.

BW: It got to the point where 1966, there was a man by the name of Howard Morgan who ran for the US Senate in the Democratic primary, and I became the chairman of his committee. The reason I supported him is because his whole campaign was based around the idea of getting us out of the war in Vietnam. So that gave me an opportunity broaden my base beyond just this local area. Then I was going around the state talking.

DS: What was the public opinion of the war, and how did it change over time?

BW: Well, the public opinion was that we were doing the right thing. There was strong support initially for the Vietnam War. And it took a number of years before it changed. We didn't win that primary in 1966. Robert Duncan won the primary, and he was a hawk – all for the war. But in our Democratic primary, we got about 1/3 of the vote, and Mr. Duncan got about 2/3rds of the vote. His position in support of the war was what brought him that vote. As a matter of fact, Lyndon Johnson, who was the President, even made a statement against my candidate, Mr. Morgan. He called us "nervous Nellies" because we were fighting the continuation of this war. He was feeling that anybody who was against our government had to be stopped in some way. But as it turned out that fall, the Republican candidate who was also against the war, whose name was Mark Hatfield (the governor) . . . he won! So there were changes being felt throughout the state at large. The pro-war candidate lost in that election. In 1968, I was the chairman in Oregon for Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, who ran for President. His sole issue in that

campaign was, "Get us out of the war in Vietnam. We don't belong there. It is crippling our nation." And we won the Oregon primary in 1968. We won the primary on the issue of getting us out of the war in Vietnam. All of this writing and speaking and agitation that all of us were stirring up finally was having an impact. More people started to shift to our position. That year I was elected the Democratic National Committeeman of Oregon. The way you were elected to that position in those years was by the voters themselves. They had a choice. And I won big because my issue was, "no more war." So slowly but surely, things were changing.

DS: How was the economy based in Hillsboro during the war, and did it change in any way?

BW: Well, not immediately after the war. Later the economy changed significantly. Hillsboro used to be a backwater little town. Beaverton was where all the growth was, even though the county seat was out here in Hillsboro. Now Hillsboro's economy has grown significantly and rapidly, and it's going to continue to grow. And that's because of the computer and software and hardware businesses in this county.

DS: Were there any anti-war or pro-war demonstrations? And how did they affect you?

BW: Oh yes, there were lots of them. I was helping to organize the anti-war ones.

DS: Once people knew that certain young men were going to the war in Vietnam, how were these people treated?

BW: Well, it depends upon whether or not they went, or whether they defied the draft. A lot of them disappeared and went up to Canada. They said, "We're not going to fight in that war." So they migrated on up to Canada. A lot of young men would demonstrate against the war, and they would burn their draft cards. They would say they weren't going to go and give up their lives for that war in Vietnam. There were more, though, who felt that if the government drafted them, they went. And early in the war, there was very little question about all these young people who were drafted. As the war drug on, and as people saw the impact of it and saw how many of our own people were being killed, then they began to wonder, "For what? Why are we doing this? Why are we sending all our young people to fight in what war? What are we going to gain from it?" Little by little, a lot of young people said, "I'm not going to go. I will be a draft dodger, or I will be a conscientious objector, or I will go to jail before I will go to Vietnam to fight."

DS: Did you know any young men who openly resisted the draft?

BW: I did at that time, but I don't remember now what their names are. A lot of them had worked with me in the political campaigns.

DS: To what extent did young men enlist voluntarily?

BW: Not many enlisted voluntarily. As a matter of fact, a lot of young men even made a point to go to college because they could get deferments if they were in college. There were a lot of the people who had no other opportunity in front of them, a lot of black Americans enlisted. But the average educated white American wasn't rushing to enlist in that war. They had to be drafted.

DS: Why were a lot of African Americans . . .

BW: Because they didn't have the job opportunities, and a lot of them didn't have a great deal of education. It was the patriotic thing to do, so they did it.

DS: Were there any pro-war activities in Hillsboro at this time, maybe things like blood drives?

BW: You know, I don't remember anything of that nature, but there were certainly a lot of pro-war meetings at that time, people who supported the war, because they would organize in opposition to us. They wanted to make sure that there was a counterbalance out there, so that people could see that we weren't the spokesmen for what most people thought. They thought most people agreed with them that we were doing the right thing. So yes, they were organized for the war. They would write letters to the editor. There were probably more letters to the editor in support of the war than against it, at least early on.

DS: How were the vets treated when they returned, and what programs were set up for them?

BW: Well, you know, the press at the time said that the soldiers who returned at the time as the war was winding down were not treated very well. But I personally never saw anything like that. I personally never saw any soldier or sailor who was harassed or treated in a bad manner because he had fought in the war.

DS: Were there any programs that re-integrated them into society?

BW: Not like following other wars.

DS: Is there anything that I didn't ask that you wanted to tell me?

BW: It's been so long. Until you called, I hadn't thought about that war in a long time. Until you sent that FAX to me, I wasn't even sure which letter you were talking about. I know that letter had an impact, because I had a number of people clip it out and mail it to me and indicate that they were in full agreement with what I was trying to accomplish at that time. And that's what led me into the other political stuff that I did. But it wasn't easy in those early years to be a voice against the war, because you were against our government policy at that time.

DS: There was a lot of strong pro-government feeling.

BW: An awful lot of it. The *Oregonian* and most of the newspapers in the state supported the war. They would editorialize, and their newspaper coverage would highlight the need for us to continue to win that war. We'd already had the history of the French losing it, of course. You know, the French were running a war before we got into it, and there was some talk that President Kennedy, before he was killed, was considering withdrawing us from the war. But Lyndon Johnson had no similar ideas at all. And I knew John Kennedy, and I knew Lyndon Johnson. I was at the White House with both of them. I was in 1962 at the White House and I have pictures in my office. In '64, I was with Johnson in his Executive Office Building, and I went to dinner with him where they had the Marine Corps band. I knew these people personally. I was one of those people who also said that we ought to recognize Red China. I said this back in the 60s, and people just threw back their heads in horror. They called me a communist! They said, "How could you possibly recognize Red China?" Well, my position is that if you recognize somebody, it doesn't mean you approve of their government, but you acknowledge the fact that they exist. And if you're ever going to have an opportunity to influence how they perform, you've got to recognize them and work back and forth. You don't have to agree. And as a result of that, in 1978, President Carter sent me to China. This was even before we had diplomatic relations with China. And I was behind the "Bamboo Curtain" touring that country, meeting some of the key people, and then came back here and made speeches and wrote articles all around. So our people would have a little more open mind about the fact that one of these days we're going to recognize Red China. And we did recognize them during China's administration.

DS: Did you know anyone personally who was in the war?

BW: I don't know anyone who died. I have two sons, and one of them was too young. He was born in December, 1968, and the other was born in March, 1960, so he was much too young also. I served in the military for 4 years during the Korean War in the US Navy. It wasn't as if I was just anti-military. I enlisted.

DS: So what was different between the Korean War . . .

BW: North Korea invaded South Korea. But it was split after World War II. The North just decided to take it over. Essentially it was the US armed forces that fought the war. I have an older brother who served in Korea and another brother who served in World War II. We were all in the Navy, by the way. One of my close relatives signed the Declaration of Independence. He was the delegate from New Hampshire. You never read about it, but he was one of the main leaders of the Continental Congress. He was head of (several important committees), and he was a close confidante and advisor to George Washington, and he was also a general, and negotiated the end of the Battle of Saratoga, which was a turning point in the war. So I don't necessarily come from a pacifist family. My grandfather was in the Spanish-American War, and he enlisted in that war when he was over 40 years old! The average age was 20 in that war. I don't come to this from a pacifist point of view. It was just not right for this country to be destroying Vietnam because their government was communist.