The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

FREDERICK A. BECKER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is the 16th of November, 2004. This is an interview with Frederick A. Becker, that's B-E-C-K-E-R, you go by Rick, is that correct?

BECKER: Yes.

Q: This is being done on behalf of the Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. All right, well, Rick, let's kind of start at the beginning. Could you tell me when and where you were born and then we'll talk a bit about your parents.

BECKER: I was born in 1943 in St. Louis, Missouri, and lived there until I was nine years old. The family relocated to California, as so many other families did in the post-World War II period, and we settled in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Q: Okay. Well, let's start and tell me about the Becker side of the family, your father's side of the family, where they came from.

BECKER: My father was the first U.S.-born generation of Beckers. His parents, a Jewish family, emigrated from Poland. My grandfather was a great storyteller, who elaborated on his own stories. One could never tell which version was closest to the truth. He claimed he was conscripted into the czarist army for 25 years. He saw an opportunity to escape this sentence by bribing a border guard. Moving west, he settled in St. Louis where a relative had previously migrated.

Q: What sort of work or business was he in?

BECKER: My earliest recollection was that he ran a Jewish delicatessen in downtown St. Louis. He and my grandmother worked side-by-side behind the counter. When my grandfather first arrived in St. Louis, he had gone to work in the then-thriving shoe manufacturing industry, putting in 12-14 hour days and studying English at night. During the Depression he ran an ice cream shop, where my father and his sister claimed they ate up most of the profits. When the family moved to California in 1952 my grandfather followed and opened up a restaurant in San Francisco. He was a delicatesseneer, a restaurateur if you will. His San Francisco restaurant's claim to fame was that it was a favorite of the jazz musicians who played the Black Hawk night club down the street. The Black Hawk was a famous jazz spot in San Francisco during the 40's and 50's. So artists like Cal Tjader, Dave Brubeck, Stan Getz, Louis Bellson, would pop in for a meal after their last set, around midnight. It was past my bedtime, so I never had the chance to meet these celebrities.

Q: Where did his wife come from, your grandmother?

BECKER: They came from the same Polish town, called Radom, which I'm told was predominantly Jewish. Although my grandparents and their immediate family immigrated to the States before World War I, most of their relatives stayed in Europe and eventually became victims of the Holocaust. Pockets of Beckers settled in Montreal, Canada and South Africa. I never had any contact with them, but this is all part of my grandfather's history of his own family.

Q: How about your father, where did he grow up?

BECKER: My father grew up in St. Louis. He was the first college educated member of his family. He first went to the University of Missouri, where he met my mother, and later attended law school at Washington University in St. Louis. When World War II broke out, he made the rounds of the armed services seeking to join up, but was deemed medically unable to serve. During the war he worked as a lawyer for Curtiss-Wright, an aircraft company with government contracts. The contracts terminated after the war ended, and my father then went to work as a manager in his father-in-law's clothing business. He resumed the practice of law later in life, after we relocated to California.

Q: Well, now, on your mother's side, where did her family come from?

BECKER: Her family came from the Ukraine, then also part of the Russian empire. They too had their tales. My maternal grandparents knew each other as youths and immigrated to the States prior to World War I. They settled initially in New York City, where my mother was born. My maternal grandmother was one of 10 children and my paternal grandmother was one of seven children, so I have a large extended family.

Q: Oh boy.

BECKER: Most of my maternal grandparents' relatives eventually settled in St. Louis. My grandfather told tales of having been trained as a watchmaker, but as a youth in Russia turned to anarchism. He apparently got into several scrapes because of bombs he said he made about the time of the 1905 Revolution. Of course, when he came to the United States, he had the qualities that made him a moderately successful capitalist.

Q: What sort of business was he in?

BECKER: At the time I was born, he owned and operated a woman's sportswear factory in St. Louis, manufacturing women's suits and dresses. My father worked for his company for a time.

Q: How did your mother and father meet?

BECKER: They met at the University of Missouri, where they were both studying. She also was the first college educated member on her side of the family. She transferred to Washington University in St. Louis to study social work, and my father followed. They had an extended engagement by today's standards, six or seven years, before they married in 1940.

Q: Good God.

Q: How Jewish was your family? I mean by the time they got down to your immediate family.

BECKER: They observed all the holidays, attended Sabbath services every Friday night, were socially active in their synagogue, and insisted that I have a "proper" Jewish education. However, as members of the conservative branch of Judaism, they did not keep kosher at home and the family's Judaism was probably more cultural and customary than religious. Neither spoke Yiddish, as did all my grandparents.

Q: How far did that penetrate down to you? Did you have any brothers or sisters?

BECKER: I have a sister; she's a couple of years younger than I am. As far as I was concerned, religion didn't penetrate very far. I opted out right after I was Bar Mitzvah at the age of 13 and have not had second thoughts. My sister, however, never lost her Jewish bearings, which actually intensified after college. She married twice, both times to non-Jews, but has remained very active in her synagogue throughout her adult life. She lives in Northern California.

Q: Well, then, you were about nine years or so when you moved?

BECKER: Yes.

Q: Northern California, you mean San Francisco?

BECKER: On the San Francisco Peninsula, south of the City. I believe my father was attracted to California as a land of opportunity and as a social antithesis to the life he led in the very conservative Midwestern city where he was raised. My uncle, my mother's brother, had served in the Army in the Pacific, where he worked on the early development of radar for U.S. warplanes. Returning from the war, he stayed in California, attended graduate school at Stanford, and wrote glowingly about economic opportunity in the Golden State. My father was apparently captivated by this vision. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life in his father-in-law's business. He wanted to get back to the practice of law. He'd been admitted to the bar in Missouri, but circumstances had forced him to put the practice of law on hold. The family migrated to California in bits and pieces. Both sets of grandparents followed us out. My father's sister, husband and son joined us from Chicago a couple of years later.

Q: What was the name of the locality where you settled?

BECKER: We lived in Palo Alto for a short time, later Atherton and Millbrae - all south of San Francisco. I recall we lived in the same house in Atherton for seven years until the 11th grade. For me, California was an obvious contrast to Missouri from the beginning. Even at age 9, I noticed its multi-cultural, multi-racial composition. Missouri was a racially segregated state until 1955, and I never encountered a black person until I moved to California. The St. Louis suburb where I grew up, University City, was heavily Jewish, and I recall most of my friends there were Jewish. I still remember my first day of school in Palo Alto. My mother was escorting me to school, and I noticed a black girl about my age across the street walking to school with her mom. My mom and I had a quick exchange. I asked, "Do I have to go to school with her?" My mother in no uncertain terms said, "Yes, you will." That very day I brought my new best friend home from school, a Chinese or Korean boy, I'm not sure which. Previously I had never seen an Asian, and blacks only at a distance. It was an introduction to a very different social milieu in California. Even though I left California after completing my education to pursue work opportunities, California made an indelible impact on my upbringing and outlook. I'm planning on moving back within the next year.

Q: Tell me, in the first place at home, what was sort of the family atmosphere? Did you sit around the table and discuss events or read at home, how did that work?

BECKER: We had a lot of books around, and my parents and grandparents had a high regard for education and the arts. Both my folks were very active in school affairs as I recall. Although my family was not wealthy, we went to museums and concerts. We took vacations that had educational as well as recreational valuChicago, Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri, and Lassen Volcanic Park in northern California. St. Louis had a summer open-air municipal opera season, offering Broadway shows on tour. We saw a lot of them on 2nd and 3rd runs. I remember at the age of five or six going with my parents to see the bright lights and hear the music. We continued this when we moved to Northern California. San Francisco has an outdoor theater area called Sterns Grove, which offers opera, shows and concerts. It was a regular part of our cultural diet. My father had played the violin through college, and my mother was a pianist. It was assumed that my sister and I would take up some musical instrument. I found I had minimal talent. I took up the violin because one was around the house, gave it up after a year, and picked up the trumpet. I moved on to the French horn in high school. My sister played the cello for a while. I recollect it was much bigger than she was. Music was always there.

Q: What about reading? Do you recall any books, what kind of books were you reading?

BECKER: As a young boy, I was basically shy and found great satisfaction in books. I think I read all the children's classics ever written. I also recall several books in particular we had around the house. One was a gift from somebody, entitled Nature's Ways, with full color plates and descriptions of various strange species of animal and plant life. I'd go through it again and again. I still have that book. Also, we had a 1933 youth edition of Collier's Encyclopedia. The facts may have been dated, but the volumes were interspersed with Greek myths, tales of medieval chivalry and historical vignettes that captured the imagination. I devoured history books on the lives of heroes of the westward expansion - Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, Kit Carson, Wild Bill Cody, Geronimo and Sitting Bull. I was also into dinosaurs and collected sets of toy soldiers, then made of lead, from major historic battles. I'm not sure where my interest in international affairs got sparked. For a long while I wanted to be a paleontologist.

Q: Where did your family fall politically?

BECKER: I don't recall early on that we discussed politics a lot. We discussed baseball a lot more at the table, but we did talk about many issues usually relating to taste, whether food or books or something like that. I don't recall specifically how my political orientation evolved. I do remember in the fourth grade, in 1952, the school tried to engage the students in the national election campaiga kind of civics exercise. The student body was quite divided between presidential candidates Eisenhower and Stevenson, and I found myself very active on the Stevenson side of the house. Why, I don't know. I remember reasoning that a soldier would make a poor president. I suspect my choice was tolerated by my parents, who were socially quite conservative and leaned toward the Republicans. My mother was a professional social worker. When I was born - my sister came along a couple of years later - my mother dropped out of the work force and only picked her profession again when we reached adolescence. She was an at-home mom during our childhood. My father was a lawyer and worked in the business world. He always held government at arm's length, although much of his legal career involved corporate contracts with the U.S. military. During my teens, religion became a point of contention between us. I guess I earned my badge of independence by arguing politics and religion with my father. What religion was for my father, education was for me. When my younger daughter entered her teens, many years later of course, she used to push my button whenever she said she wasn't going to college. She knew that would touch a raw nerve. I probably didn't fully connect the generational dots until years later. I pushed my father's button on religion pretty hard, but most of our exchanges on politics were pretty civilized. I still have a fairly vivid recollection of the family viewing the Army-McCarthy hearings on TV in 1954. Although I don't recall the precise context and probably did not grasp the critical issues at hand, I did note that my otherwise conservative parents were worried to the extent that McCarthy's Middle American anti-communism also hinted at Jewish responsibility for America's ills.

Q: Did international affairs come in across your radar at all? We're talking about around high school time.

BECKER: I was in high school from '57 to '61. Like all U.S. school children in the '50s, I remember the "duck and cover" drills and bomb shelter programs that foolishly sought to give us a sense of security from nuclear attack. The effects were quite the opposite in practice.

Q: Duck and cover, yes.

BECKER: I wondered why and what was the point of all of this. If nuclear weapons had such great destructive power, how we would survive a full-scale nuclear exchange? I recalled the Eisenhower administration's strategic centerpiece, expounded by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, which sought to build up our nuclear arsenal as if to announce we were prepared to employ nuclear weapons against any and all conceivable threats, even conventional ones. Of course, we didn't use, or even threaten to use, these weapons when confronted with Soviet repression in Poland and Hungary in 1956. Our supposed nuclear threat was not a credible form of containing communism.

I remember picking up Kissinger's seminal work Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy a couple of years after its publication in 1957. I was very much taken with his analysis of the so-called "balance of terror," an increasingly common phrase in those days. Kissinger, as well as some of his contemporaries, argued that the quest for nuclear superiority and a "first-strike capacity," the foundation of Eisenhower's strategy, was politically destabilizing. The relative balance between the U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals could produce greater stability, assuming there was also predictability on both sides. The book also opened the door to the Kennedy administration's adoption of a more credible "flexible response" military strategy. My early readings and understanding of international affairs were molded by the realpolitik school of international politics, including the works of Kissinger, Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan and others. Foreign policy and the dynamics of our containment policy became one of my great intellectual passions in college. One of the greatest influences on my professional life, one that pointed me toward a career rather than just a love for history for its own sake, was diplomatic historian Raymond Sontag at the University of California at Berkeley. He was a compiler of the Nazi war documents and was one of the great raconteurs on the scope of European diplomatic history. He really brought to life diplomatic personalities like Metternich, Disraeli, Bismarck and Clemenceau, and the forces behind the German and Italian independence movements, off the dry pages of the textbooks. I sensed that I wanted to be a part of the diplomatic world, but my orientation at that time was much more toward academia.

Q: Now did Israel come into your orbit coming from a Jewish family and all, I mean over this period there were all sorts of crises dealing with Israel.

BECKER: I was aware before high school of the 1956 Suez crisis, in which the United States had supported Egypt in blocking Britain and France from reimposing their control over the Suez Canal. The U.S. had lined up against Israel in that confrontation. My father was mildly anti-Zionist, as I recall. He did not share the Zionist conviction that Israel was the destiny, the future home and the focal point for Jewish life. My parents and, I presume, my grandparents considered that as Jews they enjoyed the most ample protection of human rights in the United States. Of course, Israel during its first couple of decades of existence was pretty strife-ridden and very insecure. For my parents support for Israel was a worthy, if not essential, foreign policy goal for the U.S., but they fell well short of accepting the Zionist principle of unswerving, uncritical support for the Jewish state and its policies. As one of the very few international crises in which the U.S. did not support Israel, Suez no doubt anguished most U.S. Jews, but I don't recall it changing my family's lukewarm attitude toward Zionism.

Q: Did Latin America, which turned out to be the area you ended up dealing with most, did that cross your mind at all?

BECKER: Not at all. During the years I grew up in California, the Latino/Hispanic, and more specifically the Mexican, influence was not that visible. California boasted Spanish place names, and the school history books did treat the Spanish colonial experience after a fashion, but a living, identifiable Latino culture was not an obvious feature in Northern California where I grew up. There were very few Latinos that lived in our community or went to my schools, and those prominent in politics, business or the arts were rather rare. The Latinos, like Afro-Americans in many respects, were a marginal caste. I didn't know any personally until I got to college. Latin America was very far from my intellectual interest, which was Europe and Soviet affairs - countries where my grandparents had come from. Moreover, the big strategic issues that dominated the headlines at that time did not involve Latin America.

Q: What about when you were in both elementary and high school, what subjects were you good at and what were you bad at?

BECKER: I was bad at handwriting.

Q: Thank God for the computer, right?

BECKER: Yes, I couldn't wait for the development of the computer to save myself. I was a good student but rather shy. My report cards always said, "The kid's got a lot to contribute, but he's very quiet and could participate more." I won a spelling bee in the fourth grade, which probably shocked my parents because I was pretty withdrawn as a child. I had a close circle of friends, but by no means was popular or outgoing. I focused on my studies, and I was a straight-A student all through high school. I think my sister was very much the same way. I was good at all subjects, except perhaps art and music where my desire was limited by my lack of ability. I thought I was particularly strong in the sciences and math until I had my comeuppance as a freshman in college. I ended up changing my major from biochemistry to history.

Q: Wise choice.

BECKER: It was that C in chemistry and the D in calculus.

Q: Well, in high school did you have extracurricular activities, get involved in those, too?

BECKER: I did to a certain degree. I went to four different high schools. It was a pretty disruptive period. We moved twice, and a new high school opened up, so there was continual movement. The ability to participate in extracurricular activities; your acceptance as part of a group, an organized group, was always uncertain. I went out for track my freshman year, but I was cold-blooded and had some lingering effects of childhood asthma that affected my conditioning. When training began in February or March, I refused the coach's order to take off my sweats and get serious. I walked off the team without apologizing and never came back. I was fairly active in some of the more intellectual extra-curriculars in high school, such as theater and music. I tried out for the basketball team as a junior in high school. I was very tall for my age in junior high, where I went out for basketball and track. Eventually other kids started growing and passed me by, and by high school I was too small and slow for interscholastic sports. I did enjoy intramurals, however, where I found I was surprisingly aggressive on the basketball court. When I was a senior, I collided with another player and literally destroyed my left knee. This kept me out of PE and ROTC in college, and I remained out of sports generally for 15 years after that.

Q: You graduated from high school in what year?

BECKER: '61.

Q: Did the Kennedy-Nixon election engage you, it engaged many young people.

BECKER: It did very much. The presidential race engaged a lot of us because it was so tightly contested and because it presented a clear choice. It was of course the first presidential election that was televised in a serious way, particularly the debates, which were critical to Kennedy's victory. Kennedy's image was that of an internationalist, somebody who had a vision. Nixon, however, seemed a discredited holdover of an administration that did not meet the challenges of the '50s, especially in the international realm. Moreover, Nixon's shabby campaign tactics as he rose to prominence in California were abhorrent to me. From my fourth grade political awakening as a Stevenson supporter, I became a lifelong Democrat, a lifelong liberal Democrat at that.

Q: In '61 you went to college. Where did you go?

BECKER: I was fortunate to get a full academic scholarship to Washington University in St. Louis, where my parents had gone. I had some relatives there, but I did not have a very happy freshman year. I found myself in the wrong major. My love of playing bridge became a consuming passion. Playing it every waking hour earned me a few master points but nearly blew my grade point average. I chalked the year up to personal growth and transferred in my sophomore year to the University of California in Berkeley, where I had a new start and a new major.

Q: Did you find when you were in St. Louis, Missouri, did you find you were having been born there at all, was this almost a strange country when you went back after your California experience?

BECKER: It was. I found a lot of truth in what my father had said about St. Louis, or Midwestern, society that had led him to move the family to California years earlier. Compared with the California I knew, Midwestern society seemed stultified and stratified. Your bloodlines seemed much more important than your merit or ambitions. There was a clear dividing line at Washington University between "town and gown." Those of us who lived in the dormitories were all out-of-townies; the rest of the student population was from the St. Louis metropolitan area. There was little social contact between the two groups. Despite some desultory efforts by my relatives to bring me into their social circles, I found myself hanging out with my dorm-mates. My roommate was an architecture student from rural Missouri. We didn't have that much in common, so somehow I gravitated to a group of Third World students, mainly Tunisians as I recall, who were avid soccer players. After the games the crowd would socialize together, or climb into a car headed for East St. Louis, Belleville, Alton, or some other "sin city" in Illinois to hang out in blues joints. At age 18 we couldn't legally drink, but we sure could listen. I discovered classical blues. Most of the clubs featured black musicians, no doubt making their way up the Mississippi River from the South to northern cities where they sought fame, fortune and tolerance. The Illinois towns were a way-station on the road to success for a number of them. There were some pretty hot acts as I recall. Maybe B.B. King was one of them, but certainly a number of his contemporaries passed through there and we had the opportunity to hear and enjoy them. This was a cultural awakening for me.

Q: Did you find that in Missouri did being Jewish make a difference or not. In some places it does, in some places it doesn't.

BECKER: I actually grew up in a disproportionately Jewish suburb of St. Louis. My freshman year at college was a bit artificial, and being Jewish was something one accepted, or sublimated in my case. It made no impression on me, though I tried to avoid getting wrapped up in my local relatives' religious rituals. I was always conscious of not wishing to confront or actively disappoint my grandparents because of my lack of religious faith. For years my parents would claim they had failed for not having imbued me with their faitthey certainly tried hard enough in my view, but the inoculation simply didn't take and I never felt religion was relevant to my life.

Q: Well, did you run across the thing of your parents or grandparents getting kind of making sure that you were dating nice Jewish girls and that sort of thing?

BECKER: There was some of that. Even in California there were Jewish communities, centered on the synagogue, and I suppose that many of my closest friends in school were Jewish. On the other hand, some of my first loves were WASPa shortstop in the fourth grade, and an orchestra percussionist in my first year of high school.

Q: It was more the occupation.

BECKER: Perhaps. When I had dates at all, they were more likely to be with non-Jews than Jews. Given society's religious breakdown, that's not unusual.

Q: I know it's interesting, when I've interviewed people who come from a Greek background, they may have played around, but almost all of them ended up with nice Greek wives.

BECKER: The irony- the real irony - is that my wife comes from a Jewish home. I met my wife Peggy - we've been married almost 38 years -when I was a first-year grad student and she was a freshman in college. The question of Judaism was never a major issue or a bond for uit was more an accident that produced a sigh of relief by my parents and her parents. Peggy's parents probably thought I was a commie from Berkeley anyway who hung out with motorcyclists and pot smokers. I was none of those. What ultimately won my in-laws over was the belief that their daughter was marrying a professional-in-traininalmost a lawyer or a doctor.

Q: Did she play baseball or was a drummer?

BECKER: No she didn't. We undoubtedly avoided a lot of family grief just by the fact that we were Jewish, but we opted out to the extent possible from the Jewishness of both sides of our family.

Q: When you came back, this would be what '62 or so?

BECKER: To California, yes.

Q: To the University of California, I mean, talk about Berkeley at that time, what was it like?

BECKER: I was waiting to find myself or define myself politically in a way that I hadn't before. Every issue under the sun was present in microcosm on the Berkeley campus. National political issues were quickly translated into local political activism by an aware student body and a tolerant organizing atmosphere on campus. Students were coming back with tales of participating in the Mississippi freedom rides. As a matter of fact, my father-in-law, my future wife's father, had been very active in equal opportunity and civil rights activities through his civic associations at a time when Jews and blacks forged a logical working alliance based on their shared experiences as oppressed groups. He was a small businessman, and I was immersed in the student activism on issues of civil rights. When the Diem regime in Vietnam fell in 1963, it was an awakening for many young people. One of the first Vietnam teach-ins took place on the Berkeley campus, and the reality of what was going on in Southeast Asia was brought to the fore. Groups like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were especially active in Berkeley. It appeared to many students that the Kennedy administration, which had come into office with the promise of progressive reform, was being tainted or pulled along by old-style political manipulations. I was involved marginally in civil rights activities in my spare time, but I gravitated more and more toward the anti-war movement. I also took part in the Free Speech Movement. It was a local issue that gained nationwide attention because it reflected the nation's changing culture and social mores from the buttoned-down '50s to the let-it-hang-out '60s, as well as the political turmoil over civil rights and the U.S. role as a world policeman. Of course, the campus was also well populated by conservative political and social groups. Fraternities and sororities were visible and influential, and the buzz or brush haircut, then called the crew cut, was at least as popular as long hair at the time.

Q: The Free Speech Movement, what was his name- Mario?

BECKER: Savio.

Q: Savio. It was one of these names you almost conjured with it at the time. What, as you saw it at that time, was it about and what were you involved in?

BECKER: It was about the kind of intellectual environment that a university should encourage or represent. Where the rubber met the road was the right of student groups to use the university campus and adjacent areas as a public platform and to organize and recruit for any and all political causes, whether it was human and civil rights, military intervention in the Dominican Republic, anti-Vietnam war protests, opposition to ROTC and the draft, support for humanitarian relief efforts abroad, or even recruitment for the Peace Corps which came into being in 1961. Berkeley probably sent more students into the Peace Corps in the early years than any other college campus. Berkeley was a center of anti-establishment student protest. As the chancellor reminded us at our commencement in 1965, the campus had enjoyed this reputation since it was founded almost 100 years earlier. Berkeley students believed fervently in academic self-government, much in the tradition of European universities, as well as in the concept of an intellectual community that should be more open than closed or directed. It was a time when Clark Kerr, the president of the UC system, was trying to build the university into an institution that would train a professional workforce and generate scientific knowledge to meet the needs of a changing economy and society. Many students had the feeling that they were being treated as ciphers or as a worker pool for large governmental or corporate purposes. The impersonal bureaucracy prevalent on ever-growing university campuses throughout the country contributed to this mood. Student protests were starting to appear at Wisconsin, Michigan, even Yale and Harvard.

Q: Columbia.

BECKER: And Columbia. Much more civilized at Harvard and Yale.

Q: Well, a couple of things. I think the reason I like to talk about this is I think this is an interesting period in our society particularly the people who ended up in the Foreign Service or another type of work who went through this process particularly at the University of California and some of the other places you've just mentioned. One, I have the feeling that a certain amount of these movements were people trying, I mean they were talking about tolerance and letting everything go, but yet at the same time these were people who with the enthusiasm of youth weren't really very tolerant and also trying their wings as demagogues or whatever they wanted to do. They mean they shout down people they didn't like. Did you get that feeling at all?

BECKER: There was always the element of replacing one intolerance with another. When one embraces a cause, it's often accompanied by a loss of tolerance for the other side. It's part of the growth process to test the limits of convention. Demonstrating tolerance shows even more growth. Historians recognize that the '50s were intellectually a particularly stifling decade, when society promoted conformity and sometimes severely penalized dissent and activism for social causes outside a narrow set of norms. For instance, the beat generation in the '50s didn't relate to anything or anybody. Its nihilism was quite attractive to youth and a few unemployed poets. Unfortunately, the nihilism of the '50s was replayed in the '60s in a different form, maybe shedding black for the multi-colors of the psychedelic and tune-out generation, a phenomenon I could never understand. Mine was a generation of commitment to something beyond oneself. I debated momentarily whether I would be one of those to join the Peace Corps, but ultimately decided I would go on to graduate school. My second year in grad school, I was awarded a National Defense Education Act fellowship for intending university professors, because I wanted to make the world a better place as a teacher and mentor to the next generation.

Q: Tell me during the time you were at Berkeley did you particularly attach yourself to anyone, I mean you had a multiplicity of causes. Are there any that you got involved in particularly or not?

BECKER: I felt in retrospect I had missed the boat by not committing myself, heart and soul, to the struggle for civil rights. I was in awe of Martin Luther King, Jr. There were some local issues, but the big issue during the time that I was an undergraduate at Berkeley was Vietnam. We were all subject to the draft. We all felt personally affected. There was a tremendous numbers game going on, and it was an unfair and unpredictable playing field. The draft district you were registered in would dictate whether or not you might be conscripted. I lived in a socially and economically mixed district - this was before the more equitable birthday lottery system was introduced - in which there was not too much likelihood that a college student would get a draft notice, but there was always the pressure to keep your grades up and carry a full academic load. And I had barely survived my freshman year at Washington U. You had to be walking the straight-and-narrow at school. More than once, university administrators would allude to the linkage between our current behavior and the possibility that the government might sanction us for straying from the approved path. So there was this tension between the institutions of authority and the large number of us coming from conventional middle class households or at least aspiring to middle class status. This was a first taste of real freedom and self-definition for most of us, but it was not balanced by a sense of personal responsibility for our actions. I suppose I was better grounded intellectually than a lot of my peers because our dinner table at home was fairly tolerant of differing views. Our discussions might create a little heartburn, but it always passed. There was never a question of being shown the door or being sanctioned for expressing one's view, but one could actually act on one's convictions once out from under the parental roof.

I was involved in some of those first teach-ins and other activities relating to the anti-war movement. Even though Europe was my area intellectually, I came to see some of the big issues, such as how far you could impose an international order based upon anti-communism and what limits existed to the unilateral exercise of power by a great power. Many other human needs - such as protecting human rights, fighting poverty, preserving the environment - were not yet central issues in the international arena at that time. Despite my youthful idealism, I was perhaps too cynical or too skeptical to adopt some of the grand conspiracy theories and global solutions that many of my classmates were prone to accept. Rather than rejecting "the system" as irretrievably rotten or evil, I believed the government and the state needed to be and could be reformed, and that we as citizens and human beings had to become participants rather than anarchists or nihilists. I didn't believe in revolutionary change. I had read enough U.S. and world history to know that revolution was a frustrating, brutal and ultimately futile experience in the vast majority of instances. My basic nature was that of an incrementalist - things could change with concerted effort.

The assassination of John Kennedy in '63 had a profound impact on my generation, it goes without saying. Even if we didn't understand all the ramifications at the time, we understood there was an underlying reality that always tempered the perception of idealism, that is, political forces were in many cases larger and beyond the control of any individual. Of course, individualif there were enough of them bonded together with similar goals - could make a difference if the political moment was right. When I was in graduate school - and of course graduate students always had a lot of time on their hands - I ran a precinct campaign office for Eugene McCarthy during the 1968 primary election. This was for me the ultimate expression of this commitment to make a difference, even on a small political stage. The stage was a district, which astonishingly was a John Birch Society stronghold.

Q: John Birch, you might explain who John Birch was.

BECKER: The John Birch Society evolved during the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s and became a phenomenon of the 1960s as an ultra-conservative political movement with overtones of racism and worship of the status quo. There were a number of pockets in southern California where I was living at that time.

Q: Where, what precinct was it?

BECKER: This was the Pomona-Claremont area at the eastern edge of Los Angeles County pushing up against the San Bernardino foothills. Even though the district encompassed the politically liberal Claremont college community - I was a student at Claremont Graduate School at that time - lower-income black and Hispanic communities in the area were politically quiescent or marginalized to a large degree, in contrast to the highly politicized status of urban blacks just a few miles away. Many in the white working and middle classes were split over the growing clout and unsatisfied demands of the civil rights movement nationally. Organized, well-funded groups on the right were frequently able to capitalize on white fears of civil disorder and diminishing political influence.

Q: A classmate of mine from the sixth grade, I went to school in San Marino was Johnny Rousselot.

BECKER: John Rousselot. He was the congressman of our district, which was gerrymandered in such a way that it included affluent San Marino and Pasadena to the west and politically conservative Pomona, while the large racially mixed and presumably more liberal towns directly in between were excluded. Our McCarthy organization did a tremendous job of mobilizing first-time voters in the primary campaign, actually defeating late campaign entry Robert Kennedy, who nonetheless won the state primary race. Having won the battle but lost the war, I had just gotten off the phone after congratulating my Kennedy campaign counterpart and saw the shocking tragedy of Robert Kennedy's assassination on TV.

Q: Well, at Berkeley, how as you were studying foreign affairs, international concerns, how was your faculty, the professors? Where were they coming out to do this?

BECKER: Most of the professors, I recall, were left-leaninsome were very tolerant while others adopted doctrinaire postures. I took one noteworthy course on the first amendment, actually freedom of speech, taught by comedian Lenny Bruce's trial lawyer. Not all of them were liberal by any stretch, however. There were some older faculty members who were refugees from communism or Nazism or some of the less than savory European autocracies. Others were veterans of the Allied military coalition against the Axis during World War II. These scholars presented a different perspective than the homegrown, post-WWII generation of academics. One of my professors, a Russian ï¿½migrï¿½ named Nicholas Riasanovsky, taught Russian history from its origins through the communist period. His point of view was distinctly right wing, anti-communist and perhaps even a little monarchist. Communism to him was a unique, aberrant phenomenon in Russian history, and the Soviet Union was more Russian than ideologically communist. For those of us already steeped in the works of the "realpolitikers," the Soviet regime, like its Russian predecessors, would ultimately act in accordance with "national interests" and would be limited in its ambitions by a balance of power. Whether the USSR could be checked by a Western ideological crusade or by a policy of containment was a very real issue for the classroom.

Another professor who influenced me greatly, the diplomatic historian Raymond Sontag, postulated that concentrated political power always generated countervailing power, and that one could fashion an effective foreign policy based on a corollary of the Clausewitzian principle that diplomacy is war by other means. Sontag's view was that military power is just another tool in the hands of the skilled diplomat. Where Clausewitz and Sontag agreed was that war and peace are not antithetical. Elements of both are almost always at play in international affairs, and the soldier and the diplomat are not mortal enemies, but parts of a larger national security equation.

Q: Well, so often young people in universities particularly at this time and other places are attracted to Marxism because it gives a rather simplistic answer to many things and it's very appealing to young people first trying their intellectual wings. Did this attract you at all?

BECKER: Not at all. I was too much of a skeptic to accept large conspiracy views. I read a lot of Marx. I also read some of the ideological tracts of prominent conservatives. I was always skeptical of the grand views of history and impressed by one of the things that Sontag always highlighted in his courses: key turning points in history were engineered by individuals who just happened to be in the right place at the right time to effect major change. In a sense, it was an accidental theory of historнot elegant or integrated but certainly having a great deal of factual evidence to support it. Regardless of what large political social trends might seem transcendent, powerful, visionary individuals made things happen at key points in time. Where those persons did not rise to the top, major movements were known to fall flat or fail through distortion or dilution. By the mid-60s, I had become steeped in the history of the Soviet Union and the politics of communist systems. I later taught Soviet history and foreign policy, convinced that the strength of the Bolshevik Revolution was not an idea whose ideological force was overwhelming, but the result of determined men and women who were motivated by certain ideas, power drives and personal goals. Frequently the losing side in great historical contests for power lacked that quality because the traditional rulers were too inbred, organizationally weak or bureaucratically inept to bring their potential power to bear on new challenges. Great forces in history are influenced by individuals and that's always been critical. I've always taken the historian's view that it's a very complex world out there and one had to master all of the elements. The political scientist, by contrast, looks for rules and patterns of social behavior that can be categorized and predictea much neater view of the human condition. I entered an interdisciplinary graduate program because I was convinced that I needed to strengthen my understanding not only of history, but of economics, culture, sociology as well as the behavioral sciences.

Q: This was at?

BECKER: At Claremont Graduate School.

Q: At Claremont Graduate School.

BECKER: Rather than looking at the world solely as an historian or as a political scientist, I think the multidisciplinary approach improved my outlook and analytic skills, although it probably degraded my marketability when I wanted to break into a specific academic specialty.

Q: Well, you were, in the first place, Claremont is what? Where does it fit in the system of California?

BECKER: It's a private graduate-level university. It is one of six associated colleges in Claremont. The other five are undergraduate - the best known is Pomona College. The international relations program at Claremont Graduate School was inter-disciplinary, distinct from the departments of government, history or economics. The six colleges shared faculty and facilities and had a very international flavor. There were Indians, Pakistanis, Latin Americans and Africans in abundance. I naturally gravitated towards European affairs, my continuing interest. My principal graduate professor, Fred Warner Neal, was an authority on Yugoslavia, but it was a very eclectic faculty. It was not in the front ranks of graduate education, but it was on a pretty high level secondary tier. I had wanted to continue at Berkeley, but the graduate programs in history and political science had a bias against accepting Berkeley undergraduates. They wanted to draw their graduate students from a wider pool. Claremont became an attractive option.

Q: What were you pointed towards?

BECKER: I decided, and I guess it was because of the strength of the faculty at Berkeley, to pursue a doctoral degree in order to enter the academic profession. I was always aware of the option of going into the Foreign Service with my interest in international affairs. I had done very little traveling outside the United States when I was younger, virtually none, so my interest in international affairs was not based on personal experiences abroad, but on my academic readings and my association with broad array of college classmates from foreign countries.

Q: Did you graduate from Claremont?

BECKER: I got a doctorate from Claremont.

Q: What was your dissertation?

BECKER: My dissertation analyzed the development and the application of the Federal German Republic's eastern policy from a historical perspective. I postulated that Germany historically had an eastern orientation or outreach, but the division of Europe and Germany after WWII frustrated that tendency. I found the Federal Republic's (that is, West Germany's) internal politics delicately balanced between a Western orientation embraced by the Christian Democrats (CDU), which dominated national politics for the first two decades of the country's existence, and the Social Democrats (SPD) advocacy of Germany's historic "Mittel-europa" role as a bridge between East and West, despite East Germany's absorption into a Soviet-controlled empire. Both political parties professed a desire for a reunified Germany. However, the CDU accepted the reality of a divided Europe, embraced the military and political leadership of the United States, and sought economic integration with the rest of Western Europe. West Germany's separation from its eastern sibling also helped to maintain the CDU in the majority, since much of the traditional voting strength of the SPD had come from the eastern part of Germany, which was under Soviet control. The CDU was willing to set aside a lot of Germany's historic self-identification as an East-West bridge. Germany's sense of being an all-inclusive center for cultural and political life in Europe, which had been distorted or taken to its racist extreme under Hitler's expansionist philosophy, had been embodied in the Holy Roman Empire as well as in Bismarck's drive to unify Germany. I tracked the competition and interplay of these two West German world views from 1949 to 1969. I started work on my dissertation about '68, at the historic moment when a grand coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats was in the making. This single governing coalition brought the tensions and the unresolved historical issues into the policy making process. Controlling the West German foreign ministry for the first time, the SPD launched an aggressive diplomatic outreach toward the communist world, opening diplomatic relations with Romania, making diplomatic inroads in Poland and Czechoslovakia and indeed moderating the very hostile adversarial relationship that had existed between the West German Republic and the Soviet Union. Indeed, some U.S. policymakers feared that the new West German coalition would weaken that country's ties to the West and commitment to anti-communist solidarity worldwide.

Q: Did you get over to Germany at this point?

BECKER: I could not get funds to travel. It was one of the great frustrations of my graduate school career. I was already married at the time and, if the opportunity had presented itself, I wouldn't have been able to take my wife. I basically relied on secondary sources, archives and interviews where I could, so while it was an interesting topic well worth pursuing, and my dissertation committee was impressed with my effort, I probably treated it somewhat superficially.

Q: You've mentioned before, but could you give us just a little bit, because this is obviously an important part of your career, what was your wife's background?

BECKER: My wife's background was in many respects similar to my own. Her ancestors had also come from central Europe, specifically Hungary and the Ukraine. They had settled in lowa, where they took up farming. My future father-in-law had been a promising student when the Depression hit, but had to quit school to help support the family on the farm. He had no opportunity to explore his own intellectual potential, and so the atmosphere my wife grew up in was not one of ideas. It was a fairly close-knit family, as was mine, but it was not an outward looking family nor was there a strong value placed on educating girl children. In the end, my wife and her sister lived at home and went to local colleges, paying the expenses out of their own savings, but surprisingly both came out of this experience with a curiosity about the world. My wife's sister spent her junior year abroad in Sweden. This created tension in the family because my intended was the younger sister and, besides, we were not prepared to hold up the wedding until she got back. In the end, my wife and I found that among the many basic values we held in common was an appreciation for other cultures and the world beyond our immediate experience. My wife later put me through college, making it possible for me to complete my education. The fellowship I received paid minimally beyond tuition and a small stipend to cover books and supplies.

Q: What was she doing?

BECKER: She quit school after her first year, when we got married and set up a little household. Money quickly dominated our lives, and my wife went to work for the telephone company as a switchboard operator. We used to joke that she was the "call girl" in the family. Then she worked on a bank switchboard for a while. She basically put aside whatever professional or educational objectives she had at that time. She had less than two years of college when she went to work to help support me through school. A number of my colleagues in graduate school, under similar economic circumstances, finished up their master's degrees and joined the Foreign Service. I decided to pursue the Ph.D. because I wanted to make my impact in the classroom, just as so many professors had made an impact on me. As I slogged through my research and writing, however, I found that academic research really wasn't my cup of tea, and I began to have doubts about my chosen profession. I had a serious confrontation with my parents about my objectives. I finally exploded at them, saying this was too much of a burden on me, my young wife and our marriage. "I'm going to quit and get a real job."

Q: This is tape two, side one with Rick Becker. You were saying your mother was adamant.

BECKER: My mother was particularly adamant, to the point of irrationality. Even though my parents were providing me with virtually no support, she replied, "If you don't finish up your Ph.D. and complete what you committed to do, I'm never going to speak to you again." This kind of language I'd never heard from my parents. There had never been ultimatums. I doubt that I took her threat seriously, but her tone was difficult to ignore. My parents were treating me brutally and as if I didn't have a mind of my own. Perhaps in their own lame way they were trying to point out that I didn't have an alternate game plan. Job prospects at that time were not good, anyway. What I was going to do if I left school before getting my doctorate? I wasn't quite sure. At least until Selective Service rules changed in 1969, the draft continued to loom as a deterrent to leaving school.

There had been limited opportunities at Claremont to be a graduate teaching or research assistant, but I taught a summer course in Soviet history at nearby Cal Poly-Pomona in 1968. You may recall what was happening in the summer of '68. I was plodding through the standard lesson plan and texts - Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev. It was a hot summer and the students' minds were elsewhere. All of a sudden, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, putting an end to the Prague Spring of democratization and presumptive independence from the Soviet empire. I walked into class one morning in August, in the midst of this international drama, and told the students, "Throw out your textbooks, start looking at the newspaper and analyze what's happening. This is no longer history, this is current events, and we're going to apply our knowledge of the Soviet Union and the international environment in Europe to this historic moment." The course changed over night. The classroom experience re-energized me.

My wife and I huddled and together decided that we would finish the doctorate. I soldiered on, without making any fateful decision to change course. Frankly, the fellowship that was barely sustaining my wife and me played a large role in setting my direction. By 1970 the dissertation was largely finished, but I hadn't defended it and without that I wouldn't get the doctorate. I started scouting around for teaching jobs. In September of that year I went to an academic conference and was trolling the halls, much like at a job fair. I had been in graduate school for five years. I had lost much of my enthusiasm for the dissertation, although I still wanted to teach at the university level. My wife was working very hard to keep us afloat. We had a very small apartment in West Los Angeles, where we had moved because it was closer to major university research facilities and because my asthma had began to act up in smoggy Claremont.At the conference I interviewed for and was offered a job by the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. The university was and is well known for its very strong Latin American studies program. They had just lost their Eastern European specialist in the political science department, who was expected to teach a heavy share of introductory courses besides those in his specialty. The university was desperate to fill the vacancy. It was already the first week of classes. I didn't know whether the incumbent had bolted and run, whether he had dropped dead of a heart attack, or whether he was intimidated by all the Latin Americanists who provided the university with its bread and butter. But here was an opportunity that fell into my lap. So I called my wife and said, "Pack up. We have to be in Albuquerque in eight days." Eight days!

I went to New Mexico as visiting assistant professor, the lowest rung on the academic totem pole. New Mexico was sort of an artificial environment for me. There was no real expectation that I would stay on for a second year. In any event, the faculty tended to treat the non-Latin American specialists as a breed apart and indeed somewhat inferior. One political scientist, an expert on Norway and Sweden, did his own thing. However, it was a department that was anchored by the Latin American studies program. Nice folks, but they were in their own little world. After a year, I moved on to a tenure-track appointment at a newly opened campus of the University of Wisconsin.

Q: I think this probably is a good place to stop. Why don't we pick this up? I put at the end of the tape where we are so we'll know where to pick it up.

BECKER: I had no idea this session had gone so fast.

Q: We'll pick this up in 1971 when you went to Wisconsin?

Q: Today is the 23rd of November, 2004. Rick, you're off to Wisconsin '70 to '71?

BECKER: I was at New Mexico for a year as a visiting assistant professor and as its lone East European-Soviet affairs specialist on a campus devoted to Latin American politics and culture. There was no tenure-track appointment in the offing, so I moved on to the University of Wisconsin, which was rapidly expanding at that time. They'd opened up two new campuses. One at Green Bay and one at Parkside, between Kenosha and Chicago to the south and Racine and Milwaukee to the north. So, my odyssey from California continued in an eastward direction, following the job opportunities in academia, which were pretty poor during that period. My wife and I packed up the cat, the car and our possessions and moved northeast.

UW Parkside was a small campus near Lake Michigan. It was just getting off the ground. The school seemed to hold a lot of promise because the university said it wanted to put the full weight and reputation of Madison campus behind research-oriented faculty at the new campuses. Parenthetically, there were two university systems in Wisconsin at that time, a teaching-oriented state university system and the University of Wisconsin system, where world-class scholarship prevailed. As it turned out, there was continuing competition between these two systems for resources and student enrollments. The university administration and the faculty at our campus were under a great deal of pressure from the state legislature to justify what we did. Our nine-hour teaching loads, geared to a research-oriented faculty, were under continual pressure from the legislature to increase to the state university standard of 12 hours. There was never enough money at Parkside for research and everybody came to realize that in a major university system, research was rewarded over teaching.

I had some very interesting, very bright students at UW Parkside. These were generally students who couldn't afford to go away from home to school. Many families, like my wife's, would not make major sacrifices to give their daughters a college education, and some of my brightest students were female. Moreover, a sizeable, diverse group of students worked days and studied nights. It was an industrial region. American Motors had a large factory nearby. Johnson & Johnson was headquartered in Racine. The campus proved to be a fascinating inter-mix of social and ethnic groups, especially interesting for a kid who grew up in California to really take his first good look at the social dynamics of the Midwest.

Q: Particularly in an industrial environment.

BECKER: Yes. Kenosha was made up primarily of Italian and Polish immigrant families. Racine had German and Danish immigrant roots. There was a good deal of rivalry between the two cities. We got them all at the university, which was sandwiched in between the two communities. Many students had a lot of work experience and were coming back to school to pursue a degree, but they were really challenged with full time jobs and families and trying to get an education. More than once, I had to remind some of these students that they needed to put as much effort into their education as they did into their bread-winning. These students brought multi-dimensionality to the student body, much more so than the faculty, which tended to be a little hidebound and traditional.

Q: Well, just to get a feel for the University of Wisconsin, you know, this has always been at least the Madison campus is a hotbed of whatever you want to call it radicalism or movements for a long time now and 1970 '71 was the beginning of the end of the draft and all, but still Vietnam was going on, what was happening on your campus?

BECKER: These kinds of movements don't transport well, don't export well. The Madison campus had evolved that kind of an atmosphere, but it had not extended to the almost as large, commuter-dominated UW campus in Milwaukee and certainly not to the community based state university campuses. Parkside resembled the state university facilities insofar as it reflected rather than shaped the larger community. It certainly was a great opportunity to lend a bit of intellectual stimulation to some very bright young working class men and women and give them some pre-professional direction in international affairs, broadening the horizons of people who had never physically traveled beyond Chicago or Milwaukee. I certainly like to think this was very much appreciated and absorbed by some of the brighter students. Still, one had the impression that the vast majority of students merely wanted that sheepskin and were not committed to the learning process. That's one of the frustrations I found with academic life. As a junior faculty member, I taught more than my share of introductory classes. The students' interest in education and in learning was often quite superficial. Your feedback, your positive reinforcement, came from about 10% of the students in the class, and the rest were challenges to keep engaged over the course of the semester. You were subject to criticism by the department leadership and the university administration if you gave too many C's and D's or if you got a reputation for rigor which lowered your FTEs - full time equivalents. You had to justify your numbers as a condition of retaining your job.

My wife at that time was working toward her degree in Spanish, which she had begun in New Mexico. She had a love for language and was good at foreign languages. Foreign language enrollments were really suffering, in part because of the economy. A professor's enrollments could be expected to suffer if his specialty didn't have a direct relationship to a job or profession. We went through this cycle, call it the post-'60s cycle, where working class kids couldn't afford to spend four years on a "superfluous" course of study in the humanities or the soft sciences. I was talking to one of my wife's professors about a common problem - how to raise enrollments. Since I couldn't do much about my own political science courses, I felt I could offer a fresh perspective to other beleaguered departments. I said, offhandedly, "Why don't you offer a few jazzy courses in Spanish, French and German for tourists, a semester of usable Berlitz-type conversation courses to help kids who want take summer trips to Mexico or Europe. Don't think of this as part of a serious degree program, but as something to attract non-majors and others who would pay a reasonable sum for college credits and a useful linguistic-cultural experience they could apply on their summer vacation. The FTEs you generate in these courses would overbalance the weak enrollments in your core courses for majors." The traditionalist faculty scoffed at this suggestion, without even considering the possibility. I was also bemused by the fact that most of the Spanish faculty spoke Castilian Spanish, because that's what they had learned, and looked down on the more usable Spanish spoken in Latin America. This kind of straight-jacketed attitude seemed to predominate, even though many of these same academics proudly trumpeted their liberal, tolerant political leanings. Such liberalism did not intrude on their defensive, change-resistant outlook as it affected their jobs and their own futures.

The internal debates over meager pay raises, which the legislature approved grudgingly, often got very bitter. There may have been a difference of $200-$300 per year between those faculty members who received merit pay raises and those who didn't. Everybody's ego was laid on the table in making these decisions, and it detracted considerably from the collegial spirit that was supposed to prevail in an intellectual community, or so I believed. I began to ask myself what the future held. The harsh realities of actually trying to earn a living and advance my professional teaching career seemed very distant from the ivory tower image of academia I had held in graduate school. Our first daughter, Michele, was born in 1972. I came to the conclusion that my life, projected 20 years into the future, would not be substantially altered - the same petty issues, perhaps a little bit more security but more likely a slow descent into a kind of a white-collar intellectual and economic poverty. It was at this point that the Foreign Service loomed as a viable course change.

Q: Well, how did that come about?

BECKER: Well, not surprisingly, it had always been in the background. What are your options if you have an advanced degree in international affairs? At the height of the Vietnam conflict, I shared many of my peers' disgust for my government's policies and would not seriously have considered a career in government. I also considered international banking at one point in time, when I was in a period of great desperation. But when I investigated the international departments of several big banks, it appeared that they were not all that interested in expanding their exposure internationally. Five or ten years later, particularly after OPEC flexed its muscles and petrodollars started to fuel international development financed by the big banks, it was quite different. But at the time I was looking, even Bank of America was not particularly interested in pushing a full range of international banking activities. The Foreign Service beckoned in the early '70s, however, and one Foreign Service retiree on our faculty spun tales of his fulfilling experiences as an economic officer in Latin America and elsewhere It wasn't too long before I decided to give this option a whirl, at least take the exam and see where it took me. In December of '73 I took the Foreign Service exam.

Q: Did you pass the written exam?

BECKER: I passed the written exam, and was invited to go down to Chicago to take the oral exam. I didn't have an interview strategy, per se, but the meeting with the recruiting panel raised a number of practical issues. I was already 30 years old. I had a little bit of professional experience outside of graduate school and I may have come across as more self-assured than other candidates. One question, I recall, was what I would do if I didn't pass this oral exam? I must have said something not quite flippant but seemingly self-confident that I always had my teaching job. That was that. A short time later I got a letter saying if I passed my security check and medical exam, I would be appointed to the Foreign Service. So hurry up and wait! Not knowing when all of this was going to transpire, I hurried up and waited.

Q: Do you recall any other questions on the oral exam?

BECKER: Oh, yes. There was a question about how I would convince a casual acquaintance at a diplomatic cocktail party to support an unpopular U.S. policy. I can't recall at all how I answered, but it must have satisfied this panel of three FSOs. I haven't followed the evolution of the exams since then, but there were both multiple choice and essay questions on the written exam. I guess a lot of applicants washed out on the essay because they couldn't express themselves. It called for very broad, general knowledge. I can't say that I was a great expert on the arts or social trivia, but I must have expressed myself well enough on the written essay and on the oral exam. I always prided myself on my writing abilituntil I had my comeuppance in the Foreign Service.

Q: How long did you have to wait?

BECKER: Not long by today's standards. The entire process from written exam to arrival in A-100 was only 13 months. One fine day my wife and I packed up our old Volvo with one small child, age two, and our immediate possessions. Most of our worldly goods went into storage because there was no household goods shipping allowance from one's point of origin to Washington, D.C. You were just told, "Report on this date, and by the way, getting here is your own affair." We packed up our effects on December 30th, in the midst of a driving snowstorm, and we made our way to Washington in two and a half days.

Q: This would be in?

BECKER: December 1974. My appointment actually started when I got into the car on the 30th and turned on the ignition, although the A-100 class was not scheduled to start until the middle of January '75. I felt fortunate that I had more advance notice this time than when I was offered my first teaching job.

Q: What were the composition and your impression of your A-100 course?

BECKER: The composition was much more diverse than I expected. We had a lot of so-called dropouts. Many were dropping out of something else. I was a professorial dropout. We had a former postal clerk. Another recruit had completed two years of law school and had dropped out. We had people who had had an awful lot of hands-on international experience. I was the one of a handful who had a doctorate, but I was envious of those people who had spent time working in international development banking or had a Peace Corps background. There were over 50 of us, 52 I think.

Q: Oh boy.

BECKER: It was a very diverse and interesting bunch of people.

Q: Male, female, race?

BECKER: There was very modest racial diversity, a handful of Latinos, a handful of blacks, very few foreign born individuals, but a fair number of females. There were kids fresh out of college, 22, 23 years old. I was 31. The average age of the group was probably 28 or 29, but there was a group of women in their late 40s and 50s. They identified themselves as former FSOs that had been forced out of their jobs when they married male FSOs. These women were only now being permitted to rejoin the Service. Even though their experience gave them certain advantages in the assignment process, they were for all practical purposes treated like JOs. Clearly they had been through some of the wars and had sustained bruises and scars from previous battles in the Foreign Service. They were very much a survivor group, and I think it was a bit of an inspiration for the rest of us because of their experience and resilience. There were at least a half a dozen of those in my group.

Q: Have you kept up with your group at all?

BECKER: The A-100 course was about five weeks long, as I recall, but I had to leave it in the third week because I was assigned to Bucharest, Romania, which had an early language training start date. Bucharest was one of only two rotational assignments that were handed out to our class. Don't ask me why or how I happened to get that particular assignment. I did have a background in Eastern Europe, but I was actually more interested in going to Lima, which was the other rotational assignment. The 2-year assignment promised roughly equal exposure to all four State Department conal specialties (political, economic-commercial, consular, administrative). I thought that since I was a political officer, and expected to do political work for most of my career, this might be the only opportunity to experience the other cones. Of course, USIA was a separate agency from State, so the public affairs option was not available. Despite spending at most three weeks in the A-100 course, it was a bonding experience to some degree and I did keep track of a fair number of classmates for several years. The class organized a few reunions, I believe. I attended one but missed others when I was overseas. By all accounts, it was a pretty successful class. There were at least a half a dozen, maybe eight, members of our class who reached ambassadorial rank. I think it was a pretty activist and fairly high profile group as a whole.

Of course it was a very diverse group, and there were people who found that the Foreign Service was not their cup of tea. After one or two tours, these officers went off and did something else. In fact, during my recent Pentagon tour I ran across a former A-100 classmate, one of the youngest in my class, who had left the service after two tours, returned to law school, and rose to prominence as a politically connected lawyer. He became general counsel for the U.S. Navy. Now and then, I do run into Foreign Service officers with whom I served at the beginning of my careeafter all, it is a small service.

Q: You were in Romania from when to when?

BECKER: '75 to '77. It was a remarkable period.

Q: Let's talk about, when you went there, what was Romania like? I mean what was the situation in Romania both internally and with the United States?

BECKER: My wife, daughter (age 3) and I arrived in Romania in September '75. My wife and I had never really traveled outside the United States until we got on a plane to fly to Romania. We decided that when we hit Europe we would take the train and see some sights en route. My wife found out just before we were about to embark that she was pregnant with our second child. She had had her State Department physical exam and gotten the required immunizations to serve overseas. We discovered that half of these inoculations were not recommended for pregnant women, and the Department medical personnel were anything but sympathetic to our concerns. So we had this cloud hanging over our heads when we embarked and, indeed, throughout the nine months until my wife gave birth to another healthy baby. We took the train from Frankfurt down through Salzburg and Vienna and then flew into Bucharest. We were pretty tired after this trek. Our first impression of Romania, arriving on Pan Am or TWA, was looking out the window and noticing that the whole plane was surrounded by soldiers, heavily armed, uniformed, serious looking Romanian soldiers. This was apparently how they greeted all international air travelers, and it was our first introduction to the totalitarian state ruled with an iron fist by Nicolai Ceausescu. All of the briefings and everything we had received at the State Department could not have prepared us for this visual experience.

The embassy gave us a standard security briefing. Don't talk except in a secure environment. Don't have family arguments where you might be overheard. Don't display any kind of weakness; it will be picked up and exploited by your hosts. A certain climate of fear and intimidation was inevitable. Even though the security message is much more sophisticated nowadays, it probably produces much the same effect. Even if you are hamstrung in doing your job, be sure to protect yourself at all times. However, we learned to function in that environment. If we had an issue, we employed the euphemism "let's take a walk in the park." It may have been the dead of winter, there may have been a blizzard outside, but if you needed to talk or let off steam, you learned to use it to your advantage. If the heat in your building went off, you cursed at the chandelier and somehow it got fixed. If your telephone went out you would talk to the radiator and muse, "You know, if they want to listen in to what we say, they'll get the telephone fixed." Somehow the telephone got fixed fairly quickly. If you were riding out in the countryside and your car had mechanical problems, you could count on some Good Samaritan coming along in about five or ten minutes to help you fix it, because they were tailing you.

You also learned not to play games with the local security professionals. I had a JO colleague who thought he could get cute by shaking his tail when he was wandering around town. Two days later he got sideswiped by a vehicle in the dark, enough to bruise him and remind him that state security was always present and didn't take kindly to games. Every now and then, they'd come into your house and muss things up. We were not in a compound, but were housed in a Romanian apartment building. I think there was one other American family in that building. It was within walking distance to the embassy, if you could stand to breathe the vehicular exhaust and soft coal inducing atmospheric pollution of central Bucharest at that time. It was a "quaint" posting - people referred to Bucharest as the "Paris of the Balkans." We kept looking for a resemblance but didn't find it because it was pretty gray and grim. Ceausescu did not allow Romanians to speak to foreigners unless they were specifically authorized to do so. This meant that your neighbors couldn't talk to you and you could get them in trouble by talking to them. You were reminded that a very large percentage of the adult population was actually in the employ of the securitate, or state security. So everybody was a potential informant on everybody else, and nobody was quite sure who was and who wasn't. The doorman of your apartment building could be an informant, or any of your neighbors. We had some very interesting neighbors. The head of the family across the hall from us was an ethnic Hungarian who headed the Hungarian language television and radio service. The Hungarians were a beleaguered minority in Romania, but the regime broadcast the official word to the Hungarian speaking population over the Romanian state radio and TV.

My wife found that she could fairly safely engage the neighbors in interchange simply by casually talking about child rearing practices or cooking. We had very different child rearing practices than the Romanians. They tended to swaddle their children, like Eskimos or Russians, keeping them all wrapped up in layers and layers of wool. We let our children run around loose, experiment with new things, and maybe get a few bruises and bumps. When my wife baked cookies, somehow people showed up at our door and wondered what that strange smell was. Within those confines we managed to establish some kind of a presence in the building and got on fairly well in a very superficial way with our neighbors. Officially Romania was very structured. You requested an appointment with a government or party official, and then waited for the government to respond with the time and place. Or you invited Romanians to a representational event, and they would all arrive at the same time. They would make their way en masse to the buffet table. When the buffet table was empty, they would leave. Probably the only square meal they got that week. They were as furtive and watchful of each other as they were of us. Our security officers constantly lectured us on the dangers of fraternization, getting to know Romanians too well. If any Romanian allowed such proximity, that was obviously suspect. This was especially true of our household help. We were told before we went to Romania that we ought to hire a Hungarian housekeeper because Hungarians cooked so well. Romanian cuisine was something to be left on the side of the road, but the Hungarians cooked marvelously. So we hired a Hungarian woman who spoke Romanian about as well as we did. She was from Transylvania in the northern part of the country, and she had two teenage girls.

Q: You were saying her cooking?

BECKER: It was superb. We could supply all of the necessary raw ingredients and she had the skills to make use of them and to show us the ropes. With two small children to care for, Teresa became indispensable part of the household. She was in her late '40s, maybe early '50s at that time, a jovial woman normally, given the severity of life in communist Romania, but every week or so she would arrive at work very depressed. We found out that after leaving work the previous day she had been summoned to the securitate office and was interrogated about our family behavior, quirks and possible points of exploitation. She would come to work the next day very shaken and depressed.

Q: What about the embassy? In the first place who was the ambassador and what were you doing?

BECKER: The ambassador was Harry Barnes, Jr., later director general of the Foreign Service. This was his first ambassadorial appointment. Since he had been DCM in Bucharest at an earlier stage, this was his second tour in Romania. He knew the Romanians intimately. He spoke 5/5 Romanian. He was quite a linguist. He had a lot of high profile, difficult posts. He later went on to be ambassador to Chile under Pinochet and India during a rough period in our bilateral relations. In Bucharest at that time, he was a youngish man in his late '40s, very vigorous and very outgoing. I arrived at the embassy on my first day and was told to pay my respects to the ambassador. This tall, casual-looking fellow came up, looking like just one of the staff, and I said, "My name's Rick Becker, and I'm the new JO." He said, "My name's Harry." It dawned on me that this was the ambassador, deserving of the title in public, but I soon learned he was always Harry in private or casual settings. I was one of only two State Department JOs at the post - USIA also had two - and somehow I think I was chosen for the favored assignments. Since the ambassador didn't have a staff assistant, I was the one who more often was selected to travel with him. He really believed in getting out and seeing the country, and he set an ambitious example for others in the embassy. We took a lot of overnight trains. His wife Betsy nursed me through several cases of "Vlad's Revenge," the Eastern European version of Montezuma's Revenge. Ambassador and Mrs. Barnes kept this young officer healthy, well fed and stimulated. They were great people. It was a young embassy that reflected the ambassador's youth. There was no post schooling beyond the 8th grade, so many Foreign Service officers avoided serving there if they had had children of high school age. The DCM and his wife and one senior USIA couple were in their mid-50s, but by and large, the staff was composed of young people like us. Everyone had more overseas experience than we did, and I got to know everybody in the embassy because I was on a rotational assignment. All the section chiefs were my bosses at one time or another. I was under the direct tutelage of the DCM, in charge of the post's JO program.

Q: Who was the DCM?

BECKER: Dick Viets, later DCM in Tel Aviv and ambassador to Jordan. Two very different people, Harry Barnes and Dick Viets, but together they made a nearly ideal team. Harry was easygoing in his manner, very private and unassuming in his personal tastes. He and his wife did not like the constant scrutiny that a U.S. ambassador had to put up with and always tried to find ways of escaping from the goldfish bowl from time to time. Dick Viets and his wife Marina had a bunch of children, five or six kids, and really loved the social life that accompanied international diplomacy. Marina was a Polish aristocrat who had suffered a lot during and after World War II.

Q: She had a distinguished career I think in the resistance, hadn't she?

BECKER: Yes, she had been in the resistance. She had been a political prisoner under the Nazis, and perhaps under the Russians as well.

Q: Pretty much a persona on her own.

BECKER: Yes. The DCM and his wife sort of fit the Foreign Service image I had at the time - they were very outgoing, self-assured in all situations, and worldly wise. As a DCM, Dick Viets was very meticulous and a bit imperious at times. The ambassador and DCM had very different philosophies with respect to the Foreign Service personnel system. It was just at the advent of the open assignments policy. Harry believed very fervently in the equity and transparency that went along with open assignments. He believed in equal opportunity for all officers. You should be fully informed about the selection process and available assignments, and the system should operate objectively and rationally in matching officers with assignments. By contrast, Dick believed very much in the so-called old-boy network, in which connections and corridor reputations were all-important. He himself was paternalistic toward younger officers, and mentored those he felt were worthy. It was unfortunate that he could be judgmental as welif he liked you, there was nothing he wouldn't do to open doors and provide career opportunities, but he took a an instant dislike to other officers who I thought were quite able. He wouldn't give them the time of day. Years later he helped me get assignments that I might not otherwise have gotten, simply by his personal intervention. In Bucharest, he would every now and then give me a special assignment, sometimes after-hours, that went beyond the requirements of my particular job description. He saw each of these as a step toward my professional development and as a measure of his own confidence in me. When a huge earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale struck Romania in March 1977, embassy real estate was as hard hit as the rest of the city. I was by chance the duty officer that week. The DCM placed a great deal of personal confidence in me as a JO to help manage major elements of the embassy's emergency response, including oversight of the evacuation of most embassy dependents to Germany.

Q: How bad was the embassy hit?

BECKER: The embassy itself, located in the center of town, was hit pretty hard but was still habitable. Most of the residences were damaged to varying degrees. It was extremely difficult to maintain embassy operations as such because everybody was living in very precarious circumstances. We had moderate damage in our residence. Growing up in California, I knew what earthquakes were and when the tremors began on that Friday night, March 5th, 1977 - I remember these details, much like the "duck and cover" drills from the '50s.

Q: Oh, yes.

BECKER: I had a four-year-old and a baby of less than one year. The first thing I screamed to my wife was, "Oh, shit, it's an earthquake and it's a big one. You get the baby and I'll get Michele (our older child)." I pulled Michele out of her bed just as a huge chandelier fell down right where she had been lying. The entire embassy staff evacuated to the chancery. I mean there were bodies all over the streets. Utter chaos. The building across the street had lost its entire face. You could see inside all the apartments. There was destruction and rubble all over the place. We had to organize ourselves. People who lived in the newer buildings were worse off than people like us, who lived in pre-World War II construction. While we had largely superficial damage (as we later discovered), a lot of buildings were rendered totally uninhabitable. For the several days we were shuttled around from residence to residence where there was space and where it was thought to be structurally secure. There were no major hotels in town where we could be housed except one, the Intercontinental, and it was booked to the ceilings.

The ambassador, I believe in retrospect, made one major error of judgment at that time. He prided himself on his access to and relationship with Romanian authorities based upon his years of service. He hesitated to order a drawdown of personnel and evacuation of dependents, even though living conditions were precarious and staff morale was shaken. He was more concerned that such an order would show lack of confidence in Romanian authorities than he was for the welfare of his embassy staff. Finally, under staff pressure, he requesteand the Department authorized - voluntary departures. We were in a honeymoon period with the Romanians. In 1975 President Ford and Henry Kissinger visited Romania. I think it was the first time in the Cold War that a U.S. president and secretary of state had visited a communist country.

Q: Well, no I think Nixon went there in.

BECKER: I don't believe so. The Romanians thought very highly of Nixon because it was under his administration that there was an opening towards Eastern Europe and China. It was under Ford that most-favored-nation (MFN) trade legislation was extended to a Soviet bloc country, albeit with the Jackson-Vanik amendment that required the recipient to allow free emigration. The Romanians deftly played the U.S. by allowing a stream of Jewish emigration but kept the door shut for most other groups. The U.S. opening to Romania rewarded Ceausescu for his policy of independence and at least rhetorical antagonism towards the Soviet Union. The Romanian ruler refused to integrate his economy into the COMECON trading bloc and refused to participate in Warsaw Pact military integration and cooperation. Every year there seemed to be a carefully orchestrated war scare, resurrecting the specter of a Soviet military interventioa la Hungary in 195to re-impose order on the renegade Romanians. It was this independence rather than Ceausescu's very repressive domestic policies that U.S. policy sought to reward.

Q: Well, during this time, did you see where Ceausescu, you know, you say had this very repressive regime, were we so you might say tolerant of the excesses of the regime within Romania because of the politics of having Ceausescu sticking his thumb in the eye of the Soviets from time to time?

BECKER: There was a very orthodox and strategic view coming out of Washington. As a JO, I didn't have a very clear picture of Washington policy. It sort of filtered down to me. My world was the embassy. We had an ambassador who was very much liked and we had a great deal of access to Romanians of all kinds. Embassy personnel traveled a lot, we were well received, and it was a policy that on a superficial level seemed to work. American culture was slowly penetrating Romanian society, especially through TV and movies. There was a feeling that supporting Romania's independence against monolithic Soviet rule through trade, good relations and incentives would gradually open the door to political and economic liberalization. We wanted to believe that Jackson-Vanik and other conditional legislation would prod the Ceausescu government to stiffen its resistance to the USSR and take small steps to reduce internal brutality and move toward greater openness, with a low risk of an armed Soviet response a la 1956 or 1968. There was also a sense that there was very little we could do to make fundamental internal reform take place in the short tereconomic and cultural penetration would undermine communism, but only in the longer term. In sum, Washington firmly believed we were frustrating Soviet consolidation, Soviet expansion and monolithic communism through a policy of rewarding independence in foreign and military affairs.

Q: Did you have any often it happens in embassies there's the big picture of we had a strategic reason for having sort of a benign policy towards Romania, but often the junior officers are the younger ones that are often out there looking around and they're hearing about the horrible things that are happening and want to do something right now. Is this a dynamic that was going on at the time?

BECKER: This was a dynamic. It didn't really separate the senior from the more junior officers. I took my turn in the consular section and my wife also worked in the consular section as well as a PIT, later known as American Family Member employment, where we had the opportunity to interact with Romanians from all walks of life.

Q: Part time.

BECKER: The ambassador instructed his consular officers to spend a minimum of 20 minutes with the client, unheard of in consular work. The purpose of lengthy interviews was not to establish visa eligibility but to pump the client for every bit of information about conditions in Romania. These people came from all over the country. They visited the embassy for both immigration and non-immigrant visas. Many of them had legitimate stories to tell. Some had contrived stories, but you would listen and write them down. It was the best environment for a budding political officer, much more so than the rather artificial and controlled access that we had when we put on our political officer hats and went on an official call. Harry Barnes recognized this and turned his consular section into a listening post, even though every Romanian who visited the consular section was being photographed as they entered the premises. There were still long lines and this is one of the things that MFN's link to immigration did - it stimulated a lot of people to take a certain risk to try and contact the embassy and investigate the possibility of leaving the country. So the consular section was an important point of contact with the local population and with Romanian reality.

I spent a good deal of time there learning about and reporting on the experiences of hundreds of Romanians from northern Hungarian towns, from the eastern borderlands with the USSR, from the Danube delta where there were reports of slave labor camps, and from the mining areas where we learned that there was a miners' revolt in 1977. When food products suddenly disappeared from Bucharest markets - I mean they were normally pretty meager - we pieced together the story from people who were coming in from the mining region, the Jiu Valley, that there was a sudden flood of food products into that area that these people had never seen before. Ceausescu's economic policy had been to export nearly every product of value in order to gain foreign exchange for investment in domestic industry and luxuries for senior party members, leaving his own people lacking in most basic necessities. So when consumer goods flowed into the Jiu Valley, it was one of a number of attempts to placate and disarm what appeared to be - because none of us were first-hand observers - a large-scale miners' revolt in a critical production sector. Shortly before then, we had had a change in political counselors. The new counselor came in, very reluctantly, from a long series of postings in Latin America. Rather than taking the usual monolithic view of Romanian society, he looked the situation from a Latin Americanist perspective and advised that trade union protests should be taken seriously. Even East bloc workers could attempt to organize and try to be a political force. Three years before the Solidarity movement emerged as a major force in Poland, this counselor led the embassy to take a new and fresh view of what was going on in a part of the country where we had no access. We also reported on slave labor being used to build a canal in the Danube delta, because a few people who had actually worked on this project as political prisoners visited the consulate. They were the fortunate onean untold number died constructing that canal.

There was a great deal of interest in immigration to the United States, due in part to the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the MFN legislation. A wave of people from all over the country came to the consulate seeking immigration to the United States. We found out that a fair number of them actually had a claim to U.S. citizenship. Either they or their parents had been born in the United States before World War I to Romanian immigrants, who had returned home after the war without thinking of their children's right to U.S. citizenship. We spent long hours interviewing these claimants and then trying to convince Washington that in fact the U.S. government had an legal obligation to assist them. This meant petitioning the Romanian government to grant exit permission. We had a very aggressive consular section chief ....

Q: Who was that?

BECKER: His name was Tony Perkins. He served most of his career in Latin America and Italy.

Q: Who was the economic counselor?

BECKER: Dick Scissors was the economic counselor.

Q: Dick Scissors?

BECKER: Yes, he's retired now, and has been working with AFSA for many years. We had a very good mission. People did not go to Bucharest unless they really wanted to serve there, except for JOs, who were sent to their first overseas posts without genuine consultation.

Q: Well, one of the things that you said is sort of the other side of the coin that when Kissinger a couple of years earlier had insisted when the secretary of state on the so called GLOP program, the global outlook program, which was essentially kicked off by finding too many Latin Americanists, chiefs of mission had no feel for Europe or elsewhere and wanted to mix to get the mix going, but it was mainly focused on Latin America, but the fact that somebody from Latin America could come to Eastern Europe and take a look and say, hey, something's going on here. We seem to have not been reflected so much in the thinking of sort of the old Cold War hands dealing with Eastern Europe.

BECKER: I think that's precisely true. It took a fresh look by a new officer coming in to bring out some things that were lurking under the surface, which were largely being ignored. I think until he came, one of the few valid pieces of political reporting that we produced in Bucharest was a compendium of jokes, humorous vignettes on the harsh realities of daily life that circulated among the people. I hate to say that because I was there for a year and a half before this new counselor arrived, and we reported a lot out of the consulate and a little out of the political section on what was going on, often in the form of trip reports with some political analysis. But it was pretty superficial, as I look back on it. The semi-annual joke-grams were very well received in Washington, although I never had any indication how policymakers reacted to the truths that were revealed.

I mentioned Ceausescu's squeezing his economy, squeezing the people in order to build national wealth and to feed his regime. There was a Romanian popular folk character, a little boy by the name of Bodo, who figured in many of these stories. Bodo was in school one day and his teacher says, "Bodo, come up to the board and draw a pig." So Bodo comes up to the board very confidently. He outlines the snout and two ears and four feet and a tail and goes back to his seat. His teacher was incredulous. "I said, come up and draw a pig and you only gave me these appendages." Bodo replied, "You didn't say you wanted an export pig." Those Romanians never saw the other parts of the pig in their market basket. There was economic humor and there was a lot of anti-Soviet humor. Very anti-Russian, anti-Soviet humor. The Romanians pride themselves on being an island of Latin culture and Latin values in a sea of Slavic crudeness and repression.

Q: How did Yugoslavia play when you were there? Was that of interest or not?

BECKER: There was some interest to the extent that the Iron Curtain in effect ran between Yugoslavia and Romania. After the massive 1977 earthquake, we brought in teams of Yugoslav construction workers to rebuild and repair our embassy housing as well as the chancery itself, which was an old 1890s building. It's still there, in the same downtown location. I visited it last spring. The Yugoslavs came in and we queried the Yugoslavs as best we could on the differences between Yugoslavia and Romania. The Yugoslav simply said, "We live in a free country and Romania is just another Russian dictatorship." The Yugoslavs certainly believed that they themselves were different and distinct and superior to those who lived behind the Iron Curtain. The Romanians didn't draw too much distinction from the way they lived and the way they thought others lived. Most Romanians we talked to were really obsessed with day-to-day survival issues.

Q: Did you get involved at all in this program that you alluded to before and that was Jews coming out of the Soviet Union. I thought some of them supposedly were heading for Israel or something would go through Romania or something like that. Was there any of that?

BECKER: There was a great deal of attention paid to Jewish immigration. It was the foundation of Jackson-Vanik, and Jewish immigration numbers seemed to be given more weight in both Washington and Bucharest than those of other groups. Romania had a fairly large Jewish population. Although they lost half of it during World War II, it was not decimated in the way that it had been in other countries. Part of Romanian mythology is that they had protected the Jews, who were well integrated into society. That was not exactly the case, but be that as it may, there was a large and very vibrant Jewish community although dwindling in numbers. In fact, what Ceausescu did was to make Jewish immigration into a political tool. Many Jews did not want to go to Israel, but they saw this as a way out of severe hardship. A number of Romanians ended up marrying African students. They emigrated with their African spouses; many of them came back with real horror stories about how they were treated. Romanian Jews, although they were very much concerned about the unsettled circumstances in the Middle East during that period of time, were willing to take any chance to get out of Romania. In fact , one of our housekeeper's daughters, born into a Catholic family, ended up marrying an Israeli student. Romania was the only Eastern European state to maintain diplomatic and trade relations with Israel after the 1967 Middle East war. The U.S. saw this as one more point in Romania's favor. Whenever Israeli oranges appeared on the market, as they did two or three times a year, we jokingly concluded that another group of Romanian Jews had left the country. Although it has yet to be documented, there were clearly under-the-table arrangements between Israel and Romania to basically buy Romanian Jews.

A lot of would-be Romanian emigrants tried to find their way to the United States, or at least to the West, through the intermediation of the U.S. embassy, whose policy toward Romania was built in part on the principle of open borders. Ceausescu had a particularly vicious policy that whenever a Romanian applied to emigrate, the applicant would immediately be fired from his job and stripped of his state benefits, including education, as a condition of receiving a passport and exit visa. The family would be left hanging in permanent limbo if they couldn't get an entry visa to go anywhere. Family reunification didn't mean much to the Romanian regime. It was intent on intimidating and punishing anybody who applied for a passport. Many of these people, labeled dissenters and even traitors by the regime, found themselves on the doorstep of the U.S. embassy.

Q: Quite a bit of pressure on those of you who were issuing visas knowing that these people were desperate is sort of a modest term for how they must have felt. I would think that this would be a consular officer's taking a pretty relaxed view about visa regulations.

BECKER: On the one hand, we were very rigorous in analyzing a person's right to enter the United States as an immigrant. We were probably more lenient in terms of allowing applicants who showed up with exit visas, because Romania exercised real control over visitors to the United States, whether official or non-official, who left most of their family behind a la Cuba. It was a fairly effective guarantee that people would return, but some Romanians would make the break in the hope that their family could eventually follow them. The families of non-returnees were brutally treated when their relatives defected. We ended up developing a secondary and informal - and according to U.S. law, probably illegal - procedure called third country processing" (TCP) which involved issuing a letter to that somebody could show at the border. The letter would state that if this Romanian, who has a passport and exit visa, can reach a third country, he would be able to apply for legal entry into the United States. We knew very well that any Romanian who got out had good grounds to apply to the U.S. embassy for parole or asylum. The embassy letter had no legal validity whatsoever, but it was a vehicle that Romanian border and immigration authorities frequently acknowledged as having some legal standing.

Indeed, a growing stream of Romanians showed up at our embassies in Vienna and Rome, two favorite stop-over points. We ended up establishing major processing centers for Romanian immigrants or asylum seekings to the United States outside of these cities. If you recall, Vienna was the route used by Nadia Comaneci when she defected.

Q: Olympic.

BECKER: Yes. Although I don't think she availed herself of our TCP letter, but knew very well that the embassy in Vienna was a way station to get to the United States. By the way, I later served on the Romania desk and became her welcoming officer. I had to go to Kennedy Airport to see her arrive and interview her. This system was probably criticized by later State Department inspectors and maybe even more loudly criticized by risk-averse consular rules makers in Washington, but it was a way of skirting some of the rigidities of U.S. law, and was consistent I think with the philosophy of the administration to encourage a freer flow of people out of communist countries. More than that, we sought to ease the plight of thousands of Romanians who were caught in the middle. Common people translated Romania's MFN treatment and the Jackson-Vanik amendment as including the right to enter the U.S. People who came to the embassy genuinely believed that if they had the right exit documents, they could go to the United States. I don't think any U.S. spokesman really had the backbone to stand up and say they didn't have an automatic right. So without really acknowledging the expectations that we had raised by some of our rhetoric, we developed a mechanism that really skirted the formalities of the law, and in many ways alleviated a huge human rights problem.

Q: As a long time consular officer, this is what you do. You work out these deals to get to make sure that we're doing right rather than necessary the rigid qualifications of the law. What about Ceausescu and Madame Ceausescu? What was the feeling that you were getting about them?

BECKER: Well, I think we characterized the regime as probably more Byzantine than communist. It was basically a family regime, a dynasty hiding behind a totalitarian communist state apparatus. That apparatus was designed to consolidate Ceausescu's personal power and that of his wife. His wife Elena was a chemist by training and professed to have broad knowledge and authority throughout the sciences. The Romanian state came out with textbooks and tracts asserting that a diet of potatoes, carrots and cabbage, not to mention other roots that you could find around, was much healthier than meat, fresh vegetables and fruit, all of which were not available. Romania was a very pro-natalist country. Statistics now show that the rate of abortion was probably the highest in Europe because family planning was discouraged, birth control technology was prohibited, and reproductive rights were nonexistent. The most effective form of birth control proved to be overcrowded apartments, because housing was at a premium, which militated against increase in the number of children. In many and numerous ways the regime was seen as a personal regime at the service of the Ceausescus.

The VOA and Radio Free Europe were probably more popular in Romania than in any other bloc country because Romania was completely surrounded by communist states. Even Yugoslavia acted as a buffer that filtered information flow; it was almost as effective as having a wall between East and Western Germany. The kind of interchange of ideas and people that might have developed across the border just didn't occur in Romania. Romanians by and large didn't travel. Romania hosted very few major international conferences or cultural events. The Romanian ï¿½migrï¿½ community was not politically active. There was not a lot of contact between ï¿½migrï¿½s and would-be activists at home. There was a group in France and there were a growing number of Romanians in the United States and Israel, but by and large the number of Romanians who emigrated was probably much smaller than from other countries, even though the level of repression was greater.

Q: This is tape three, side one with Rick Becker. You were saying there was great effort to show Romania was more enlightened than it really was?

BECKER: Yes, and I don't know to what extent it convinced U.S. policymakers that it was true. I think there was a certain feeling in the United States that because we had a favorable policy towards Romania vis-ï¿½-vis East Germany or Czechoslovakia, Romanian policies must be more liberal and humane, but in fact quite the opposite was true. We were rewarding Romania for other than its domestic policies, which were much worse. Conditions were much more repressive and there was a great deal more deprivation, including infant mortality and other public health indicators. The embassy had contact with the Romanian medical community. We evacuated people to Germany for very minimally necessary medical reasons because the quality of basic care was so poor. There was no anesthetic to go around, even local anesthetic. We didn't have an embassy nurse or doctor. The regional medical officer visited quarterly from Belgrade. We had a contract nurse, a British lady, but by and large there were no basic necessities to be had on the local economy. We imported 90% of our consumables from Germany. We had a contract buyer with access to the military PXs and commissaries in Germany. The embassy closed shop for a day every month or six weeks when the U.S. Air Force plane arrived. We spent the entire day distributing consumables ordered by embassy families.. Cases of toilet paper, chewing gum and cigarettes, as well as bushels of bananas and other fresh fruits and vegetables, came in on these flights. There was a great deal of barter among embassy families, as the case lots were far too large for a single family to consume. Everybody bought cigarettes because they were the accepted medium of exchange in Romania. The local currency had no value, but Western cigarettes, particularly Kent 100s, were used by Romanians to get in front of the food line while there were still supplies, to get into a doctor's office on an emergency basis, to gain any kind of consideration or favor, that and working the black market which a lot of other embassies did directly. As far as we could tell, the British, Canadian and American embassies may have been the only embassies to adhere to the established exchange rate and rules against selling our consumables to the local population. The ambassador made it clear he would severely penalize anybody who used other than the embassy accommodation exchange, because the securitate was eager to entrap diplomats on the streets who were involved in illegal currency exchange.

Q: Were we there as the embassy were there attempts to suborn Americans, you know, one hears of the Soviet Union how they had honey traps, girls making themselves available and then pictures taken or handing over supposed documents and pictures. I mean things of that nature, was that happening much?

BECKER: There were always probes and our security officers tried very hard to get on top of these. Interestingly enough, Ambassador Barnes gained a certain notoriety when, as DCM in Romania a few years earlier, he was involved in a security breach. I guess the incident was recounted in one of the books on the CIA that was later published, perhaps Philip Agee's book or another spy exposï¿½.

Q: Well, there was a Who's Who.

BECKER: It was Harry Barnes' shoe that was fitted with a listening device. When the staff went into the secure conference room, those discussions were reportedly recorded by the Romanians. It seems that the housekeeper who was found responsible for fitting that shoe continued to work years later in the diplomat community, perhaps even the U.S. community I heard. The joke was that good household help was hard to find. Clearly there were efforts to suborn Americans. One of the most difficult U.S. policies to enforce, and one that really made an impact on recruitment, was the non-fraternization policy. One of our young single officers- he was in fact the first single officer who was allowed to serve in Romania- found a Romanian girlfriend, got her pregnant, and then petitioned the embassy to arrange for marriage and an immigrant visa. This officer had flagrantly broken the policy. He could have, should have had the book thrown at him immediately, but only got a few pages tossed in his direction. He stayed in the Foreign Service for a while, even though he left the service early. He was supposedly a fast riser, but really had his career tainted by this experience. There was always the potential for security compromise.

Q: What about the Roma or the gypsies? Were we looking at, you know, one thinks of Romania as being full of gypsies. What was happening?

BECKER: Romania had a high percentage of gypsies, but no reliable statistics bore out this fact. They were everywhere one looked, but were invisible as far as the embassy was concerned. They were discriminated against openly by all other ethnic groups. They were really the bottom of the social scale, the country's untouchables. They had no status whatsoever, not with the Romanian state and not with the U.S. embassy. We had no policy or mechanism for dealing with them. We dealt with the established groups, whether Hungarians, the Germans, the Jewish population, but the numerous gypsy population was basically shunned, avoided, distrusted and ignored as far as policy was concerned.

Q: What about the Soviets, the Soviet embassy and all? Did we have any contact with them?

BECKER: We had contact with the Soviets. The Soviets would complain to us that they were under literally house arrest by the Romanians. The Romanians vigorously pursued a policy of reciprocity vis-ï¿½-vis the Soviets and in fact treated them worse than almost any other diplomatic mission. They couldn't travel outside of Bucharest without getting permission from the government, just the way the Soviets treated the Romanian diplomats in the USSR, whereas we could travel all over the country without prior notification. There was a great deal of freedom for Americans and indeed the Romanians liked to show favor to U.S. diplomats just to stick it to the Soviets. The Soviets were a very frustrated bunch. They were probably the number one target of the Romanian security service, which constantly sought to suborn, intimidate and otherwise restrict them. The Romanians were really less concerned about our influence in Romania than they were about the Soviets. Every now and then, Romanians were arrested and show trials would take place against officials who were accused of having sold out national interests to the Russians.

As I mentioned, every now and then there was a war scare that involved a Russian invasion scenario. During one of these manufactured crises, the DCM from our embassy in Moscow was visiting Romania. Tom Simons was actually being considered for the ambassadorship in Bucharest. He and his wife on an orientation visit, and I was assigned as his control officer, guide and travel companion. . He was traveling with his U.S. diplomatic passport, but the visit was low-key and unofficial, as his appointment had not yet been announced by Washington and nobody wanted to feed the rumor mill about Ambassador Harry Barnes' replacement. As we passed through Iasi, in the eastern part of the country, he and his wife were subjected to a near strip search in the airport, since he had a lot of Russian language documents on his person. Anything of a Russian nature was being scrutinized much more closely during this period. As their escort officer, I protested and said I was going to take this diplomatic breach up with the authorities in Bucharesbut to little effect. I was pushed through the line and they were taken off to secondary for a search. He eventually did become ambassador to Romania, apparently not intimidated nor overly exercised by that experience.

Q: I would think that the French would have been riding high in there. I mean de Gaulle is planning this, this goes way back and how about the French Embassy?

BECKER: The French embassy, as I recall, did try and play up the traditional cultural connection with Romania. Unfortunately, that connection virtually died in World War II. There was an older generation of Romanians who were thoroughly Frenchified. They even spoke their own native language with a French accent, including a number of people in the diplomatic service, but at that time France had nothing to offer and indeed these people were discredited as part of an older, pre-communist generation. The French never really had a great deal of influence. Third-world countries were very well represented in the Bucharest diplomatic community, which was quite large. Romania had relations not only with Israel, but with everybody else. It was seen as a kind of international protection against possible Soviet pressures. Arab and African countries were very conspicuous in the diplomatic community. It was hard to see how the housing system and the other services to diplomats could be sustained. We met Yasser Arafat for the first time at the diplomatic cluthe PLO was accorded full diplomatic status by the Ceausescu regime. A friend of ours, actually the wife of our consular section chief, had an encounter with Mrs. Arafat. Both had brought their dogs to the diplomatic club for an outing, which was permitted. Mrs. Arafat apparently complained that so-and-so ought to keep her dog on a leash. So this embassy wife replied without hesitation, "Mrs. Arafat, you ought to keep your husband on a leash." Arafat was an occasional visitor to Romania, as were most Middle Eastern leaders. Romania was no longer a major oil producer, but it was a major oil refining center and there was a great deal of trade with the Middle East oil producing countries. This was the mid '70s, and Romania re-exported a lot of its refined production to the West.

Q: What about Israel? How did the Israeli embassy work there?

BECKER: The Israeli Embassy was a fortified mission, but it was an embassy that functioned very effectively. It functioned effectively on a diplomatic level, but it also was a cultural and political conduit to the Romanian Jewish community and the Grand Rabbi of Romania, Moses Rosen, was very well received in Israel. He was treated with a great deal of respect and consideration. Rabbi Rosen was also an old friend of Larry Eagleburger, and every time he came to Washington while I was on the Romania desk, I had a chance to renew acquaintances. He was in his '70s when I knew him in Romania and he was in his '80s by the time I was on the Romanian desk a dozen years later. Rabbi Rosen faced this dilemma of a dwindling number of Romanian Jews due to emigration and the inability to adequately support those who remained in his country. He could not get the Israeli Jewish leadership to send rabbis and others to sustain the faithful in Romanithe Israelis really didn't think it was worthwhile. The Israelis thought only of continuing the outward flow of Romanian Jews until none remained. The only people who refused to leave the country for Israel or elsewhere were the elderly, as well as some of their younger relatives and caretakers, who simply were too old to travel or change lifestyles. There was a Jewish cultural and historical tradition that the Israeli Embassy and government supported in a sort of superficial way, but without wanting to antagonize the Romanian Orthodox Church among other xenophobic influences in the country.

Q: Just as a historical note, in 1875 '76, President Ulysses Grant sent a gentleman named Benjamin Pieotto, I'm not sure P-I-E-O-T-T-O, or something, his lawyer from San Francisco to go with, made him consul in Bucharest and he was sent there for the specific purpose of helping the Jewish community, the Mambas, the Jewish (?). He went there and made some reports on that. It's an interesting historical note of why we sent somebody there. He was apparently fairly effective.

BECKER: When Ceausescu finally decided around 1980 he was going to build his grand palace, the old Jewish ghetto in Bucharest was one of several historic neighborhoods that were razed to the ground; one of the last physical vestiges of a Jewish cultural life. I still have photographs of my travels around Romania and visits to Jewish cemeteries and other vestiges of a once-thriving Jewish community. In the post-Holocaust/post-World War II period, it was a mere shadow of what the Jewish population had been and the influence that it had had before the war.

Q: Well, you, this is probably a good place to stop. You left there in 1977? Whither?

BECKER: Yes. Well, I thought I was going to Mexico in a great job as an external affairs reporting officer in the political section of our huge embassy in Mexico City. It was the other half of the Kissinger GLOP policy of trying to diversify FSO career tracks that tended to be too regionally specific and narrow. The Department wanted to send more non-Latin American specialists to Western Hemisphere in order to shake up an inbred mentality in our embassies there. We shipped off our worldly goods, said our tearful goodbyes, and left on our first home leave in California to visit family. It had been a rough two years in many ways, but it had been a memorable and largely positive experience. You always remember fondly your first tour, though the daily realities may have been otherwise.

Q: Your wife I assume had her baby at what the 87th General or something?

BECKER: No, actually she had our baby at the Wiesbaden Air Force Hospital. At age seven days, we brought the baby to Romania, where she was embraced by our housekeeper and her two daughters. She was well taken care of by a kind of surrogate grandmother and extended family. We maintained contact with the housekeeper and her daughters over many years. We used to send cards, letters every year. Once in a while, every three or four years, a letter or a card, very innocuously worded, would arrive at wherever we happened to be. We had no idea how many of our letters arrived and how many of hers actually got through, but for at least 15 years after we left we communicated in this manner. Interestingly enough, the correspondence tailed off after the revolution of '89.Maybe it was no longer a lifeline for the family or they had other things to do, but we lost contact. We kept it up over a long period of time and under extremely difficult circumstances for Romanians.

I was off to Mexico, or so I thought. We were on home leave and I got this call from Personnel in Washington. The bureau was still called "Personnel" before being changed a few years ago to the politically correct, but to me more mechanical, "Human Resources." I was told I no longer had a job in Mexico City. "Although we assigned you to this great job, and you've been signed up to spend six months in Washington learning Spanish, the inspectors determined that the job should be abolished. The incumbent, of all people, even considered the job unnecessary." I asked, "What do I do now?" That's when Personnel shrugged its collective shoulder and said, "We can discuss your future when you come to Washington. Enjoy your home leave, by the way." I then had to track down my household effects, which were on their way to Mexico. I could see them on the high seas on their way to Mexico and we would be going God knows where. It was not a very good home leave. My kids caught chicken pox and there were various family issues. But the Department actually tracked the shipment down, still on the docks in Bremerhaven, and held them in place until I got an assignment. When I finally got back to Washington and started trolling the halls for assignments, I learned that fall was not a good time to look for immediate openings. Never having served in Washington, I found so much depended on whom you knew and what your corridor reputation was. I had just learned the assignment process went beyond questions of timing and rational matches of persons and posts. In my case, what personnel gave freely with one hand the inspectors could take away with the other. The very week I arrived in Washington, in September 1977, all the heads of state and foreign ministers and U.S. ambassadors from every Latin American country were in town for the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty.

Q: Oh, yes.

BECKER: I ended up making the rounds of U.S. chiefs of mission who had potential openings on their staffs and said, "I am an officer who is at liberty at the moment." I interviewed with John Hugh Crimmins, our ambassador to Brazil, who said he had a job that had been vacated and was not filled. It was a political section job that involved reporting on human rights, church- state relations, and party and legislative affairs. By the way, he added, Brazil is a military dictatorship so the parties aren't a very important part of the portfolio. You interested? I said, I'll take it, but will you wait six months so I can get Portuguese and he said we'll wait. By the time I arrived in the spring of '78 he was no longer ambassador. That was my next assignment.

Q: Okay, we'll pick this up in 1978 when you're off to Brazil.

BECKER: All right.

Q: Great.

Q: Today is the day after Thanksgiving, November 26th, 2004. Rick, just to get this, you were in Brazil from '78 to when?

BECKER: '80.

Q: '80. Let's talk first, what was the situation in Brazil, sort of economically because that's always very important and politically at that time.

BECKER: We had -and this was drilled into us at every turn - a very high Carter administration priority on human rights and democratic development. Brazil under the military dictatorship was one of several southern cone countries so inflicted, was very much a part of our calculations and our concern as embassy officers. That said, Brazil's problem with the domestic democratic forces, the "disappeared" and the victims of the dirty war was not as serious as in some of the other countries in that area.

Q: Particularly Argentina.

BECKER: Argentina and Uruguay, particularly. It was much worse there, if measured by the body count, although Brazil went through a period of rather severe repression of political dissent in the early years of the dictatorship. By the time I arrived in '78, much of that police state repression had eased considerably. The Brazilian generals had made it very clear that they were not going to rule alone and that they always intended to turn the reins back to civilians at some point in time. Indeed, they left most of the economy in the hands of civilian technocrats, having probably learned the historical lesson that managing economies over time goes very badly under the best of circumstances. Indeed, they did not want to be tarred with the full weight of whatever was happening in Brazil, including an historic roller coaster of economic booms, inflationary spirals and bouts of calm and instability. At the time I arrived, Brazil was going through one of its hyperinflation phases and there was a lot of pressure on the central bank and the finance ministry to stabilize the economy. The Americans, paid in dollars, were pretty well shielded. Brazil had a crawling peg monetary policy whereby there were a dozen or more mini-devaluations against the dollar during the course of the year, so the 100 plus percent inflation was hardly felt by those of us who earned dollars. I understand the situation in Argentina at roughly the same time was much worse partly because the State Department bureaucracy could never keep up with severe hyperinflation. There was always a lag time between price hikes and USG salary adjustments, and the Argentine government did not have a monetary adjustment policy. Brazil also had a serious problem of uneven economic development, between social classes and between regions. There was the rich, self-sufficient and productive "European" part of the country in the South, and then there was the impoverished Northeast and the Amazon basin, which seemed to be impervious to most of the development incentives and the income and resource redistribution policies of the government.

The capital Brasilia, a new city, was only partly finished by the time we arrived in 1978, but it was already taking shape in terms of the class structure that Brazil reflected. There was a significant middle class, largely civil servant population in Brasilia, fairly affluent, mostly bureaucrats. A lot of mid-level bureaucrats flew home on the weekends, home being Sao Paulo or Rio. Airfares were not cheap. Satellite cities were emerging on the periphery of Brasilia, where working class and the poor lived and basically fed off of or survived on the basis of their dependence on the people in the capital.

Q: Well, then.

BECKER: The main issues we had with Brazil, in addition to human rights standards, revolved around the lack of free speech, assembly, and the right to choose one's own government. There was also a serious issue of Brazil's nuclear development. Brazil was in competition with Argentina. Both were developing ostensibly peaceful nuclear capabilities. They were not parties to the Treaty of Tlatelolco or the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and it was apparent from all the information we had that there was some spillover from their energy programs into potential weapons development. So we were very much intent on reining in Brazil's nuclear ambitions. But Brazil was on the verge of being a great power and was not about to be told by the United States or anybody else how to order its national policies.

Q: Who was our ambassador while you were there?

BECKER: Crimmins left before I arrived, as I indicated earlier, and there was no ambassador in Brasilia when I arrived. A couple of months later Robert Sayre arrived as ambassador. He had been ambassador to Uruguay and to Panama previously so he was an experienced chief of mission. If I can speak frankly, I found him - compared with my first ambassador - not at all equipped to handle the needs, the demands, and the requirements of directing a large full service multi-post mission, because it was not only the embassy in Brasilia but also two super-consulates general in Rio and Sao Paulo. There were also consular outposts in Salvador da Bahia and Recife on the northern coast, a public affairs office in Belo Horizonte, a major inland industrial center, and a consulate in Porto Alegre in the far south.

Q: Sometimes when you have an ambassador who does sort of the ambassadorial thing and he has a DCM who is in charge of managing it. Did you have such a DCM?

BECKER: We had a first rate DCM. His name was George High and he did have a fairly clear division of labor with the ambassador. My sense, however, was that the DCM carried much of the load both inside and outside the mission. Ambassador Sayre was not a vigorous, outgoing representative of U.S. policy. He preferred to speak Spanish despite the fact that it offended many Brazilians, and indeed on a personal level he was almost painfully shy in dealing with his staff. I learned most of this first-hand in my second year at post when I became his staff assistant - against my will, by the way.

Q: Well, we'll come to that, but let's talk about the first part when you were dealing with human rights and church relationships and also what there was of the legislature. The human rights, what were the problems, how were we dealing with them?

BECKER: Issues as I recall centered on freedom of expression, whether media expression or individual expression. The capital, Brasilia, was somewhat isolated and in many ways very artificial. Most of the political activity and most of the social concerns were in the rest of the country. I had the opportunity to do a fair amount of traveling to Sao Paulo and Rio and to the Northeast to consult with our consulates and to interview human rights activists. I found that the church-state relationship proved to be the most interesting element in my portfolio. The Catholic Church leadershithe Episcopal Council - was seated in Brasilia and met periodically. The cardinals and archbishops represented constituencies throughout the country. I got to know many senior church officials. One of the most colorful was Dom Helder Camara, the Bishop of Recife, also known as the "red bishop." Every Catholic country seems to have one.

Q: Oh, yes.

BECKER: The Brazilian church was motivated by liberation theology in a way that most other churches in Latin America had not been.

Q: Explain liberation theology.

BECKER: Liberation theology was an outgrowth of - and this is coming from a Jewish boy who is trying to learn the dynamics of how the Catholic Church thinks and operates - the Vatican II conference in the early '60s, which commanded the church and its representatives to become much more of a popular church, to become much more attuned to the needs of communities and people, and to call upon the church hierarchy to live the faith alongside the faithful at a most basic level. Latin gave way to national languages in the mass. Parishes became centers for social activism, often encouraged by and with active participation by the parish priests. This went all the way up. A couple of Brazil's cardinals, including the very influential Cardinal of Sao Paulo, Cardinal Paulo Arns, spelled "A-R-N-S," was very much identified with liberation theology and the more progressive views of the church and its role in society. The church's activism and the struggle for human rights and democracy were closely intertwined. It was particularly interesting to follow church affairs with this in mind. The church was somewhat more shielded than other reform-minded sectors from the full weight of the military dictatorship, simply by its prominence, influence and tradition of autonomy. However, the Brazilian church was quite divided over liberation theology, as was the entire Catholic Church at that time. So there were many conservative cardinals and bishops that tended to act as a counterweight to this progressive trend.

It appeared to me that the government was also ambivalent about what to do about the church's left-leaning, anti-military tendencies. The ambivalence probably translated into a degree of tolerance that was not intended, but the church operated with a great deal of freedom. I don't recall a lot of active repression. This was well into the second decade of the military dictatorship. The dictatorship installed in '64 was already 15 years old, and the dictatorship and its civilian allies were already starting to get a little tired of the responsibilities of government and were talking about handing over the reins of power to civilian authorities. It was during this period that the generals actually set a date, 1985, when they would hand authority back to an elected government. Although Brazil did have presidential elections, in fact the designated general or the general in charge passed the baton to another general. There was a presidential election and the inauguration of a new president in '79 while I was there.

Q: How did we treat that?

BECKER: We sent a fairly high level delegation, though it might have been even higher if our relations with Brazil had been more cordial during the Carter presidency. It was headed by Joan Mondale, the wife of the Vice President, and it included several cabinet members, including our secretary of labor. It was shortly before this event that chance fell to me to pick up the labor affairs portfolio. We had a labor attachï¿½ at our consulate in Sao Paulo, but the assistant labor attachï¿½ position in Brasilia had been assigned to an officer who had no love for it, no interest in it and found the work rather demeaning. He was desperately trying to get back to his consular specialty and so ignored the responsibilities to which he had been assigned. The DCM came to me one day and said, "There are five or six major labor confederations headquartered in Brasilia. They represent different points of view or a different slice of the labor movementhe labor aristocracy if you will - whereas our labor attachï¿½ in Sao Paulo is an experienced man who has got his feet on the ground dealing with local trade union leaders, including a certain metal workers' union leader by the name of Lula."

Q: Who is now president.

BECKER: He's now president. I've followed his career from that point in time onward. I met him once or twice and was very impressed with him, as well as with a lot of the people who were around him. I was well aware of the entrenched nature of the military, and of the labor aristocracy in Brasilia that was at the beck and call of the military dictatorship, which allowed them to siphon off a lot of the funds paid for by compulsory union dues. Lula lobbied strongly against this practice. He was trying to establish some viability in labor movement, which had been decimated in earlier years by military repression and co-optation and which furnished few protections or benefits to the workers.

Q: Was the military very close to what you would call the industrial complex, in other words big business?

BECKER: Very much so. Keep in mind that the military dictatorship in Brazil was very thin and superficial. Most members of the military were not involved in political life and in fact most of the political parties operated at the state and local level. A sandbox legislative branch went through the motions in Brasilia. So, you did have civilian political activity, but it was at a low and rather anemic level. Nobody stuck their head up too high above the barricades, but the military counted on a great deal of support from an industrial establishment centered in Sao Paulo and other major cities, as well as entrenched rural interests. Brazil was expanding its aircraft industry, its arms production and its military sales abroad, all of which were products of the country's growing industrial strength. While I was serving in Brazil, the country became one of the top 10 industrial countries of the world, passing such traditional powers as Italy and Canada.

Q: Yes?

BECKER: Environmental issues were starting to raise their head because of clashes between indigenous (native) groups and an expansive modern agricultural sector as well as the power of the state that were intent on developing Brazil's huge interior, including the Amazon basin. The foundation of Brasilia in the 1950s was a manifestation of the expansion of industry and population away from the developed coastal areas into the semi-settled interior, Brazil's frontier if you will.

Q: Well, was there?

BECKER: But the military also counted on support from conservative political groups as well as the general population which, while restive over the harshness of the dictatorship, still recalled the political and economic chaos of the early '60s and saw the military as the guarantor of stability. Despite ensuring a degree of political calm and stability, the military was unable to establish a similar stability in the economic realm. A number of new economic policies designed to stabilize commodity and financial markets did not change basic Brazilian behavior, which favored expansionism, cronyism and spending without regard to the financial bottom line.

Q: Where did you find the embassy sat? I mean was the embassy, one could it be divided? Often the younger officers want to do more to change the status quo and the more senior members feel this is the quo we're used to and we want to keep it this way. How did you find the embassy?

BECKER: I found the embassy curiously passive with regard to the set of issues that I was concerned with. We had major issues with the Brazilians, but they were handled very much on a senior policy issue.

Q: Like the nuclear issue.

BECKER: Like the nuclear issue and indeed the human rights issue. I recall very few instances where I as a junior officer, even accompanied by the chief or deputy chief of the political section, would dialogue on human rights with Brazilian counterparts or at least with government officials. This apparently took place at fairly high levels. We made our points. It was about this time that our consul in Recife was expelled from the country for speaking out and for crossing the line, being overly active.

Q: Who was that?

BECKER: I think it was Rich Brown, later Ambassador Rich Brown.

Q: Is he still in the Service?

BECKER: He died suddenly in the past year. I found a lot of my activities curiously detached. I did my regular reporting to Washington, kept them informed. Actually, my magnum opus as a political officer was an update of a church-state report originally written by a junior political officer in Rio in the early '60s, about the time of the military takeover, by the name of Miles Frechette, who rose to be ambassador.

Q: Oh, yes, I've interviewed Miles.

BECKER: I figured 15 years later we ought to do another study, so one of my major projects was to study the role of the church in Brazilian politics. There was actually a readership in Washington that was very interested in this topic. They wanted to know how deep, how profound and how influential the forces for change were in Brazilian society.

Q: It seems that there would be a conjunction of interest of the expansion of modern agriculture into the Amazon Basin. You get the indigenous population, you've got human rights environmentalists and I imagine the church would be there. How did we, did that get into your portfolio at all?

BECKER: Well, even though we had a large embassy and a fairly significant presence in Brasilia and the major Brazilian cities, it was just too big a country for a handful of diplomats to follow. I mean it was very difficult to just get on a plane and travel to Manaus or the border regions and follow up on a report of armed clashes between the military, settlers or corporate interests and indigenous groups. Frequently the word just didn't get out or it got out months and months later. It was exceedingly difficult to follow up. There was a lot of spot reporting that would pinpoint actual incidents, the kinds of incidents that would eventually find their way into human rights reports. Most of our consulates were not really well equipped or staffed to report on politics or human rights. They were very small, one-to-three person operations that were more interested in public affairs, running the U.S. libraries, or commercial facilitation. The church and the labor unions were conduits for information from the far corners of Brazil, but it was an imperfect reporting network. It was at this time, about '79 or early '80, that the Brazilian government made a significant decision to retaliate against our pressures on human rights and nuclear development, which they saw as intrusive U.S. policies. The government ordered our AID mission and our Peace Corps operation to leave the country. The official reason was that Brazil was a developed country that no longer needed development assistance. Ironically, Brazil declined our offer to support its membership in the OECD, the club of developed industrial nations.

Because I had an academic background, I spent a fair amount of time communing with academics at the University of Brasilia and other institutions of higher learning. I did some reporting on academic freedom and the role of the universities as an avenue for social and political activism. I found the quiescent, even supportive attitude of Brazilian universities toward the country's conservative leadership contrasted greatly with what I later found in other Latin American countries. The universities were there to train the new leaders of industry, the new generation of diplomats, the new professional class, and were not at all hotbeds of politics and civil unrest. In that sense, Brazil had a much more modern university system than what existed in other Latin American countries and one that was far more relevant to what the country was doing, which was trying to pursue great power status. If they had been cauldrons of radicalism, they would have been effectively quashed by the military regime.

Q: Did you find there was a certain resentment of the United States, I mean we're a big boy now and stop interfering with us. Was this a theme that you had all the time?

BECKER: There was some of that, it depended upon whom you talked with. There was also a good deal of envy of the United States because of the freedoms that we had, our scientific and economic accomplishments, the major social gains that had come from the freedoms that we exercise. Racial issues sort of fell into my portfolio and came up in a couple of contexts. We were asked by Washington to do more reporting on racism and cultural discrimination. However, the Brazilians just didn't identify with the stark color lines that our own society recognized or with the flashpoints that had taken place in U.S. history. We're talking about a decade after the passage of our major civil rights laws, the urban race riots of the '60s and the death of Martin Luther King. I had black or at least darker Brazilians of African descent coming to me and expressing a great deal of envy at the sharp distinctions between black and white in the United States, which they saw as a necessary precondition to a civil rights movement that basically had brought about great gains in equal rights and opportunity in the U.S. during the '60s and '70s. They could not get their own countrymen to identify in terms of racial antagonism or discrimination, because culturally Brazilians saw themselves as a whole spectrum of shades from the darkest to the lightest. It was still very much the goal of darker Brazilians to marry up and sire whiter children. Brazilian blacks, Afro-Brazilians if you will, attained success either in sports or in entertainment. There were very few black Brazilian political or economic leaders on the national scene. That said, the Japanese had been successfully assimilated, and even had a cabinet minister. Indeed, Brazilians prided themselves on being an assimilated society, a multicultural society that was impervious to the kinds of racial antagonisms that we in the United States had experienced, and which we were seeking to remedy in our own civil rights and human rights policies. There was a good deal of envy among Afro-Brazilians that the lines of cleavage in Brazil were not as sharp as they had been in the United States, and they were having a great deal of difficulty in developing an effective civil rights mentality or sentiment in the population.

Q: I've talked to people who have served in Brazil who were African American and they'd say, you know, the divisions were there and whites who were dating darker Brazilians and all found, I mean all of a sudden lines came up. There was a lot more discrimination than one might.

BECKER: Very much so. Again, you did not see darker Brazilians in the corporate world, in higher levels of national politics, or in academia, although they were very active in local politics. The top labor leaders and most of the top church leaders were all quite European in their physical appearance.

Q: What about the indigenous population, the Indian population, was that pretty well kept within sort of almost tribal bounds or something?

BECKER: I indicated that Brazilians were beginning to make a big push to open up the interior. Almost every month or two, there were newspaper headlines highlighting the discovery of a new tribe that had never had contact with the outside world. The Amazon was seen as a tremendous source of riches, which it is, and therefore an area that cried out for exploitation on manifest destiny and economic grounds. If Brazil could develop its resources, it would be the salvation of the impoverished North. That said, there were whole ways of life that would change and whole new forms of oppression that would arise out of a corporate-government alliance to push aside all obstacles to development. Those of us sitting in Brasilia could do little more than talk about these issues. We were 1,000 miles from the Amazon, and we had only a consular agent in Manaus who had no reporting or advocacy responsibilities. We had closed our consulate in Belem, since it did not have much to do. We really didn't have any eyes or ears in that part of the country. When the ambassador traveled to the North, it was to show the flag briefly rather than to open new reporting avenues. He simply couldn't afford the personnel to send out to the border areas and to the interior to report on economic activity or human rights abuses.

Q: Well, on the legislative side, I mean this is part of your portfolio, how did you find, what did they call it? Was it a congress or an assembly?

BECKER: They had a full-fledged, organized congress, divided into two blocs, a two-party system if you will. There was a pro-government bloc, with right of center politicians and old-line regional patriarchs and powerbrokers, and there was a left-of-center opposition party. The legislators went through the motions, knew the rules of the game, and knew the lines they could cross and could not cross. Most were biding their time. Many were veterans and survivors of the pre-1964 flowering of democracy, and some were really afraid of their own past. They were allowed to operate within limited bounds and understood that things could be a lot worse. In many ways, all of them were bought off by the military government. They had position and benefits, and they were given a limited functional area in which they could operate. They could debate the budget. They could pass laws that didn't infringe on the national power arrangement. They had a functioning legislature, but it was strictly circumscribed by the constitution at the time and I think by their own lack of initiative or daring. These were the people who emerged in '85 as the core of the political leadership when the military finally turned over power.

Q: When you were at that time, was there the sort of a feeling from the embassy that we're marking time?

BECKER: Yes, I believe so. We had an issue focus. We understood that the military was there, they didn't have any effective opposition. We weren't beating on tier doors for them to leave power. We argued that they needed to make definite plans, a timetable, and prepare the country for return to democracy. We argued that elections had to be much more credible and had to be competitive, but by and large, we were dealing with a big country. We were dealing with a self-assertive country and a proud country. This is a quality that all Brazilians shared regardless of class or political stripe. They did not look to the United States as their salvation or even as their inspiration for the most part. They were proud of being Brazilians. They were going to find Brazilian solutions to Brazilian problems. The flip side of that was they didn't blame the United States for everything that went wrong in their country.

Q: Yes, a delight.

BECKER: In that respect it was delightful to deal with the Brazilians. They were mature. There were many points of disagreement, but there were also points of agreement. We were the two largest, most influential countries on the continent. One thing the United States wanted Brazil to do was play a more active role in international economic fora. We thought Brazil would take a much more responsible position on a whole range of international issues if they played with the other big boys. Some in Washington were frustrated with the knee-jerk leftist policies of left-leaning Mexican governments, which were prepared to exercise clout in international affairs. Whether it was in the G-77 or the United Nations, Brazil was just unwilling to step up to the plate. We knew for example that Brazil maintained very vibrant ties to other former Portuguese colonies in Africa. We thought that Brazil could play a moderating or constructive role in Angola, where the civil war posed a threat to our interests in southern Africa. In Mozambique, there was a Marxist government at that time. We understood that Brazil had equities and influence in both countries, and we wanted them to play an active role congruent with our interest in trying to move Africa towards greater stability.

Q: Was Argentina at this time '78 to '80 sort of the menace that was used in various things or not?

BECKER: Yes, yes. Even though the demographics and the economics clearly show that there was no real competition - the state of Sao Paulo out produced the entire Argentine economy. Brazil's economy, with all of its problems, was still very expansive. It was growing. Brazil was flexing its international economic muscle, whereas Argentina was in the pits. Its military had mismanaged its economy. It had allowed the feuds with the Peronistas and other popular political groups to dissipate its economic and political energies. But in Brazil the big focus was the threat posed by Argentina. My family and I had just arrived in Brazil in April '78 and I got the full flavor of all of the Brazil-Argentina rivalry during the World Cup in June of '78. Argentina was the host country and, as so often happened, it really came down to Brazil versus Argentina for the whole kit and caboodle. I mean the whole country stopped in its tracks to watch the drama unfold. All of the passion and all of the anger and all of the hopes and wishes and desires that the nation will redeem all of the promise of the past if only we could win the World Cup. Well, Argentina won the World Cup. You got a flavor through sports, sort of like the U.S.-Soviet competition at the Olympics.

Q: In hockey particularly.

BECKER: But nothing could match the frenzy, the insanity that took place during the World Cup month of June. We had just arrived in-country so we were not at all prepared.

Q: How did you find the media in Brazil at that time?

BECKER: It's funny. This was my first exposure to Latin American media coming from Romania. I mean Brazil was a free country as far as I was concerned. There were lots of consumer goods, people seemed affluent and generally positive by comparison, and the media reported on everything, or so it seemed. It was sensationalist media for the most part, headline seeking media. It was also highly competitive media. I'm talking about the print media. The electronic media was still pretty much in its infancy and TV was very much official TV. There were huge media corporations - O Globo, the Rio-based media empire, and O Estado de Sao Paulo basically competed for influence through national newspapers and TV stations with national reach. Folha de Sao Paulo had an edgier format as well as more middle-of-the-road political content. It was a mark of the military regime's self-confidence that it tolerated a degree of criticism in the media. Most political issues of the day did seem to play out in the media. The media represented a wide spectrum of political opinion, but was a mostly harmless outlet for those who had little active voice in the country's governance.

Q: What about back to living in Brasilia did everything sort of shut down on the weekend and the people left or not?

BECKER: It had that flavor. It was already getting to the point where it was exceedingly expensive to travel home to Rio or Sao Paulo for the weekend. Those who could continued to do so. It was a four day work-week, in some cases a three day work week, as those Brazilians, civil servants mainly, who could left town. Brasilia was like Washington, DC before the Kennedy Center was built. It was the seat of government and little else. When government wasn't operating, it was deadly dull. Social life revolved around sports and recreational clubs, and a lot of informal diplomatic work was done in these venues. The military attachï¿½s hung out at the luxurious army and navy clubs. There was also a diplomatic club in Brasilia, a tennis club, a golf club, a riding club and a yacht club, among others. Brasilia was set on a man-made lake, which was heavily polluted.

Q: I would think it would get almost island happy there.

BECKER: You did because the distances were so great. If you could not fly out to the coast, your option was to drive 60 miles or so to Goiania, the largest state capital in the region. It was a two-day drive just to get to Belo Horizonte. Unless you had a four wheel drive vehicle, you wouldn't think of driving all the way to the northeast coast. Air travel was the only way to escape Brasilia, so the capital was very much an island. But we had small kids, like many embassy families, and we were not inclined to go anywhere anyway. Because of its size, importance and complexity, the embassy was never very well integrated, even though we did live in an embassy compound. The more senior officers had very good housing across the lake - spacious, modern, with great views. The rest of us were crammed into old, decaying, not very presentable apartment buildings, all of which had been concessions from the Brazilian government when the city was founded. The Americans got first pick of these apartments. Well, what happened was that those apartments 15 or 18 years later had been superseded by more modern construction, but they were still the ones assigned to us. The navy ministry's apartments were adjacent to ours, the foreign ministry's bloc of apartments was across the highway, the health ministry's was down the road. There was a common denominator. All of us felt isolated and ghettoized, and those of us who couldn't get out of town made the best of the circumstances. Of all my Foreign Service posts, Brasilia had the worst living conditions for most of the staff. Senior post management seemed highly indifferent to these conditions.

It was ironic that the political appointee ambassador who came on board in 1981, after career diplomat Sayre left, was so appalled at the situation that he immediately ordered the housing arrangements be modified, upgraded and made more livable for families. Officers were attracted to Brasilia only because it was an important post, families with small children and limited finances survived in Brasilia, but single people found the physical and social environment stifling. There was no cultural life to speak of. There were a few restaurants and movie theaters. Because we lived in a compound, privacy was a rare commodity. Everybody knew what everybody else was or wasn't doing. It just wasn't a very healthy living environment. As I learned during my career, living conditions, and the degree of support that post management gives to that set of issues, are a major precondition for how well the embassy functions and how satisfied employees are with their overall working environment.

Q: Speaking of that you ended up as staff assistant to the ambassador.

BECKER: Yes.

Q: How did you find that?

BECKER: The new ambassador, Robert Sayre, came on board late in 1978 and decided that the ambassador to Brazil needed a staff assistant. However, the State Department was not programming new staff assistant positions even at major class one posts like Brasilia. The ambassador was intent getting one, probably more as a status symbol than as a management or support tool. He had a highly competent secretary, a senior secretary who resented anybody else assuming what she saw were her administrative prerogatives and roles, and especially her gatekeeper role. She saw the staff assistant as a rival. But the order that went out and the DCM, George High, assembled all the junior officers and announced that one of them would be chosen as a half-time staff assistant to the ambassador. He (all the junior officers at that time were male) would have an office next to the ambassador and his workload in whatever section he was being pulled out of would be reduced accordingly. The aide's responsibilities would be to go through the incoming cable traffic and correspondence for policy content, act as a gate-keeper for the ambassador, and manage some of the interagency office issues. This was obviously a role distinct from that of a secretary, even if the secretary didn't see it that way.

We were all lined up, five or six of us. I asked the DCM to take my name out of this running. I wasn't interested. I said something to the effect that I was happy and productive as a full-time political officer, and being a staff assistant was not part of my career plan. (I had already turned down one "opportunity" to serve as a staff assistant in an assistant secretary's office when I joined the Department.) I don't know whether that word went up to the ambassador, but I wasn't chosen that time around. However, the next year the JOs went through the same process and were told, "You the man!" I tried to decline, but was warned that you didn't decline such an assignment. After that, George High and I became very close. Whenever I had an issue I couldn't resolve myself, I went to him because the ambassador was not that approachable. Besides, I had this continuing and increasingly bitter feud with his secretary. I could not get her to be part of the team, to accept the new reality that had been imposed on both of us. I must admit that the job came with a rush of power, since there were senior agency and section heads that had to come to me to get access to the ambassador. I didn't have the fortitude to tell them that I was having the same problem getting the ambassador's attention. So I said, "Here's how you can solve your problem." Most of them seemed to go away happy that somehow, even though they couldn't get in to see the ambassador, I may have been the next best thing. Here I am a second-tour officer who's managing the relationships within the embassy among the senior staff, who were all powers in their own right.

Q: Did you get any feel for the foreign policy apparatus of Brazil? It's often touted as being very good.

BECKER: I did, because we got to know our Brazilian counterparts quite well. Many of them lived just across the way and we socialized.

Q: Were they as unhappy as everyone else?

BECKER: They're just as unhappy as everybody else. Most Brazilians are born and raised within 100 miles of the coast. When they are suddenly plopped 1,500 miles into the interior, the results are often highly stressful and distressful. The foreign ministry was the last ministry to relocate from Rio, and even though the capital was founded in the late '50s, they hung on for 10 years before they actually moved the foreign ministry to Brasilia. They were the last diehard contingent, and they continually recalled how wonderful it was when they were in Rio and bemoaned their current circumstances. So we had a lot in common, including the fact that we were all professional diplomats. Brazilian service had a rigorous entry process for diplomats, giving their recruits a two year apprenticeship, the equivalent of a master's degree, whereas we recruited people who already had practical experience and tried to turn them overnight into diplomats. They had a two-year A100 program and every Brazilian diplomat who came in already spoke fluent English and fluent French as well as Portuguese, and they understood Spanish as well because the two languages are cousins. They were all ready very well equipped with basic skills, but they were an elite service to be sure. Obviously you didn't get that kind of education coming off the streets and there were very few Brazilian diplomats who came from humble background. It was a career service in the sense that everybody from the bottom up, even the top people assigned as ambassadors and DCMs overseas as well as the people who ran the foreign ministry, were career officers. They had a lot of pride. Brazilian diplomats were respected and admired by most of other diplomatic services, and I think they were acknowledged by the European and other developed countries' services as peers, not as the patronage driven or throwaway diplomatic services that other developing countries have.

Q: Did you get any feel speaking of that.

BECKER: But they were tough negotiators, they knew what they wanted and they were all nationalists sometimes in the best sense of the word. You were dealing with them in a professional manner all the time.

Q: Did you get any feeling there for how sort of the Brazilian at least at the center attitude towards its Spanish speaking neighbors all of whom were in one form of turmoil or another?

BECKER: As I said earlier that the Brazilians were very nationalistic and very self-confident about their own identity. They were a great power. They knew that there were more Brazilians in South America than there were Spanish speakers. They tended to look down on the small countries as being in a different category, but they also understood that the Spanish speakers and Spanish speaking countries were more numerous and more influence worldwide. They were also aware of the disdain in some Hispanic countries about the Afro-Portuguese culture in Brazil. What Brazilians regarded as an element of national pride, the Argentines and some others treated Brazilians with a good deal of condescension and racism. The people at the top in most Hispanic countries, Mexico being an immediate example, were white European and proud of it, regardless of how they arrived at that "pure" state. I mean Argentina and Chile solved their racial problems in the 17th and 18th centuries by wiping out all of the indigenous populations and then not allowing African immigration.

Q: Well, did.

BECKER: The Brazilian foreign ministry, because it was a professional service, always wanted a much more assertive policy in foreign affairs than the society was willing to do to support.

Q: How about Mexico when you were there? Was Mexico trying to work for equal status or what have you there, did you get any feel for that?

BECKER: I never served in Mexico, but only visited a few times. I had a non-standard diplomatic portfolio in Brasilia and I do not recall having daily dealings with most of the other diplomats in town. My beat was internal politics. I had a domestic constituency and those were the people I cultivated and tried to understand.

Q: This is tape four, side one with Rick Becker. Yes?

BECKER: The diplomatic dynamics were something that I was somewhat distant from.

Q: Well, how did you survive your time as ambassador's assistant?

BECKER: Poorly. Poorly. Well, I had gotten exceedingly good, in fact excellent EER ratings in Romania, but they tended to languish in Brazil particularly during the year that I was the staff assistant. If the ambassador had found value in what I did, it was not really reflected in my EER. The DCM was much more knowledgeable and much more appreciative about what I did and the political counselor who actually did the other part of my EER did not assert himself on my behalf, although I tried to get him to pry me away from what I found was a very thankless staff job. I turned down staff jobs throughout my career both before and since and probably with good reason. I looked myself in the mirror and said, "You are not that kind of person."

Q: I've watched people, interviewed many people who have had staff jobs and often this is the key to success and all and I just know this wasn't for me. I'm just no good at that.

BECKER: I know at the very beginning of my career, while I was still in A-100, I was invited up to the front office of PM because the executive assistant there saw my name on the list. We had been graduate school buddies. He had left graduate school earlier and so he was much more senior than me. He was going to do me a favor because they were looking for somebody, a staff assistant in that office at that time headed by George Vest, Ambassador George Vest. He regaled me about how important this job was and how we would be rubbing shoulders with senior State Department officials. I asked innocently, "Well, what would I be doing?" He said, "You will be taking papers from here and putting them there, and you will be organizing reading files for our boss, and you will be tracking events and issues and taskings and all of that for the bureau." I basically told my friend, "Thanks, but no thanks. I joined the Foreign Service to serve overseas and this isn't how I want to start out my career." I've been running from staff positions almost ever since.

Q: Then, Rick in 1980 you were off. Whither?

BECKER: It was impressed upon me that after two overseas tours I ought to go back to Washington, and it was also impressed upon me that the best job you could have in Washington - unless you wanted a staff job on the 7th floor, which I quickly rejected - was as a country desk officer. But there were very few such desk jobs at my rank that I could move into. I was initially recruited to be the desk officer for Paraguay and Uruguay. I thought this would be a very good opportunity. Coming from Brazil, I wanted to continue working in the Western Hemisphere bureau, ARA at that time. I already had punched my ticket in the Southern Cone, and I envisioned a smooth transition to a Washington assignment.

Then the bureau informed me that there were very few officers in the Uruguayan and Paraguayan embassies in Washington who spoke good English, and I spoke only Portuguese, so they preferred to get a Spanish speaker for that job. They offered to put me on the Brazil desk, which had four people and needed an officer with recent Brazil experience. Nobody else had it. How would I like to be the economic officer, because this was the one job available on that desk? I felt like a supplicant, as there wasn't anything else coming my way. It sounded fine to me. I could continue working on Brazil and it would seguï¿½ very well into the Department and Washington. This was before FSI had a Washington statecraft course and other tools that would ease your way in. Rather, you learned by the seat of your pants how to function in the Department. So, I came back to Washington. On my first consultation with the office director, he said, "You may want to start looking for another assignment." I said, "What, sir?" This was a senior officer. Later he would be an ambassador. He continued, "Well, you know, I want to be perfectly honest, I needed somebody who had served in Brazil. I haven't served in Brazil in 15 years. The other two officers in the office have never served in Brazil. I need somebody who knows the country, who knows the issues, has a feel for what's going on, but I really want a real economist and you're not one. So you may start looking around." Well, I sort of dismissed this as wishful meandering on his part, but when he mentioned it two months later I started taking him seriously. I figured this is not going to be a very warm, fuzzy relationship, and indeed for other reasons it turned out not to be a very warm, fuzzy relationship.

By mutual consent I decided I would curtail after one year on the desk, and I signed up for mid-level training. I was going to be assigned as labor officer in Quito, Ecuador, one of the very few people who went into professional training actually knowing where I was going afterwards. I had a year of training after that, but my education into the Department politics and bureaucratics was not an easy one. It was a very rough year.

Q: You said there were some other factors.

BECKER: Yes, the other factor principally was that is the office director continually found fault and who had no sense of team. When he received criticism from the ARA front office, he was quick to turn on one of his subordinates. We had a very demanding front office headed by at that time, this was 1980, which was an election year, and there were a lot of demands.

Q: Tom Enders.

BECKER: Tom Enders was the outgoing assistant secretary. No, Bill Bowdler was the outgoing. Tom Enders was the new assistant secretary.

Q: He came in in '81 and Bowdler.

BECKER: It was a brutal changeover. All of Bowdler's DASs were spread to the winds. Jim Cheek, Bob Service, and others.

Q: I was just a couple of days ago interviewing Ron Godard.

BECKER: He was the executive assistant.

Q: He was in the front office there.

BECKER: That's where I first knew Ron. It was quite brutal. It was itself an education, but there were a lot of pressures because Brazil was one of the key issue areas at that time. It became a campaign issue between the Republicans and the Democrats in the '80 elections. Were we being fair to a great power? Were we not getting what we needed or wanted from Brazil? There were several key people in the Republican campaign who were Brazil specialists and who definitely wanted Brazil to be a campaign issue. I was invited as a desk officer to address a world affairs forum in Connecticut during the fall of '80. I had been on the desk only three or four months. It was in mid-campaign and I found out that somebody in the Department didn't do his or her job. The office learned only a few days before I was to go up and speak on U.S.-Brazil relations that I would share the podium with an academic, Roger Fontaine, a Brazil specialist who was also a senior Reagan campaign advisor. His presence had been set up by the head of the local world affairs council precisely, we concluded, to entrap the State Department and make some headlines. The big question was whether or not the Department would pull the plug on me and substitute a more senior representative. My boss didn't show a lot of confidence in me, but decided either he couldn't spare anybody else or else this junior officer could be treated as a sacrificial lamb. Whatever I said could be disabused later on. I went up to Connecticut knowing full well that I was being set up, not only by the sponsors of the program, but by the State Department because they couldn't do any better on short notice. I thought I acquitted myself fairly well, but it was a distasteful experience. I didn't win any brownie points with my boss, anyway.

I also had to learn how to deal with the media as a desk officer. This was very much trial and error. I felt in command of my subject matter and therefore confident to talk to the press. What I was not confident to do was to distinguish who was the legitimate press and who was not the legitimate press. Again, I was not tutored or mentored. I was just roundly criticized for even having contact with the media. So, all of that added up to a very unfortunate experience. I had a colleague on the desk who managed to stab herself with a pair of scissors because the boss' demands made her exceedingly nervous. At least I left that job without having shed any blood, anybody else's or my own.

Q: Did you find though that when you got there, did you find that there was a problem on the desk, that they really didn't have any Brazilian Brazilness in their makeup?

BECKER: I thought my recent experience brought value added to the desk. I'm not sure that in the overall scheme of things this mattered too much, since Brazil policy was being handled at a fairly high level, which is what frequently happens when you're dealing with an important country. You prepare papers. You have an embassy there which gives you all the raw material and provides all the backup that you need, but you're not flying blind. I had a feel for the country and I knew people in Brazil. Indeed, the same year I transferred there were a number of Brazilian foreign ministry officials that transferred to their embassy in Washington. I had a ready-made relationship with key people in the Brazilian embassy in Washington from the moment I arrived. That was one of the things I brought from my Brazil experience. As it turns out, it was not something that was valued. I think, given the opportunity, I might have been able to shed more light on Brazilian sensibilities, the limits of Brazilian flexibility on both the human rights and the nuclear issues, simply from osmosis, from having known Brazilians and having known how they reacted when we raised these issues, rather than looking at these issues in more or less academic or policy terms. Policy was being handled at such a high level that I don't think any of my inputs really were factored in. Had there been more Brazilian hands on the desk, I am not sure that it would have changed policy particularly. Brazil policy had been a divisive issue in the Reagan campaign.

Q: Well, did you find, I mean you weren't there overly long, but was there a major change or did you see a real change in our approach to Brazil when the Reagan group came in?

BECKER: No, I didn't. The Reagan administration came in with the idea that we could always extract more from Brazil on the nuclear issue than we were getting under the Democrats, and that our human rights concerns were overblown and needed to be removed from the negotiating table. But the Republican administration was not prepared to hit Brazil as hard as they said they would during the campaign. They would not go to the wall on Brazil's nuclear development because they were looking at bigger strategic issues. They very much wanted Brazil to play a more constructive role in international economic and political fora, so they pushed aside our hard differences despite their previous opposition to Carter administration policies. They were not prepared to do it any better.

Q: So often that's the case. The actual facts on the ground really dictate what most of our policy is.

BECKER: Roger Fontaine ended up at the NSC, where I continued to have dealings with him, but by the time the new administration was well ensconced, I was out the door. It didn't make any difference to me.

Q: in your training to go to Quito, I take it you took Spanish among other things?

BECKER: I took Spanish. I had the benefit of a conversion course which was three weeks one on one with a Spanish teacher to beat all of that nasty Portuguese out of me and then they thrust me into the final weeks of a regular Spanish course and it worked. It really worked well. In less than half the time of a full course I went out to Quito with better than 3/3 in Spanish. I had a very strong Brazilian accent. The people in Ecuador didn't know where the hell I was coming from.

Q: Tell me about the labor course and what was the thrust of it at the time?

BECKER: Since I had become a labor officer almost by default because somebody else didn't want the job in Brasilia, my work there apparently caught some people's attention in Washington. Given the chance to do labor work and particularly in Ecuador, I also had a great opportunity take a semester of university labor training. I figured after my experience on the Brazil desk, I needed a break. I got a call, I think it was in August, and was told to pack up my bags, as I had been enrolled at Harvard for a semester. I had a wife and two kids here in Washington. We had just bought a house in Reston and I replied, "No I'm not leaving town. You won't pay to relocate my family and I'm not about to become a northeast corridor commuter. You can get me into Georgetown." The Department had contracts with three universities for labor training in those days. Cornell had a very prestigious industrial relations program. Harvard had a very strong international labor program. Georgetown's program didn't quite measure up to the other two, but it had the advantage for me of being in Washington, and this made it much more policy oriented. In Washington there was access to all of the resources and institutions of America's labor leadership, especially the headquarters of the AFL-CIO and the lobbying offices of all the major national trade unions. So I attended Georgetown for a semester. I can also say for the rest of my life that I turned down Harvard.

Since I already had a doctorate, I arranged with the professors at Georgetown that I would not work toward a degree or certificate program. Other people in the international labor program were seeking a master's degree or something beyond that. I could care less about grades or credits. I would do the assignments, but I wanted to audit. The international labor program turned out to be a superb experience. I took four courses, a full academic load. One was "History of U.S. Labor in International Affairs." Another was a graduate seminar in labor-management relations that included case studies and negotiating skills. I also took a graduate course in comparative economic development, which I found exceedingly difficult. I was in with a lot of high powered economics students who had B.A.s in the subject. The program rounded out with an independent study with an AFL-CIO senior advisor who was teaching part time at Georgetown. For this course I wrote a mini-master's thesis on the development of public service unions in the United States.

Q: Did you find, this must have been an interesting time to be looking at the labor movement really in the United States because of the sort of the Reagan push particularly at the beginning of being not really very pro-union.

BECKER: Well, one of Reagan's first targets was the air traffic controller's union, which he literally dismantled. But there were also a lot of interesting things going on in the labor movement, especially in the public sector. There were arguments within AFSA about whether the organization should remain a professional association or actually start acting like a union by defending the rights and interests of its members vis-ï¿½-vis State Department management.

Q: AFSA being?

BECKER: American Foreign Service Association, the State Department's exclusive bargaining agent according to the Foreign Service Act of 1980. I had been an AFSA member since joining the Foreign Service, probably part of my liberal political orientation but also because some of the jobs I had while growing up underscored the need for effective advocacy on behalf of workers. AFSA later represented USIA and AID employees, who initially affiliated with American Federation of Government Employees. Georgetown was a great laboratory, and the timing was excellent. The economy was in a shambles because of the inflationary effects of two Arab oil crises in the '70s. When I signed the papers for my first mortgage in 1981, the interest rate was 14-plus percent. The economy was in a downward slide, public confidence was at a low, and obviously Reagan had taken advantage of these conditions to defeat Carter for the presidency in 1980. The trade unions allied with civil rights and other socially active organizations to mount a huge march on Washington against poverty in the summer of 1981.

Q: Did you feel that at that up for a long time you might say the former communists who became extreme anti-communists were very influential in the labor movement. I want to say _____ or.

BECKER: Yes?

Q: I mean this role.

BECKER: The U.S. labor movement was by this time a very conservative force in American society. They had built a reputation after World War II of vigorously challenging communist politicians and union organizers, both in the U.S. and abroad. They claimed to have uncovered communists even where they probably didn't exist. This campaign may have had greater validity in Europe than in the U.S. in the late '40s, when in fact labor's allegiances could in fact determine the composition of governments in France, Italy and other countries. It was also not terribly relevant for what was going on in Latin America, as I later learned.

Q: I was going to say.

BECKER: Because labor movements were recognized as having a great deal of influence on national politics in all of these countries, it was U.S. policy to ally with the AFL-CIO to offer an alternative to politicized labor relations, to try and get unions to focus on bread-and-butter issues. Interestingly enough, this was very much Lula's orientation at the very beginning, because the big labor organizations in Brazil never paid any attention to basic bread-and-butter issues at the industry or plant level. Most Latin American union leaders never really addressed the worker's specific interests in living wages, tolerable working conditions or job security except as part of a big push to influence national politics. Indeed, in most of the countries in Latin America, the great gains made by workers did not come from union activity, but from the largesse and the populist policies of governments whether Argentina's Peronistas, Peru's Apristas or the PRI in Mexico. The unions tagged along, but workers looked to the state for protection and benefits. The unions became bureaucratized, politicized and ultimately irresponsible in how they treated workers and how they served workers. In that sense the bread and butter issue model in the U.S. was a very valid approach to take, notwithstanding the fact that the resources put in the hands of the U.S. labor movement by the Congress were primarily motivated by a desire to fight communism in every little, every potentially unstable Third World country.

Q: Well, did you feel when you went out, what was this '80?

BECKER: '82.

Q: '82.

BECKER: In '82 I arrived in Ecuador.

Q: Did you feel as you went out that the hand of the AFL-CIO was resting on your shoulder? In other words, that it was going to be somebody to whom you had to pay due or basis or something like that?

BECKER: I had heard this in Washington, but it was never expressed in so many words. I quickly found out when you go out as a labor officer you are an oddball in the embassy. You don't belong to anybody, nobody really understands what you do, and nobody really appreciates where it fits into the overall scheme of embassy priorities. I was already pretty well settled in Quito when the new ambassador arrived. As part of our initial consultations, he asked me what I did. I briefly described my job. He said his impression of labor officers and of how the U.S. pursued labor relations abroad was like porcupines making love. You do it very carefully and very gingerly to avoid dire consequences. Then he gave me this advice. "Keep doing what you're doing, but I don't want the first hint of any trouble between you and your labor constituents that could bring disrepute on me or the embassy." It was not a sterling endorsement of the labor function. That said, Ecuador was an interesting environment in which the labor movement was deeply divided among unions federations, only some of which were, shall we say, AFL-CIO constituents.

Q: We've put quite a bit of money into it.

BECKER: We'd put a lot of money into establishing a U.S. labor footprint in Latin America. At that time nearly every country had an AFL-CIO institute, headed by a U. S. citizen country representative. The parent institute was AIFLD, American Institute for Free Labor Development. AID was always uncomfortable with its responsibility for the AIFLD program, whose budget was centrally administered by AID Washington. AIFLD was officially a contracted agency, but because it had so much independent clout in Washington, it didn't act like one of AID's usual dependencies or supplicants and didn't feel bound by AID rules or oversight. So there was constant friction between the AID mission director, who didn't have that much actual control over the local AIFLD operation. There were constant points of friction, tests of who controlled what, how programs should be structured, and whether they would be consistent with other AID programs in country. The AID program in Ecuador was very large, and AIFLD was viewed by many AID officers as money down the drain. AID directors and program officers were just as happy seeing someone else, in this case the labor officer, take an interest in AIFLD. AID often left practical oversight in my hands, even though I had no fiduciary responsibility. I was expected to be the broker, the referee or the policeman in any dispute that arose with AIFLD. To paraphrase the ambassador's views, I was supposed to make sure the porcupines made love according to the rules.

In addition to the trade unions sponsored or cultivated by AIFLD, there was a Christian socialist trade union confederation. These unions were another manifestation of liberation theology in Latin America. They were loosely sponsored by the Catholic Church. They were less likely to be industrial unions; but more often traditional artisan or agricultural cooperatives, small merchant or vendor associations, or indigenous groups. In a less developed country like Ecuador these can have a great deal of influence.

Then there were the Marxists, the communist led labor confederation. So, there was a three-way, interwoven competition for the loyalty of workers and influence on government policy. It was an exciting place to do labor work, which was only part of my portfolio. I also had a lot of internal political reporting, similar to what I did in Brazil.

Q: You were there from '82 to?

BECKER: '85.

Q: '85. I think this is probably a good place to stop before we get into this and we'll pick this up when you were in Ecuador '82 to '85. You're the labor officer. We haven't talked about what the situation the basic situation was in Ecuador at the time and then we will pick up sort of how you mentioned the three labor unions, how they were operating, were they delivering to the workers or were these sort of basic political organizations that really weren't representing the workers and how the embassy worked and all that. How's that?

BECKER: Sounds good.

Q: Today is the 3rd of December, 2004. We're off to Ecuador, '82 to '85. You heard the questions I was asking, what was the situation there Rick when you arrived?

BECKER: Let me take a slight detour. Yesterday the Washington Post reported on page 23 the assassination of a U.S. labor organizer in El Salvador.

Q: I saw that.

BECKER: Page 23. Recalling that in the same epoch that I was working in Ecuador, U.S. and local labor organizers were under great physical threat in many Latin American countries. In fact, three organizers were assassinated in El Salvador around 1981. That was front page news then. The incident was portrayed as part of the contest between the forces of light and darkness in Central America by the Reagan administration, which of course was indifferent if not hostile to worker rights at home. Now the topic would be relegated to page 23. Labor rights, irrespective of the great Cold War contest, is a real human rights issue in much of the Third World, particularly in Latin America where there is growing political awareness and activism and where all kinds of groups exist to either exploit workers or else feed their frustrations. Ecuador had emerged from a prolonged military dictatorship in '79. When I arrived, the first democratically elected government was in power. The 1984 presidential elections in Ecuador would be the first test of democratic succession. Our own national elections in 1984 were a referendum on Ronald Reagan's first term of office.

To reprise, there were three major trade union movements in Ecuador and a lot of independent splinter groups. There was a communist trade union movement generally conceded as sympathetic to and influenced by Havana and Moscow. There was also a Maoist splinter group oriented toward Beijing at odds with the dominant communist organization. There was a Christian Democratic or Christian Socialist labor organization, which claimed inspiration from the Catholic Church's liberation theology of the '60s. This organization sought to mobilize artisans, peasant cooperatives, the self-employed, even small merchants, as well as labor unions, anybody who would pay dues and boost membership. Then there was the social democratic labor movement which, if not founded and structured by the AFL-CIO, was certainly heavily subsidized and under the influence of U.S. trade union principles and practices. There was a great deal of territory to be sowed, regardless of the great contest for ideological superiority and supremacy. In fact, humanitarian concerns and human rights were much more valid than anti-communism as a foundation for pursuing U.S. objectives in the Ecuadorian labor movement. It really came down to trying to moderate the political ambitions of so-called democratic labor leaders, while empowering local unions to deliver essential services to their members, in lieu of fickle, manipulative populist governments or other political movements that did not have the worker's interests at heart. I spent a lot of time working arm-in-arm with the local AFL-CIO representative meeting with and cultivating trade union leaders on behalf of the U.S. government.

Q: You were saying the AFL-CIO representative was an American.

BECKER: They were American citizens. Most of them were of Latino origin. The AIFLD director in Ecuador at the time was Cuban born, a former sugar worker organizer in the pre-Castro period. He had taken his lumps as an organizer in other countries before he came to Ecuador. He was a very effective representative of North American trade unionism, to my mind. He was black and thus put a slightly different face on U.S. labor diplomacy. Interestingly enough, AIFLD trod a fine line between serving as a representative of U.S. labor and being an arm of U.S. foreign policy. They had a difficult time dealing with some aspects of Reagan administration policy, and they were not beyond biting the hand that fed them because they had their own power base in Washington.

Q: Well, did you ever find yourself at cross-purposes?

BECKER: On occasion I served as a kind of mediator between the AID bureaucrats and the AIFLD country director, trying to get both of them to look at what AIFLD was doing as a common developmental activity, even if it wasn't organized down to the last paper clip by AID. AIFLD would lose its effectiveness if perceived by local labor leaders as an arm of the U.S. government, but nonetheless we needed to guarantee that AIFLD would behave in a responsible manner. Even though AIFLD was not a force for revolution in Latin America, it was a force for change. It mobilized and supported workers to demand better wages and working conditions from employers, some of which happened to be major U.S. investors. In Ecuador this included the big oil companies and banana producers, among other industrial concerns. Besides supporting U.S. business expansion abroad, the Reagan administration was pursuing aggressive, very unpopular policies in Cuba and Central America. In addition to representing these policies on behalf of the embassy, I was often caught in the middle of bureaucratic and policy tussles with these two elephants, AID and AIFLD, which were not inclined to listen closely to each other.

Q: What was your impression of unions you were dealing with? In some countries unions as you alluded to before are really just ways of getting a bunch of people together to give political power to the leaders who after basically political influence as opposed to delivering better conditions to the workers. Where did the ones in Ecuador stand?

BECKER: Well, despite its high sounding rhetoric about building democratic labor unions, AIFLD too often fell into the trap of developing clients that remained dependent on AIFLD's good graces. AIFLD thought nothing of interfering in union elections to favor one faction over another. That said, the AIFLD director in Ecuador was instrumental in creating a labor training institute and selling the idea to his superiors in Washington. There was a recognition that the top labor leadership was to some extent unresponsive to a more, let's say, rational or politically less self-serving approach to organizing, and the institute was an attempt to leapfrog that leadership through labor education. The institute was designed to get labor organizing skills and basic knowledge of economics and worker issues into the hands of local labor activists. I remember AIFLD put together a very good primer on worker education, and the AIFLD director, AID mission and the local labor organizations collaborated closely to develop this institute. I think it was, by and large, quite successful. It actually produced some publications that were used in other countries by other AIFLD missions. The initiative was seen as somewhat of a model for really getting nuts and bolts, bread and butter educational issues on labor, including occupational health, organizing techniques, or providing social services to members. The trade unions legitimized themselves by providing services and benefits which the government or other entities were unable to do. Most unions of any size had social programs that extended beyond the work place and assisted worker families. I found this to be very much in line with AID's philosophy of self-help, if not AID's practice, and I spent a good deal of time publicizing what AIFLD was doing, utilizing the success stories I found in the field to gain support within the embassy and AID for these programs. I felt I had my finger on the pulse of what was going on politically and socially in the country, maybe more than some of my political or economic section colleagues, and was able to report back on what was going on. Particularly as we moved into the electoral season in '84, I was able to contribute significantly to the embassy's understanding and appreciation of the contest between the Ecuadorian political parties and where organized labor was lining up.

Q: Well, in Ecuador at this time, how would you describe the power of, I'm not sure it's the right term, businessmen, manufacturers, in other words, the leaders, the people who employed workers?

BECKER: Ecuador was, and remains to a very large extent, an agricultural country. It was also a country that was divided both geographically and socially between two poles of power, Guayaquil on the coast and Quito up in the highlands. Most political groups identified more geographically than in any other way, and most candidates represented a geographic more than an ideological base. Some of the more conservative political forces came out of the highlands, whose economic power fed off the government's control of oil revenues. On the other side, there were the traditional coastal commercial and agricultural interests, banking, bananas, sugar, shipping, export-import activities. Ecuador is probably the largest banana producer and exporter in the world, and a lot of labor organizing in the industry occurred in Guayaquil. Guayaquil at the time was run by the Bucaram family, descendants of Lebanese immigrants, very populist and corrupt even by Ecuadorian standards. The family was not above sending thugs out to break up opposition rallies and shaking down economic and political organizations. This was probably done on a much smaller scale in the highlands, where old family names, old money and old political loyalties tended to hold sway. Even though we were based in Quito and had a consulate in Guayaquil, the consulate was not well staffed for reporting, and I found myself going down to the coast quite often to test the political waters and report on developments.

Q: Did you ever find yourself bumping noses with the what's the name of the family?

BECKER: The Bucaram family.

Q: Bucaram family.

BECKER: Personally no, but an embassy colleague was accused in a major Guayaquil newspaper, controlled by this family, of carrying black bags of money from the U.S. government down to Guayaquil to pay off one of the members of the family, or at least try to. It was a standing joke that the embassy had its designated bagman. The fact is, we could not be any further politically or ideologically from this family dynasty in Guayaquil nor them from us. The electoral contest in 1984 tended to turn on two major candidates, one representing the center-left social democratic party of an established Quito family, a archetypical Latin American intellectual man of letters, versus a U.S.- educated, politically conservative cowboy type who was supported by the Guayaquil political machine. The embassy was quite torn about how to approach this political contest. In the end, Washington tilted very visibly in favor of the conservative cowboy, who claimed to emulate Ronald Reagan, whereas most of us in the embassy argued for maintaining neutrality between democratic alternatives and supporting an electoral process and election machinery in which AID was putting a lot of money. We felt U.S. credibility with the Ecuadorian populace was on the line, since this was the first test of democratic succession in the nation's recent history. In '79 the military had ceded power to an elected government and now this government was committed to consolidating the democratic process through fair and free elections. This is often a most difficult test.

Q: Yes.

BECKER: The embassy was quite torn, because there were elements that wanted to help the avowedly pro-Reagan candidate win. Very frankly the ambassador at the time lost it.

Q: Who was he?

BECKER: His name was Sam Hart. He arrived a few months after I did in '82 or in early '83. We were without an ambassador for some period of time and he was apparently under a great deal of pressure from the political leadership in Washington to support the more conservative candidate, to come out on the "right" side of history. Yet those of working in the political trenches warned against any favoritism that would ultimately reflect poorly on the U.S. over the long run. The post had a political appointee AID mission director, who had been brought in late in the first Reagan administration. It was very rare for AID to assign a non-professional as mission director. This man was a retired general in the Puerto Rican Air National Guard retired general. We also had a chief of station who had transferred in from Jamaica, where he claimed to have been personally responsible for leftist Michael Manley's electoral downfall the year before. I have no way of verifying his claim, and I suspect there was a good deal of self-aggrandizement in them, but he certainly made it very clear that he favored employing dirty tricks to tilt the election in Ecuador the right way. All of his proposals were roundly rejected at the embassy, but it was apparent he was advocating electoral manipulations to his superiors in Washington. It eventually become evident to Washington when an embassy country team is divided and the ambassador cannot manage the dissent on his staff.

Q: When you say the ambassador lost it, what did Hart do?

BECKER: One of the worst things you can do as a chief of mission is not build consensus on your country team. If consensus is not possible, at least discipline must be enforced and dissent must be channeled in a constructive way. When you cannot manage dissent on your staff, it can quickly become insubordination and invite separate reporting channels to Washington. Agency headquarters usually do not like to hear the embassy speaking with more than one voice, nor do they want to get involved in embassy affairs to restore order. The ambassador's weakness was further evidenced by a State Department inspection a few months earlier, the only inspection I've ever witnessed that was not to some degree a whitewash and stamp of approval for the ambassador's policies and practices. It was abundantly clear, in retrospect, that someone associated with the inspection teaeither in Washington or on the team itself - wanted to see the ambassador to get a black eye, perhaps to make way for that person's own appointment in his place. There were plenty of irregularities to find if inspectors are looking for them, and this inspection team loaded its report with them, the most serious of which was weak executive office management.

Q: Who was the inspector?

BECKER: I can't remember. There were a couple of names floating around, but for the record, even if I could remember, I probably wouldn't say.

Q: All right. Well, something before we come to the results of this election, but why the hell, I mean Ecuador is not high, I wouldn't think it would be high on anybody's list and all of a sudden you find all these forces converging on this country.

BECKER: Because of what we were confronting in Central America and elsewhere in the Andean region, there was a high level of ideological sensitivity in Washington to how the political winds were blowing. Allen Garcia in Peru was taking that country off flirting with the Cubans and with the Eastern Bloc countries, and there were other governments in the hemisphere that did not see eye to eye with the U.S. on economic development strategies, and there were very few countries that saw eye to eye on what we were purporting to do in Central America, that is, defending the frontiers of freedom against some kind of monolithic communist threat. Elections like this, even in minor countries, became critical tests of U.S. influence and resolve. Yes, Ecuador was not anybody's battle forefront or even in the headlines except when there was a major oil sector strike or disruption in banana shipments. During my tenure there, almost nobody in the embassy got promoted, I believe because working in Ecuador didn't represent a significant professional or foreign policy challenge to those in Washington who sat on promotion panels. Ecuador tended to confirm my theory about promotions. All other things being equal, where you are is makes more impact on the board than how well you're doing your job.

Q: Well, certainly, I sat on a promotion panel one time from OC to MC, whatever and the Middle East always got the attention. You couldn't help it. They were always responsible for being major players in the Middle East process which I remarked at one point during the thing, I said, hell the Middle East process isn't going anywhere. It never has gone anywhere, but still, I mean that's the place to be.

BECKER: Yes, I agree. The fastest promotion I ever got - and I won't say it was undeserved - was when I was sitting along with a lot of my colleagues in the office of East European affairs when the Berlin Wall fell.

Q: Yes.

BECKER: When truly historic transitions were taking place. Virtually all of the desk officers in that office were rewarded, within a two year period, suggesting of course that as desk officers were responsible for those events. All other things being equal, when there is no discernible difference in ability among a couple of hundred employee evaluations, where you are serving and whether that region or that country or that set of issues is on the front page of the newspaper. In many instances, this can and does tilt an otherwise undecided selection board member in favor of certain promotable officers. This person is doing significant work on significant issues and deserves a push upward.

Q: Well, we're back to Ecuador. How about labor? Where was labor weighing in on this American labor?

BECKER: American labor was very clearly aligned with the center left, the social democratic party candidate. Despite the fact that in our quieter moments, we advised that it would be prudent if labor prepared for the possibility that their favored candidate might lose and they would have to deal with the other one as president. That's not something that the AFL-CIO has learned from its own history in the United States. In any event, there was literally nothing we could do about that orientation except to emphasize the need to strengthen basic services through local unions over and above one's political flag waving. One should not lose sight of the long term, that you are building a labor organization, you're building loyalty, you're building a following because you are delivering things of value to the worker, either in the workplace or in terms of social benefits.

Q: Did you find yourself both personally and sort of the field that you were representing having a problem in the embassy?

BECKER: As indicated last time, as long as I operated prudently and did not gain a lot of headlines for the embassy through my labor work, I didn't feel anybody actively opposed what I was doing. I also adopted a practice of outreach towards members of the U.S. business community, particularly through the American Chamber of Commerce in Ecuador, to try and expand their understanding and awareness of international labor organization standards and local labor code requirements. Many of them had been in Ecuador for many years and were presumably aware of those standards, but because they represented U.S. interests felt more or less immune from government retaliation for any potential violation. What I preached to them was that it was more likely than not, the government or the unions would try to make examples of them, whereas a local industry guilty of the same kinds of practices would be able to use its political connections to escape. I developed what I thought were some educational mechanisms, for example roundtables, that actually tried to bring labor leaders together with business leaders to discuss industry concerns. I tried to use the embassy as a focal point to foster healthy or at least less confrontational, less disruptive labor-management relations. I had more luck after I moved on to Panama doing this kind of thing, but I learned a lot about what worked and what didn't work in that area. I built credibility and respect within the embassy and the local U.S community because I may have been initially perceived as the AFL-CIO's attachï¿½, just as the commercial attachï¿½ was seen as the business community's and the Commerce Department's mouthpiece. I was reaching out to the business community to try and bring their level of understanding up to a level where they would be less likely to be surprised by an adverse labor-related development, which could be both expensive and bad for public relations. When a company did show up on the embassy doorstep with a serious labor problem, it was usually after they had been established for some time in the country. My answer would be, "If you had come in a while ago, when you set up shop here, we could have laid out what the actual conditions were and what the government enforcement penchant was, and you might have avoided some of the problems you're facing now. It's too late for me to help. You need a good lawyer."

Q: What did you find though, let's take the two probably major ones, the banana people and the oil people. How were they treated and I'm speaking from the American side. How were they treating their workers?

BECKER: Conditions on the banana plantations, like much of agriculture in Ecuador, were pretty shabby, and indeed organizing the banana workers was a major task. Banana plantations were often feudal empires. No Ecuadorian authority, and certainly no foreign embassy or government, was likely to make major inroads in terms of ensuring that International Labor Organization (ILO) standards were met. Keep in mind that our major effort within the labor movement and within Ecuadorian society was education to improve labor-management relations, workplace conditions and worker rights, all in accordance with international standards to which Ecuador officially adhered. The right to organizing trade union as a way of enforcing worker rights was one of those standards. Our mantra to the government was: "We are ready to help you meet the ILO standards you have accepted." We worked with labor ministries to improve their inspection and enforcement mechanisms, and we tried to the extent possible to educate the business class to the advantages of healthy worker management relations. Strikes were counterproductive in a highly competitive market like bananas. Ecuador took advantage of Central America's political chaos and greatly boosted its market share. We always pointed out that there was always another country ready to seize the moment if Ecuador suffered a major strike with loss of production. We urged the Ecuadorians to raise the level of the worker satisfaction to prevent this eventuality.

And here's where the ideological element comes in. I spent some time and effort trying to get AIFLD, which focused all of its attention on the one-third of the labor movement that was social democratic, to open up its doors - particularly its educational institute doorto dialogue with and cultivate union leaders and organizations which may belong to non-affiliated or rival labor organizations. AFL-CIO was content to preach to the converted. They were not expanding their influence or the services that they could render, and they were not blunting some of the less constructive practices of these other labor organizations. I managed to open the door a crack by convincing the AFL-CIO in Washington, as well as the local AIFLD representative, to accept a certain number of Christian labor leaders into their education programs.

Q: Where did the Christian labor leaders fall in the political spectrum?

BECKER: Politically they were decidedly left of center. They tended to support the Christian Democratic parties, which were really strong in Ecuador, although not in some of the other Latin American countries. The Christian Democratic movement had a lot of influence within small peasant communities, where it received tacit or active support from church people as the correct avenue for effecting social reform.

Q: This was basically Catholic?

BECKER: Yes, it was Catholic, but it was not traditional Catholic, but was inspired by liberation theology and by hostility to U.S. power and policies. There was decidedly anti-U.S. bias to the overall political complexion of the Christian unions. Their hostility was directed toward what they viewed as a massive campaign to expand U.S. military and economic power worldwide, at the expense of social and political reforms that would put real power in the hands of the people. But these people represented a third of the labor movement, and it was clear that the positive side of U.S. foreign policy, especially labor policy, was not being received or heard. There were grand battles between the AFL-CIO and the Christian labor movement, the origins probably dating from the period between the two world wars. They had intensified in the post-World War II period when Europe was divided. Christian unions were getting a lot of support from Catholic countries in Europe, whereas the Protestant countries, especially the Scandinavians, tended to support the social democratic unions. West Germany, with strong Christian Democratic and Social Democratic movements, worked with both Christian and social democratic unions in Ecuador. Our embassy established linkages with the major German political education institutes - the Christian Democratic Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the socialist Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, and the Free Democratic Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

Q: Well, how did the election come out?

BECKER: The cowboy from Guayaquil, Leon Febres Cordero, won. The social democrat lost. It was probably the character of the campaign where the winning candidate was able to reach out and touch the electorate while the loser maintained an intellectual aloofness. We've seen this sometimes before in U.S. politics. Febres Cordero was swept into office much to the pleasure and the relief of certain Reagan administration officials, but the embassy was very much torn apart not by who we favored, but by how to approach the election. We felt that even though we embraced the new administration in Ecuador, we also needed to mend fences with the losing party, which represented a formidable and persistent force in Ecuadorian politics. Given the ideological divide, this was difficult to do. I guess the big payoff for my activities as labor attachï¿½ occurred as I was packing up and getting ready to leave the country in '85. Our security office got wind of what they said was a credible report that I was the target of an assassination plot by a far-left labor organization that apparently was highly resentful of my promotion of the U.S. the labor agenda in the country. The leftist group may have linked my labor work to the victory of the pro-Reagan presidential candidate, which of course was ridiculous.

Q: Dubious honor?

BECKER: Well, I thought it was a badge of honor. Otherwise, you sometimes leave a country, thinking, "I've been here three years, I've toiled in the trenches and on the battlefield, but what have I accomplished?" In this case, I got a couple of plaques on the wall and a death threat."

Q: Did you find that during the election process that you were bumping into sort of CIA types with money bags or what have you working at almost cross purposes to what you were doing in Ecuador?

BECKER: If they were running around with money bags, they were probably too sophisticated to come up on my scope. Since the ambassador was unable to maintain effective control over major agencies under his direction, it's not inconceivable that there may have been some nefarious election activities afoot. I do know that a couple of years later, there was a major financial scandal in the AID mission in Ecuador, focusing on the political appointee mission director, who had apparently channeled AID development funds inappropriately to support the political agenda of some conservative Ecuadorian organizations. A number of AID officers, who should have exercised due diligence, were caught up in the scandal as well. Their careers, if not destroyed, were severely tainted.

Q: How did you find sort of the major American business interest, one always thinks of the old term banana republics and how United Fruit and all sort of ran their own empire and became a target of all sorts of you might say liberal opposition both in the country and in the United States. What was your feeling about American business interests that had been in Ecuador for some time?

BECKER: Ecuador was not a large country, did not have a large U.S. business footprint. It did have some significant U.S. investment in selected sectors, and the banana sector was one of those. Chiquita was very active there. Occidental Petroleum, more recently, was a major developer of Ecuadorian oil fields. I found these were some of the toughest customers to deal with, based on little sense of benefit for them to dialogue with the labor attachï¿½. There were other people in the embassy, the executive office or the commercial attachï¿½, who were much more plugged in to what they were about. They certainly wouldn't come to the embassy to seek support on a labor issue.

Q: This is tape five, side one with Rick Becker. I mean some of the _____ oil fields and places like that.

BECKER: By and large, the U.S. business presence, with the exception of Chiquita, was of fairly recent origin, and many of them were affiliated with the American Chamber of Commerce. I developed some educational programs for business audiences, which included IBM, Bank of America, and other large service sector corporations as well as some of the smaller manufacturing firms. There were a lot of shipping interests in Guayaquil. Most of their activities were offshore, but they brought a lot of business in and they were certainly interested in embassy briefings on local practices and local politics. They found Ecuadorian politics as bewildering as I often did. I've talked about two political parties contending for the presidency. There were probably 15 or 20 political parties that fielded candidates. Elections had an atmosphere that combined elements of fiesta and tag-team wrestling along with elements of cut-throat, life-or-death politics.

Increasingly, the question of business security arose. Security was an area where the U.S. business community was interested, given their lack of understanding of the local scene. U.S. businesses looked to the embassy for leadership in dealing with unforeseen and uncertain political conditions. General strikes were fairly common, where the whole economy was shut down for a day or two by street protests, and this of course affected a lot of business activity. These acts tended to divert potential investors to other countries where conditions were calmer and more predictable. We tried to help U.S. business understand the dynamics of what was going on politically. Since I had a very good feel for what was going on in the labor scene, I often represented the embassy at these informational forums.

The period also saw the beginnings of an incipient terrorist movement in Ecuador. There had been episodic terrorism in other countries, most notably the Shining Path insurgents in Peru, and of course the emerging narco-political insurgents in Columbia. With Ecuador's two big neighbors heavily affected by civil conflict and insurgencies, it was surprising that Ecuador appeared to be an island of tranquility. Everybody wondered why, because the conditions that bred the insurgencies in the neighboring countries were certainly there in Ecuador. Ecuador was, if anything, poorer than either of their two neighbors. There was a large, impoverished indigenous population in Ecuador as in Peru. The descendants of the Incas, largely Quechua-speaking, had been historically passive but now seemed susceptible to radical appeals. Yet Ecuador during the time I was there was largely free of serious political unrest and violence. In the last few months before I transferred, there appeared a group that called itself "Alfaro Vive Carajo!" Eloy Alfaro was an Ecuadoran president - almost everybody was at one time or another president of the countrwho had been assassinated by democratic insurgents on the presidential portico in 1911. "Alfaro Vive, Carajo!" translates as "Alfaro lives, damn it!" When a name like that scrawled on a wall, you think it's a bunch of thugs, kids, or whatever. And while they were quite inept at first, the police did find safe houses and bomb-making equipment. Certain assassinations of mid-level and indeed one high level political leader, as well as occasional kidnappings for ransom, were attributed to this group. The group's activities really took off about the time that I was leaving in '85. Concerns over terrorism, spillover from Colombia's drug trafficking and general criminality were on the increase. When I arrived in Ecuador in '82, you could walk almost anywhere in the city and while you had concern over pick pockets here and there, the threat of violence against even foreigners was fairly remote.

There were drive-by robberies, kids on motorcycles. A friend was dragged nearly to her death when one of these motorcycles, a driver and a rider, grabbed her purse or a necklace as they swung by on the city streets. The strap or the chain didn't break off. Ecuadorians always blamed rising crime on the Colombians. Ecuadorians, they said, don't do that sort of a thing. These were new and fearful developments, and the U.S. business community looked to the embassy for guidance and some kind of understanding as to how they could function effectively and profitably in an environment which there were a lot of question marks.

Q: How did you find the communist or the Maoist unions?

BECKER: With very few exceptions, the embassy had virtually no direct dialogue with them. Mutual hostility was great. That said, there were occasions, in the course of dialogue among and between the labor groups, that I would bump into one of the leaders of this group. Indeed, I expressed interest from time to time to go to their national congresses as an observer. The request was never honored with an invitation. They didn't want my presence. There was hostility towards an official U.S. presence and it was pretty much a steel curtain that created a two-way barrier.

Q: Well, was it, how did you view them as what they were trying to do? Were they effective for the rights of the workers or did they have more of a political agenda?

BECKER: They certainly had a definite political agenda. It was hard to tell how much actual deliverables they were able to provide to their workers. For example, I think the public utility workers were in the hands of the communists, and these unions brought the government almost to its knees on a couple of occasions to win concessions for their workers. Whether these concessions were in the best overall interest of the Ecuadorian economy and population or the bottom line of the budget could be debated endlessly. Be that as it may, these unions were more willing to cross the line politically to force major stoppages in key economic sectors. So they did deliver to that extent. I have to give them credit for their organization and effectiveness. But they also had a political agenda which was to gain power and support candidates for office that would allow them more scope to pursue political influence.

Q: How about the students at the university and all? Were they a factor for you or not?

BECKER: The embassy was almost right across the street from the Catholic University, which was fairly tranquil. My wife took Spanish language courses there. By contrast, the public university, as in a number of Latin American countries, was a hotbed of radical political activity. There was a close association between a number of radical trade unions and student groups. When I talk about general strikes, it was never simply because of trade union activity, but it was because the labor groups were able to capitalize on their alliances with student and other social organizations to actually shut down major parts of the capital, the major cities and economic activity. Students didn't have much in the way of educational incentive - the universities offered obsolete courses of study taught by professors who were little more than activists themselves or else bureaucratic drones. The public educational system was a training ground for political radicalism. We jokingly observed that the term "student activist" was a misnomer, since many were in their '30s and '40s. One didn't graduate in four years, lose one's athletic eligibility and have to go out and make a living.

Q: Was the system in Ecuador as it is in so many countries including in Europe, not your ability, but you family connections moving up?

BECKER: Very much so. The modern economy had not yet fully arrived in Ecuador. I think they opened the first supermarket while we were there, and I think we declared an embassy holiday when Oreo cookies were introduced into the economy. It was not a great consumer heaven. Quito, with 800,000 inhabitants, was surprisingly parochial. The capital is upwards of 9,000 feet and nestled in the Andes. Historically, there were not a lot of cultural cross-currents, a lot of the foreign ethnic groups that had migrated to Ecuador -Arabs from the Middle East, migrant labor from Africa via the Caribbean, or Asians - had settled on the coast, not in the Andes. Therefore the cultural character of coastal society was much more outgoing, much less rule-driven and to some extent there was more opportunity for newcomers to establish themselves there. The Bucaram family that dominated Guayaquil politics was of Lebanese origin, whereas the powerful in Quito, regardless of political party, could trace their names back 100 or 200 years, when their families had been part of highland aristocracy.

Q: One last question on this period, more out of pure curiosity. How stood the Panama hat business?

BECKER: It was wonderful. There's a town on the coast called Montecristo and its claim to fame is that they grow a particularly supple kind of bamboo in the nearby swamps that produced wonderful Panama hats. Of course, the origin of the Panama hat was that sombreros produced in Ecuador found their way to Panama at the time of the building of the Panama Canal. They were quite prized and practical and popular there, and they became known as Panama hats even though the highest quality ones are still produced in Ecuador.

Q: I read a book called I think The Panama Hat Trail or something like that?

BECKER: Really!

Q: A very good account of this. Well, then Rick you left there in 1985? What happened?

BECKER: I was well established as a labor officer, had a good reputation for my labor work in Ecuador and Brazil. I was asked if I wanted to be the regional labor officer for Panama and Costa Rica. Panama was not my top choice of countries to go to. I had managed to spend a fair amount of time in Latin America without ever having served in the tropics. As a Californian, I don't like hot, humid weather, but that's where the assignment process led me. So my family and took home leave and arrived in our embassy in Panama City in the fall of 1985.

Q: You were there for how long?

BECKER: I was in Panama for three years, until 1988.

Q: Did you get any feel for the labor attachï¿½ business per se particularly after World War II? This is a big deal, I mean we were particularly in Europe and all I mean really pushing labor movements and all, but by the time you got to the Reagan administration did you have the feeling that sort of American overall interest in the labor movement was dying down?

BECKER: I think the Republicans may have had more appreciation of the overseas role of the U.S. trade union movement than the Democrats.

Q: That's interesting.

BECKER: They looked at the projection of U.S. labor interests abroad as an important tool in the fight against communism and far-left political influence. There was a recognition that labor unions, even though they didn't represent a large percent of the local population, had the capacity to do serious mischief against fledgling democratic or pro-U.S. governments, or against U.S. overseas investors, who were just really getting off the ground in a number of Latin American countries. The Democrats may have looked at the trade union movement as an outgrowth of civil and human rights in the U.S. and the global humanitarian interest of U.S. foreign policy. The Republicans never shirked their financial support for overseas labor programs, and some of the most politically conservative representatives of U.S. labor were involved in international affairs. They were stridently anti-communist, and they tended to look at the world in black and white terms. The fact that 99% of U.S. labor disputes are resolved without strikes and through negotiation is something that was frequently lost on people overseas. Labor and business leaders abroad tended to be much more confrontational and less forgiving of who might be sitting on the other side of the table than maybe they would be if they were in the U.S.

Q: One always thinks of our cousins the British where you know you're sort as a laborite or a conservative and they really think in confrontational terms. It's changed now, but certainly up to the well, 1980s or so.

BECKER: The first generation, probably the first two generations of labor attachï¿½s in the State Department were in fact veterans of the U.S. labor movement, and there was an insidious and even incestuous relationship between 16th Street and Foggy Bottom.

Q: That's where.

BECKER: Yes, that's where AFL-CIO is headquartered - 16th and Connecticut. The problem for these attachï¿½s arose when directives from AFL-CIO headquarters did not mesh with the policies developed in the State Department and the rest of the U.S. government. In the end, you can't serve two masters. The AFL-CIO wisely found that support for a professional labor diplomat, a labor attachï¿½ corps within the State Department, was an important U.S. labor objective. They fought very hard and successfully for many years to establish the credibility of the attachï¿½ corps and to expand promotion and assignment opportunities that would get good officers into the labor field. That said, I discovered when I got into it, almost by accident in Brazil, that it was an aging corps. It was not a corps that was renewing itself. There were probably fewer and fewer of us who wanted to go back and do more than one or two tours as a labor officer. When I showed interest in continuing as a labor officer, in a way I had my pick of labor assignments. However, within embassies you were buried in a political or economic section, and often didn't rate a seat on the country team. It was difficult to maintain credibility as a labor officer when 50% of your workload, in Latin America at least, was not labor-related. I was a labor-political officer during all my labor tours of duty. In our larger embassies in Europe, there are a few senior FSOs who spend full time doing labor work. In Latin America, with the exception of Mexico, it was always a mixed bag, but I enjoyed it.

Q: Were the labor and human rights sort of melded together?

BECKER: In some respects, yes, but it was more often labor and internal politics. You followed the political parties because the structure of the labor movement frequently paralleled or mirrored the structure of the political party system. There was a flow of leaders between the parties and the unions, even though the labor leaders tended to have dirtier fingernails and did not always rub shoulders easily with the patricians who ran some of the large political parties and who may have owned large businesses. Politics does make for strange bedfellows on occasion.

Q: Well, then Panama. When you got there in '85, what was the situation in Panama and Costa Rica?

BECKER: Panama was a country that was struggling to find an identity. The military coup headed by Omar Torrijos that took place in '68 persisted through the '70s and into the '80s. Torrijos had died in a plane accident in '81, and a Panamanian urban legend continues to attribute his death to the CIA having blown up the plane. Interestingly, the first democratic president of Ecuador after the military ceded power in 1979, Jaime Roldos, also died in a plane crash around '81. That too was attributed by some to a CIA plot. One supposes that the CIA wanted the military regime back in Ecuador and the regime to fall in Panama. There was never any evidence of that, just people wanting to believe the worst of the U.S. Torrijos' death was an avenue for his security chief, Manuel Noriega, to rise to power. He didn't have any of the charm that Torrijos did, but he became the principal vehicle through which we had to rely to ensure that the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977 was faithfully carried out. I arrived in Panama shortly after national elections in '85, which had literally been engineered by Noriega to ensure the victory of the candidate of the political party Torrijos had created, the PRD. What was seen at that time by public and foreign observers alike as massive manipulation of the election was largely downplayed by the U.S. embassy and government. It was an exceedingly tense time. Noriega, who was never chief of state and never held a position other than chief of the Panama Defense Forces, was acknowledged as the country's strongman but also as the only person who could guarantee the security of the canal in a time of transition. The individual who was elected president at that time had all the right credentials. He was a World Bank economist, U.S. educated, and spoke English almost without an accent, which is not unusual in Panama. Nicolas ("Nicky") Barletta was a very charming, intelligent man. Although I didn't know him at the time, I got to know him quite well during my second tour of duty there, and he's still writes very good economic and political commentaries. I'm not sure he's all that good an economist, but in any event, he became the mouthpiece of the Noriega dictatorship for a time. He was the fresh front for what was an increasingly brutal and repressive government.

Q: When you got there, in the first place, who was the ambassador?

BECKER: The ambassador was the very professional Ted Briggs.

Q: What was the attitude of the embassy towards Noriega and his president at that time?

BECKER: We basically bit the bullet and established a working relationship with the new government and maintained correct relations with the Panama Defense Forces. That said, the embassy was only one of three major U.S. government institutions in the country, each of which was headed by a presidential appointee confirmed with the advice and consent of the Senate. The U.S. ambassador was by no means the sole focal point for official U.S. policy in Panama. The other two centers were the headquarters of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and the U.S. forces stationed in Panama for the defense of the canal, and the administrator of the Panama Canal Commission, who was charged with the management, operation and proper functioning of the Panama Canal. The U.S. public law that established the Panama Canal Commission and the administrator's job declared that the U.S. ambassador shall have no say over policies relating to the operation or the defense of the canal. Whatever its motivation, this arrangement clearly constrained and diffused U.S. power and policy in Panama, which thoroughly confused a lot of Panamanians as well as Americans. The result was that when people looked to the United States to get things done or to issue policy statements, more often than not they were going to look to the SOUTHCOM commander or the canal administrator, who at that time was a retired four-star general and ex- SOUTHCOM commander. Both men presided over large resource bases and a lot of actual operational power, in contrast to the ambassador to a country of two million people.

Q: How did you find when you got there relations between these three entities?

BECKER: They were always delicate at best, but Ted Briggs was a consummate professional and people manager. I suppose that the three chiefs met several times a week, and he was able to manage that relationship, I think very successfully, to the extent that the short leg on the stool that represented U.S. diplomatic interests in Panama, the embassy, was basically an equal partner.

Q: Oh, that doesn't sound like a good mix.

BECKER: I think Briggs was able to capitalize on a certain rivalry between the other two agency chiefs and asserted a constructive, sometimes decisive embassy role. It was clear to all of us who lived and worked at the embassy that we had to pay at least as much attention to interagency issues as we did to bilateral issues if we wanted to advance the U.S. agenda.

Q: Now, the canal treaty had been taken care of hadn't it? I mean where stood the canal?

BECKER: The canal treaty established a 21-year timetable for the turnover of all of the properties and all of the functions and all of the facilities to Panama, with the final date of December 31, 1999 when the canal itself would turn over. Panamanians always referred to this transfer process as "reversion," but in fact since the canal had never belonged to Panama, and there was nothing to revert except real estate that had never been controlled by a Panamanian government. Of course there was the prevailing view in many parts of the United States that the canal and all the land surrounding it was ours. As Teddy Roosevelt had said and others had reiterated, regardless of how we seized control of it, the canal was ours.

Q: We stole it fair and square.

BECKER: Fair and square. We stole the land from the Colombians as a matter of fact and had a major role in creating Panama as an independent country, as a vehicle for controlling and running the canal which we would one day build. Panamanians have always anguished over their national identity and sort of rewrote their own history to give themselves a much more active role in their own independence.

One of the first steps the after the canal treaty came into effect in 1979 was to demolish the fence that separated the Panama Canal Zone, five miles on either side of the canal that had constituted an enclave splitting Panama top to bottom. The Canal Zone was a company town run by the Panama Canal Company and its governor, invested with much more power than any U.S. state governor and virtually unchecked by Congress or by the U.S. president. In fact, it was a throw-back institution. Since most canal employees and leadership had been originally recruited from the south, the Zone had been somewhat impervious to many of the transformational social movements in recent U.S. history, such as the civil rights movement and the rise of industrial labor unions, although there were labor organizations that operated in the canal area. A lot of this changed with the end of the enclave except for the mentality of its long-term residents. There was a book published shortly after the treaty was signed, called Red, White and Blue Paradise. A lot of former Zonians - Americans who were born, lived and worked in the Canal Zone, or whose parents and grandparents had done so - left Panama for the United States after 1979 because they couldn't conceive of sharing "their" territory and the society they had built and maintained with Panamanians who were now allowed to live side by side.

Part of my portfolio - the other half of my portfolio besides handling labor affairs - was as a treaty implementation officer. This included all of the social elements of the treaty. Many of these had to do with the divestiture of businesses that had been run by the Panama Canal Company and the transfer to Panama of real property not directly related to the operation of the canal. There were large tracts of land, warehouses, large housing subdivisions that were on a timetable to be turned over. Some real estate was within the canal operating area under the authority of the canal administrator, and some was on military bases because we were also turning over tracts of land that had been U.S. military installations. I think at its peak during World War II and Korea, we had had something like 25,000 to 30,000 troops stationed in Panama. When I arrived, there were probably 12,000 troops there. There were also military installations which were jointly administered between ourselves and the Panama Defense Forces. It was our stated objective to groom an indigenous Panamanian armed force to take over the defense of the canal when we finally left. This created a strange marriage between the U.S. military and the Panamanian Defense Forces headed by Manuel Noriega. There was an intimate intelligence gathering relationship, which came into play especially when we became embroiled in the unrest in Central America. There was a great deal of military cooperation and joint training. Our intent was to create a modern military organization that would ensure the defense of the canal after we departed Panama. This policy was based on some premises and assumptions that were way off the mark, even if one could justify the transfer of the canal to Panama and the withdrawal of our military forces. I for one believe that one of the great historic achievements of the Carter administration, for which he paid dearly in political terms at home, was to bring about the treaty calling for the transfer of the Panama Canal. Even though it had been negotiated by four or five previous presidents, he was the one who paid the price for pushing it through the Senate, a price also paid by a number of Republican and Democratic senators who voted for it, Howard Baker, for example, was a hero in Panama because he cast the deciding vote to bring the canal treaty into being. As an ex-senator, he was treated as a hero whenever he came to visit Panama, but he had lost his seat along with others for having voted for treaty ratification.

Panama was an exciting place to work. There were actually two parts to my labor portfolio, seemingly distinct. One was dealing with Panamanian unions in a sort of traditional relationship that I had found in Ecuador, a bilateral labor relationship. I established working relations with the local U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which represented a much larger business community in Panama, and tried to replicate some of the more successful initiatives that I had created in Ecuador. I also established the usual embassy relationship with democratic unions in Panama, many of which were supported by the AFL-CIO. There was an active AIFLD country office, loosely administered by our AID mission. There were also communist unions in Panama, especially in the public sector, and I encountered the same difficulties dialoguing with them as I had in my previous post. The second part of my labor portfolio involved my relations with the U.S.-affiliated unions that represented both Panamanian and U.S. workers in the in the canal area and defense installations. These included shipyard workers, building trades unions and the Panama Canal pilots, representing the canal operating work force, that were affiliates of U.S. trade union organizations. Many of the Panamanian workers on the U.S. military bases were also affiliated to U.S. unions, such as the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). I became a listening post and to some degree an in-house spokesman for the interests of those workers vis-ï¿½-vis U.S. government agencies, even though in a legal sense I could not get involved in what was an extension of U.S. civil service legislation. The only place in the world outside the U.S. that our domestic labor laws operated was in Panama.

Q: In the first place, did the fence come down?

BECKER: The fence came down in '79. It was the first step.

Q: How did that work? I mean the uncouth Panamanians were mixing with the pristine Zonians?

BECKER: Most certainly. There were all kinds of social implications to that big first step. In many cases the U.S. citizen population just had to suck it up. It was hard on them. They were unprepared politically or culturally to see this integration, or desegregation, shall we say, and the erosion almost overnight of their privileged and exclusive empire.

Q: Well, I've interviewed a man who later became a USIA officer, but I think was a major lieutenant colonel in Special Forces in the Panamanian command. He's an African American, Jim Dandridge, and he was saying that he went to a military party which was held at the yacht club. Very obviously they were very uncomfortable having him there. This was sort of the old South. I'm not sure exactly when this was, but you know, our military wasn't going to take any of that nonsense, but it was an offshoot you might say of the culture of the '50s or something of the South.

BECKER: Very much so. Sociologically it was an interesting little social order that was sort of dropped down in the midst of a foreign country. The military bases in Panama represented a similar sociology. My older daughter made the transition; we'd been overseas for some years.

Q: You were saying, your older daughter?

BECKER: My older daughter, Michele, was passing from junior high to high school. Rather than sending her to the international school with her younger sister, we would enroll her in the Department of Defense high school which had formerly been part of the Panama Canal Company school system. Under the treaty, the Panama Canal Commission was not allowed to run schools or businesses or anything else except maintain the canal. Those facilities were either privatized or transferred to the Department of Defense in 1979, and DOD ran a K-12 school system as they do on military installations throughout the world. We thought this would be an opportunity for Michele to get used to the way things were done in the United States rather than in the international school environment, with which she was very familiar. Eventually she would have to go back to the U.S. and transition to a stateside school experience. We lived in an apartment in a part of Panama City called Paitilla, where a majority of embassy families were housed. There were also some DOD families living there, because there were simply too many military families to be housed on the bases. By and large, the military were housed on the bases and everybody else lived in town. So my daughter would take the military school bus to school and back. When she invited some of her military brat friends from the bases to visit her, their parents told us under no uncertain terms could their children go into Panama. It was not safe. It was not right. They could not leave the bases. Basically, when my daughter wanted to socialize with any military friends, we had to take her to their houses on base. The mental wall was still there, even to the point where you would get a blank stare when you told people that you lived in Panama, and they did as well. With or without a fence, there was, and is, an insularity that is often bred on military bases. The large fence that had separated the U.S. canal enclave from the rest of the country had been there for so long that most Americans took it for granted. There was U.S. territory inside the fence and Panama was somewhere out there. Yet because we had a new set commitments defined by the treaty, we established a new political relationship that took priority over literally everything else in trying to ensure that there would be a successful transfer of U.S. power over a 20 year period, as we withdrew little by little from our canal defense and operational responsibilities.

Q: Well, this is probably a good place to stop Rick. We'll pick this up the next time. We've talked about, we're into the Panama period of '85 to '88 and you've talked a bit about dealing with the Zonians, but we haven't talked about some of the developments during this time. I mean you had these two hats that you were wearing. One was the union business and the other was the implementation of the treaty. We'll talk about that and also talk about, although you didn't have a real or formal relationship with the unions on the base or in the canal, talk about how they were constituted, their problems, how that was working. And of course we haven't talked at all about the relationship as you saw it with Noriega and how things were developing there at that time because they were at least towards the end, ended up with essentially an American military action against him, after you left I guess. I mean it was moving towards that.

BECKER: It moved slowly and perceptively during my time.

Q: The whole thing and then of course after we finish talking about that, then we can move to Costa Rica and whatever was happening there. Great.

Q: Today is the 23rd of December, 2004. Rick, well, anyway, you've got sort of two hats on the canal. What were you up to?

BECKER: As labor officer my primary responsibilities were to follow the domestic labor scene. Technically speaking, I didn't have any role in the canal labor relations environment, because those relationships between the labor organizations there and the two big employers, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Panama Canal Commission, were governed by U.S. public law 96-70, and they were off limits to the embassy. That said, I had very good relations with the labor unions' Panamanian leadership. These unions often wore two hats, or betrayed two faceone Panamanian and nationalistic, and the other as representatives of U.S. labor unions. In practice, these unions tended to be opportunistic - trying to extract privileges from their employers under both U.S. and Panamanian laws and from the two governments. It was a confusing set of relationships at best. I found myself drawn in from time to time as an unofficial mediator in labor disputes, both between Panamanian unions and U.S. private employers such as Coca-Cola and between the labor union representing the Panamanian employees of the Department of Defense. How was I drawn in? On one occasion, the Panamanian labor minister called me and said he had a political problem that required my assistance. The labor union in question was affiliated both to the AFL-CIO and to a major Panamanian labor confederation. They were in a dispute with the Department of Defense over representation and working conditions, as I recall at a DOD credit union. Some employees had been fired. There was not the required consultation. The unions believed they were protected by U.S. law, but just to be on the safe side, they were trying to get the Panamanian government and Panamanian labor law involved to their benefit to put a little extra pressure on the U.S. government. The Panamanian labor minister was very much concerned that he and his government would be dragged into an unwanted bilateral dispute with the United States over jurisdiction over the integrity over the Panama Canal treaty. As I said, our bilateral relations were not terribly warm because it was a government tainted by the 1985 elections that was manipulated by Noriega and his people. The question of legitimacy of that government in the Panamanian context also came into play, but I took this as an important diplomatic mission, knowing that things might not improve, but they could certainly get worse. My one cardinal rule as a potential mediator was that I had to have credibility and a green light from both sides. Since I had very good relations with SOUTHCOM and the Department of Defense establishment from my treaty implementation work and I had very good relations with the labor union, which by the way was affiliated with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in the United States. Maybe it still is, or maybe it isn't now that the treaty's over, but at that time they were quite proud of that affiliation and from time to time got moral if not financial support from AFL-CIO and from AFSCME headquarters in the States. I managed to resolve that issue to the relative satisfaction of DOD and the union, and got a Meritorious Honor Award from the State Department for brokering a solution that allowed both governments to duck some of the more ticklish issues relating to treaty implementation and jurisdiction that they did not want to address at that time.

Q: In the first place, how did the embassy feel about this, you were sort of straddling two zones in a way. Was it uncomfortable?

BECKER: As long as my role was perceived as strictly informal, as long as both sides saw my good offices as a means to an end to eliminate a friction point in a relationship that was full of friction points, the embassy was perfectly happy to see me work both sides and get both sides to the table. This was in '85 and '86. By '87, when things got very dicey, we were trying to keep our relationship and certainly our operational military relationship with Panama and the legal status of U.S. forces in Panama as friction-free as possible because we were dealing with larger political issues.

Q: Well, was the issue when one the sort of thing where essentially it was a focus on rights benefits and that sort of thing as opposed to I mean were the people involved in the working level strictly after their own problems or was somebody trying to move this into a bigger field.

BECKER: Clearly the Panamanian union wanted to take advantage of whatever protection or whatever support they could get from the Panamanian government and Panamanian public opinion. There were people in the union who were perfectly happy to stir things up and to throw eggs and tomatoes at the Department of Defense. That said, the labor union itself was internally divided as to how to proceed, how to deal with a very vexing issue and a very large and powerful employer. The labor leadership needed to come home with something or else lose their credibility with the rank and file and open the door to a much more radicalized set of leaders. Keep in mind that almost all DOD facilities in Panama were unionized and there were a great many Panamanians who depended on the jobs and on normal working relations with the U.S. forces. They were pained at the deterioration of the bilateral relationship. They did not like the treaty any more than a lot of individuals in the United States. In fact, the trade union membership by and large represented a labor aristocracy in the view of most working class Panamanians. They were paid far and above what Panamanian workers were on the local economy. They had protections under U.S. civil service legislation, including merit promotion and collective bargaining that they couldn't dream of under Panamanian labor law. However, when a labor issue heated up they were certainly not averse to pushing whatever buttons they could to extract a negotiating advantage.

Q: Was there the implicit, I don't want to say threat, but cloud that the whole American presence just might go out of there including the military?

BECKER: Clearly Panamanian society was divided between those who favored and those who opposed a U.S. withdrawal, which the treaty mandated. There were deep philosophical differences over the meaning of the treaty. The treaty was a 21 year transition to full Panamanian sovereignty over the canal and control over all of the defense and operating areas contiguous to the canal. There were Panamanians who saw the treaty as another means to perpetuate U.S. control over a significant portion of Panamanian territory and influence in Panamanian domestic politics. Other Panamanians were afraid that if we left, all of the worst characteristics of Panamanian culture and society would be unleashed, perhaps believing that we represented a brake on corruption, on oppression, on deterioration of a tolerant political environment. Indeed, we were credited with keeping all the worst instincts of Panamanians in check.

Q: On this negotiation what was your, what were you doing?

BECKER: First of all, I was trying to lower the temperature on both sides. DOD was relying on its interpretation of rules and regs and on its prerogatives as employer and security guarantor. DOD is an agency that has always been uncomfortable working with labor unions and the Panamanian trade unions who were trying to survive. The unions were trying to maintain a very fine balance between their obvious loyalty to the U.S. and their economic interest in good relations with their employers and the need to show backbone on an issue which most of us on the outside recognized was blown far out of proportion for what else is going on in the country at the time. As for Noriega, he sought to co-opt any independent elements within the labor movement that might be too pro-U.S. and not amenable to his will. Omar Torrijos had created an umbrella Panamanian labor organization, which Noriega had inherited, and this was one of his principal political tools. This labor union's Panamanian affiliation was with that labor umbrella organization, but yet they found their bread and butter came from U.S. forces and not from the Panamanian confederation, which relied very heavy on patronage and corruption.

Q: Well, did you I mean most labor disputes it gets confused. Did you find was the DOD oppressive or were the unions asking for, I mean were the people not deserving of assistance or how did it come about?

BECKER: My assessment at the time was probably irrelevant to the overall settlement of the dispute, but I do believe that DOD took a very heavy-handed approach in resolving these labor issues, employee issues within the credit union. We're only talking about a couple of dozen employees, but again it was a potential flashpoint at a time when flashpoints in U.S.-Panamanian relations took on a huge political significance, frequently played out in the newspapers, on talk radio and elsewhere in the media. This is what brought me into it. The labor minister belonged to a very small political party that was allied with the PRD, Noriega's political machine created by Torrijos and run the government since Torrijos came to power in the late '60s. The PRD had won every election through hook and crook during the 15 years or more when basically the military was the power behind the scenes. The party was always looking for opportunities to show the U.S. in a poor light and particularly show the U.S. military in a poor light. What's ironic was that the U.S. military was one of the U.S. government agencies most opposed to our taking a hard-line towards Noriega. We had a lot of equities to protect, whether intelligence sharing on Cuba and Central America, or providing unfettered use of airfields and the other facilities in Panama as staging areas for our support for the Contra forces in Nicaragua and for other operations in Central America against leftist insurgents. DOD really didn't want to confront Noriega during most of the time that I was at post.

Q: From your perspective, you were there from when to when now?

BECKER: '85 to '88. Summer of '85 to the summer of '88.

Q: From the embassy point of view and your own work and all how did you perceive the Noriega regime?

BECKER: I arrived at post shortly after the '85 elections which installed Nicky Barletta, who was the latest Noriega-designated president in opposition to Arnulfo Arias, the four or five time elected president of Panama. Arias, by all accounts, had won the '85 election but was never allowed to take office. There were considerable allegations from international and other electoral observers that massive fraud had taken place. Nicky Barletta, who had very impressive credentials as a U.S. educated, pro-U.S. World Bank economist, came in on the heels of this tainted election. I got to know Nicky during my second tour in Panama and found him impressive on any number of fronts, but as the elected leader of a country he left a great deal to be desired. He ended up leaving office within two years, mourned by nobody. The United States' equities in Panama - our need for Panama as a staging area for Central American operations, and our stated objective to train the Panamanian Defense Forces to defend and secure the canal against all threattook priority. We had not envisioned that those defense forces would become a hostile force inimical to our presence in the hands of somebody like Manual Noriega.

Q: Were you seeing the hostility developing mainly because this was Noriega and company trying to keep their hands on the purse of getting whatever, I mean was corruption the issue or was anti-Americanism was the instrument to keep a hold of the purse strings or what?

BECKER: I think both anti-Americanism and corruption were tools in the hands of a dictator. Noriega didn't have all of the social graces and charm that Torrijos had had. There were many who cynically believed that Noriega, who was a Torrijos prodigy, had turned on his master and had probably done him in so that he could take over. I don't think there's much evidence to support that.

Q: This is because of what was it a helicopter crash or a plane crash?

BECKER: It was a plane crash. There were others who claimed that we had eliminated Torrijos because he was the architect of the canal treaty, but there were very small signs in the mid '80s that Noriega was not going to treat the treaty as a sacrosanct time table for U.S. departure. Certainly our continued presence there and most Panamanians in their heart of hearts really didn't believe that at the end of the treaty period we would really leave anyway. There were those who felt that a little Panamanian political muscle would ensure that we moved along.

There was always tension when it came to turning over facilities to the Panamanians. We had a rough timetable that determined when facilities were no longer needed by the United States and could be transferred to Panama. Panama continued to press for more rapid turnover of facilities. I was in charge of negotiating and preparing the final documents for transfers of large tracts of territory and facilities to the Panamanians. When it came to excess housing, we could always hope that Panama would give preference in housing assignments to Panamanian employees of the canal and those with direct responsibility for defending and maintaining the canal. That was not the case. It was doled out as political patronage to party loyalists. There was always tension at the negotiating table with the Panamanian authorities as we tried to work out the modalities of incremental, predictable transfers of facilities and assets. It was taking place. We basically had no say, no legal say as to how those facilities and other assets were disposed of after they were transferred. It was simply our hope that the Panamanian government would place the same value on effective, efficient defense and management of the canal as we did, but Noriega had his own agenda. That agenda included crushing the political opposition, much of which was lodged in the middle class and in the pro-Arnulfo Arias political movement. Arias' supporters rightfully felt that they had had a couple of elections taken away from them, and Arias himself had been ousted from office by the Panamanian military more than once in the 50 years that he was politically active.

A number of Panamanians told me that Torrijos had made a pact with the Panamanian middle class. He told them, "I'm not going to interfere in your economic activities. Just don't cross the line and interfere in my political activities." Whether that was apocryphal or just wishful thinking on some people's part, it is very clear that the Panamanian middle class, already a powerful economic force in a prosperous country with a lot of U.S. investment, would not content itself to simply making money. They would want to exercise political power, and Noriega was increasingly intolerant of opposition and fearful of their potential. There were a couple of noteworthy disappearances; the evidence pointed to political assassination, almost certainly by Noriega's goon squads. One was a Hugo Spadafora, a medical doctor who had been an assistant minister of health under Torrijos. He had gone off to fight the good fight in Central America. He had helped to set up the southern front in Costa Rica against the Sandinistas, even though he had gone off initially sympathetic to the Sandinistas. Spadafora was said to be coming back to Panama to help organize the opposition to Noriega. He was a sort of larger than life figure to many Panamanians, but he never arrived at his destination. About a month before I arrived, his headless body was found in the border area between Costa Rica and Panama, and the case became a cause celebre. Throughout the military period there had been individuals who had disappeared. As a matter of fact, when I came back to Panama for my second tour in '99, the government was headed by Mireya Moscoso, Arias' widow, and she was making a concerted effort to investigate the disappearances and deaths of key individuals during the Torrijos-Noriega period, whether Catholic priests, political activists, or people who had shown independence and opposition to the military regime. Part of this campaign was political posturing, but part of it was trying to shed light on a chapter of history that was shrouded in darkness. The government found mass graves and bodies. DNA analysis identified the remains as individuals against whom Noriega in particular had taken a hard hand.

Q: At the embassy again, who was the ambassador?

BECKER: From '85 to '86 the ambassador when I arrived was Ted Briggs, the DCM was Bill Price, both very professional diplomats.

Q: Then afterwards?

BECKER: In 1986Arthur Davis, a political appointee, arrived as ambassador. This was his second ambassadorship. He had been ambassador to Paraguay and he had gained a reputation there of standing up to the Paraguayan military and of supporting a number of civil rights or human rights causes there. His wife died in a tragic plane crash in Bolivia. He was a widower, almost 70 years old, when he arrived. His DCM was John Maisto, who has since gone on to a very distinguished career as ambassador in several countries and who is currently U.S. permrep to the Organization of American States.

Q: Well, while you were there, this '85 to '88 period, did you see I mean was there a running battle within the country team or within the embassy over what to do about Noriega? You mentioned the military had its stakes in there and was Noriega seen as the enemy, just a problem?

BECKER: The embassy was divided. I was a mid-grade political officer so I was not privy to a lot of the discussions on the ambassador's country team, among the heads of section and agencies, but it was very clear that the embassy was divided over what to do about Noriega if anything. He was seen increasingly as a problem, but the interests of several agencies in the embassy led them to argue against rocking the boat. There were a lot of others in the embassy, certainly a majority and principally those at the mid-level like myself, who saw Noriega as a danger to orderly implementation of the canal treaty and indeed to the security and safety of the canal and the U.S. presence. We were repulsed by his human rights excesses, his personal and political excesses and the activities of the organizations that he controlled, whether it was front organizations or labor unions or political parties. The embassy leadership was to my mind ambivalent about this, but merely reflected what was apparently a strong ambivalence in the United States, strong division at the headquarters of key U.S. agencies about what to do if anything about Noriega. Was he an asset or a liability? If he was a liability, to what extent should we move into active opposition given the fact that we were heavily involved in Central America? Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union, China and Cuba persisted. Panama in some respects seemed like small potatoes, but Noriega played us very well.

Q: You know, looking at it from newspaper accounts, it almost seems from what you're saying, it almost seems like Noriega was able to keep this going until his goon squads started messing around with our military and particularly the military's wives. I mean this is where I mean there were some incidents there.

BECKER: There were incidents involving both civilians and military personnel who worked in and around the canal area. They were targets of opportunity, but they suggested to an increasing number of us that Noriega was not a reliable partner in managing our canal relationship and indeed was probably not a reliable partner in the other enterprises where we required his cooperation.

Q: Were you seeing in this atmosphere it sounds like was it the tailor of Panama, how the Cold War intrudes in a small country and all a real mix, I mean did you see a communist or Castroian hand in the labor movement or anywhere in that country?

BECKER: I spoke earlier about Ecuador, where the labor movement was fairly equally divided among a social democratic labor organization, the Christian democratic labor organization and a pro-communist labor umbrella group. That balance was not there in Panama. Its ironic that the organization that that Noriega sought to control was in fact the organization which the AFL-CIO had the closest working relations. By contrast, the communist and the Christian democratic labor organizations were very small, very anemic and had very little influence. None of us in Panama saw the hand of communism, the influence of Cuba or the upsurge of leftist political groups. In fact left-right in Panama never really made much sense. Anyway, there were two major political groupings and a lot of smaller ones, but they all represented chunks of the mainstream. The real rivalries were between those who were in and those who were out.

Q: How about drug money and drugs? During this time was that an increasing problem or how was that seen?

BECKER: There was a very active and large DEA presence at the embassy. They were cowboys for the most part, in the sense that they operated from my perspective with pretty much a free hand, without a great deal of ambassadorial or embassy oversight. There were always innuendoes that senior government or military officials were involved in the drug trade, but there were never any real smoking guns. DEA was very much concerned about transit of drugs between the drug producing countries - Peru, Bolivia and Colombia - and the United States. Panama has been a transit country for drugs. It's always been a center for international commerce, both licit and illicit. Contraband drugs, illegal aliens, you name it, and Panama was a narcotics way station that DEA was intent on shutting down.

Q: Did any of these DEA operations sort of blow up in our face or not while you were there?

BECKER: Not that I recall. I must say I was not in the center of the counter-drug activity. I had other portfolios, DEA didn't cross my path that often, nor I theirs, except at the end of my tour.

Q: This is tape six, side one with Rick Becker. Yes, you were saying you had a DEA story.

BECKER: I have a DEA story. In 1987 U.S. policy took a fateful step after any number of initiatives to negotiate with Noriega. But let me back up and let's work toward the DEA story, okay?

Q: Sure.

BECKER: Because my story has a lot to do with the imposition of economic sanctions against Panama, which transformed our bilateral relations during the time I was there. It was a high point of my tenure. Let's stay chronological. The embassy, as I said, was deeply divided. There was a level of activity in dealing with Noriega that many of us did not see at all. It was managed at a very high level on our country team, perhaps only the ambassador, the DCM, the CIA chief of station, the heads of our defense attachï¿½ office and our military cooperation mission were aware of our contacts with Noriega, but dealing with Panamanian government counterparts became increasingly difficult for the rest of us. The opposition coalesced in I believe early '86 into what they call a cruzada civilista, or Citizens' Crusade, that was largely middle class and professional. The political parties sort of stood aside, bemused by massive marches in the streets, people wearing white, housewives banging pans and pots from their balconies. The joke was that the middle- and upper-class Panamanian housewives, who had never done a day of constructive work in their lives, were sending their housemaids out on their balconies to protest for them. That said, a lot of professionals and business people, many of whom I knew personally, took significant time away from their jobs and took some significant risks to oppose Noriega's brutal rule openly. I suppose these people liked to pattern themselves after the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King, in the sense that they believed mass demonstrations, civil disobedience and general work stoppages would put public pressure on the regime and gain international support, particularly from the United States, to do something about Noriega.

The civilista leaders believed conditions were ripe for some sort of U.S. action, and organized their protests in a way that it was inevitable that we would observe them and report on them. A couple of our embassy officers - less judicious than enterprising - actually got involved in a couple of demonstrations. One such officer was actually picked up by the police and held incommunicado for several hours after the demonstration in which he participated was broken up violently by uniformed police and plain-clothes government thugs. He was fortunate not to have been beaten up along with the Panamanians. You may recall that the media captured repression of these demonstrations, and the brutal beatings of major Panamanian opposition leaders appeared on the covers of Time and Newsweek magazines.

Q: Yes, their pictures were on the front pages newspapers.

BECKER: All friends of mine, but a lot of them ended spending long hours at night in my house afraid to go home because it was being staked out. Most of the mid-level officers found out later that there had been a series of high level missions from the State Department, White House and Defense Department with the intent of trying to convince Noriega to stand down and leave the country.

Q: I think George Bush as Vice President came out there, didn't he at one time?

BECKER: I can't remember. I don't recall a Bush visit on my watch. It may have taken place earlier. I don't think, once the shit hit the fan in '87, that any senior U.S. officials visited through the front door. There were a number of emissaries from the administration who came with the express purpose of negotiating with Noriega to try to persuade him to withdraw from the scene for the betterment of Panama. This was after a decision was taken to support regime change in Panama, to use the current vernacular. We didn't say that we were going to force it, but that we favored regime change. It was in our interest, to protect our equities, but even at that time there was a great deal of debate within the embassy over whether our assets exceeded our liabilities. Again, a number of agencies and elements were either empowered or enabled by Noriega to do their work in Panama, including DEA interestingly enough. He often took the DEA people on well publicized marijuana eradication raids, where they seized a few hundred kilos of marijuana. However, many suspected that there were thousands and thousands of kilos of marijuana, not to mention cocaine and other narcotics, stashed in sites where he did not take the DEA. The actual takes were so small that most of us concluded it was pretty much for show. Yet the DEA seemed wedded to a cooperative relationship with him.

The military assistance group and the military intelligence types were very much in favor of not rocking the boat. There was a weekly meeting of what was called the Panama Watchers. I was a member of that organization for a while because I brought in the labor perspective. Basically all the reporting elements, from both DOD units on the bases and the embassy, would sit down and share all their dirt, insights and what-not on Panama. Some of the DOD intelligence representatives had been in Panama for 20 years or more. All of their sources were in fact part of the Panamanian military establishment and indeed their own "expertise" was based upon information that the Panamanian military provided them. These DOD types tended to have a much more benign view of Noriega and the Panama Defense Forces than some of the rest of us who were trying to bring in and enrich the discussion with information from sources that were not so self-serving. The CIA chief of station likewise didn't want his relationship with his Panamanian counterparts to be jeopardized in any way. Those of us on the economic and political side saw the cost to Panama and U.S., noting the deterioration of the body politic and the economic well being of the country. We concluded that we had to take a much stronger line vis-ï¿½-vis Noriega.

In early 1987 we received a cable from Washington suggesting that U.S. policy was moving in that direction. The cable asked us for an analysis of the impact of sanctions on Panama. We took the exercise very seriously. The country team and all of us in the support positions basically came to the conclusion that economic sanctions would not only not affect Noriega's basic power, they would adversely affect the business and working class sectors as well as the economic and political well being of the opposition to Noriega. We sent our analysis back and one day we were informed, probably in the newspapers rather than in a cable, that the U.S. had imposed economic sanctions, in short an embargo on all financial transactions between the U.S. government and the Noriega-backed government in Panama. All transfers of dollarand the U.S. dollar is Panama's currencceased overnight, shutting down the banking system. By then Nicky Barletta had been eased out as president and another Noriega surrogate been installed, a president whose legitimacy we did not acknowledge. It then became very difficult for the embassy to maintain a relationship with, or even maintain contacts for reporting purposes with key Panamanian sectors that happened to be part of the official power structure. Most of us were explicitly precluded from having any relationship with Noriega-controlled organizations, whether political parties, trade unions or other front organizations. There were one or two officers in each section who were designated the official liaisons between the embassy and the government. Because the labor minister was of another party, even though allied with Noriega, he was somehow not considered off limits and I continued to have a very good working relationship with him. He was also a leader of the Chinese community and he had great insights into Panamanian history and culture from an Asian perspective.

Q: How did the unions react to these sanctions?

BECKER: With great ambivalence. The economic stability they had enjoyed throughout the treaty period was being directly threatened. They were seen by key elements in Panamnot only Noriega supporters but many nationalists - as having sold out to the yanquis. Their status as employees of the U.S. forces made it necessary for them to maintain close working relations. Like many Panamanians, the unions which operated in the canal area were pro-U.S. and favored sanctions against Noriega. Yet they were under increased pressure from pro-regime unions to join the official pressure to push the United States out. The embassy stopped paying its bills to the government, whether utility bills on U.S. facilities and residences or rent on government-owned properties. The government retaliated, cutting off our water, electricity and other services. Our household utilities were cut off for non-payment. There was selective harassment of embassy employees. The government in December of '87 ordered the AID mission out of the country. The AFL-CIO rep, who was both a representative of the AFL-CIO to the local labor organization and a contractor to the AID mission, refused to leave the country. His offices were ransacked by government goons, and his home was broken into. He narrowly escaped without injury. I inveigled him and his people at AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington to take him out. I did not want blood spilled, because there had been attacks on U.S. citizens in other parts of Panama. Routinely, U.S. diplomatic vehicles and school buses that carried our children from DOD schools on the defense sites to their homes in downtown Panama were stopped and harassed by heavily armed personnel, some in military uniforms but others without any uniform who were clearly acting on the orders of the government. There were nighttime curfews as well. Once sanctions were imposed, despite the embassy's analysis that they would be counterproductive to our interests, bilateral relations deteriorated very rapidly.

Q: On the Noriega side were people wondering because I mean it sounds like a rather small boy poking a stick at a tiger, that you know, I mean we had a considerable military presence there and going after kids and roughing up our people and all that. This is obviously something that we would not tolerate at a certain point wasn't it? Were we waiting for something to happen?

BECKER: I have no insight into Noriega's mindset or that of the people around him. He may have thought that he was beyond forcible removal. He may have thought that whatever his transgressions, we needed him more than he needed us. He may have thought that he could string out negotiations with a series of U.S. special envoys who wanted to discuss the transition of power and improvement in bilateral relations. Those of us who were vaguely aware that such discussions were going on firmly believed that there was nothing we could offer Noriega that he didn't already have. We couldn't offer him safe haven in some other country. His security was in Panama, surrounded by his army and support groups. He certainly was not in a position to take all of his wealth, and he certainly couldn't take his power out. We were asking him to give up power. Many of us felt that we were at a dead end, thinking that we could somehow buy Noriega's departure through negotiations. Most of us came to the conclusion that an increasingly irrational Noriega seemed to be intent on demonstrating his political power, and as you point out poking the stick at the tiger was seen as Noriega's attempt to win popular favor in those sectors that were already inclined to oppose the United States and our plans and designs in Central America. This was sort of a cheap way for him to gain stature. I think the record now shows that he did really feel that he could not be touched. There were very important U.S. government agencies that were committed to a cooperative relationship with Noriega for their own purposes. Indeed, I believe that some representatives of these agencies probably advised Noriega that our sanctions and other pressures against his regime were for political consumption at home, and that he should not take our rhetoric all that seriously.

Interestingly enough, the U.S. ambassador made a decision, a painful decision, about the time that the AID mission was expelled to authorize departure of dependents and to start to draw down the embassy staff. A lot of agencies protested. They did not want to back down, and yet the harassment had gotten to a point where we really felt that somebody from the mission might be injured or even killed. As I said, a couple of officers had been caught up in major demonstrations in town and had been roughed up, but not seriously harmed. They were probably too close to the action for their own good, but be that as it may, a lot of things were done for show on both sides. The embassy was the target of large, well-organized, anti-U.S. demonstrations, and some embassy employee vehicles were vandalized. So the ambassador decided that the embassy should be drawn down to reduce our exposure to either organized or random violence. Some in the embassy hoped that a drawdown would send a message to Noriega that we were preparing for a more aggressive set of tactics against him. However, all this was apparently not coordinated with the other USG elements in country, or certainly not coordinated well. SOUTHCOM refused to order any military dependents or staff to leave, even those living off base. Therefore our drawdown sent a very hollow message. The embassy, which was a very small part of the U.S. government presence in Panama, was clearly pulling back, but everything else went on pretty much as normal. We maintained a military force of about 12,000 troops in Panama, and the overall number of dependents brought the official DOD presence probably to between 25,000 and 30,000 people. What the embassy was doing was not in keeping with what DOD was doing, and it showed a breakdown in our policy making process. Noriega must have felt reassured.

There were all kinds of rumors of coup plotting within the Panama Defense Forces against Noriega by elements of the military who wanted to re-establish good relations with the United States. The DCM actually recruited me to go on a middle-of-the-night mission to interview a senior military officer about his intentions vis-ï¿½-vis Noriega. I came back to report that at least from that source there was no coup plotting going on. This did not go down well in some U.S. quarters, who would have liked the Panamanians to take care of their problem and take it out of our hands. As we learned later on, after my departure, some coup plotting did take place, although not involving the officer I interviewed. This was almost on the eve of Operation "Just Cause" in December 1989. In 1988, however, every lead we followed up of a rumor of a plot to Noriega out proved to be empty.

Q: Well, tell me, you go out in the middle of the night and talk to a military leader. What do you do sort of say have a drink or say, what's up with coup? I mean how does one almost broach the subject?

BECKER: Very judiciously. You're a reporting officer from the embassy, and you want to go out in a safe, secure environment get a better assessment of what is going on in the country. I was probably selected for that mission because I was not well-known in those Panamanian circles; I could be expected to operate beneath the radar. By our own choice, we had cut ourselves off from key reporting sources and channels. Most of us weren't allowed to talk to our government counterparts or government contacts. You were thus left with very unorthodox ways of trying to get information about what was going on in Panama. This was at a time when we had begun to lose faith that some of our long-standing U.S. reporting sources, those who tried to protect their access to the Panamanian military, were in fact reliable ones. This was well into the crisis, well after the sanctions had been imposed. Nobody in a position of authority and decision could seem to figure out why Noriega was not responding to our negotiations. Why was he not willing to step aside for the good of all? There seemed to be a real policy and information vacuum, and the operational disarray at the embassy simply reflected the policy disarray in Washington about what to do about Panama.

Q: Did you get any feel from people reporting back and all of where the pressure for sanctions our imposing sanctions was coming from in Washington?

BECKER: I can only guess that the pressure was coming from the usual sources, from the Hill and from pro-business lobbies with equities in Panama. We've got to do something about this dictator. There were people who came to the conclusion, far earlier than many in the U.S. government, that Noriega was a liability across the board and that our policy was actually propping him up. Noriega's critics cited our robust military and intelligence support programs, our transfer of canal assets that he used to boost his influence within Panama, our sharing of intelligence on Cuba. Panama, like Mexico, was a haven for Cuba watchers. Rumors were rampant that Noriega was playing us as well as the Cubans. Drawing the important policy conclusions was exceedingly difficult in the absence of solid information about what was going on. And information aside, we could not reach an internal consensus on how important Noriega's cooperation and tolerance were to our support operations in Central America, or to carrying our statutory and strategic objective of defending and managing the canal. We had signed the canal treaty in 1997. The testimony on the Hill of numerous senior U.S. military officials - admirals, generals and military analysts - that we could not defend the canal against a modern threat without Panama's active cooperation was critical to the Senate confirmation of that treaty and to our calculations about canal defense.

Q: You said 1997?

BECKER: No, 1977, I'm sorry. 1977. We felt committed to a relationship with Panama. We were sort of bound at the hip to maintain an environment in which we could defend and operate the canal until the end of the treaty period, when according to that treaty we would turn it all over to Panama. Do you do this by tolerating a degree of excess by Noriega? Do you do this by embracing what he represents even if you've got to wear a clothespin on your nose? Do you do this by removing him and getting somebody who is going to establish a more cooperative relationship? These were the policy dilemmas that were confronting Washington, but from the standpoint of those of us who were living it - and who were living in hotels because our power had been cut off - and were facing what we saw as an ever more hostile environment and ever more divided Panama. Of course, as things moved toward what many of us thought was an inexorable decision to intervene militarily, lacking any other tools in our diplomatic quiver, we tried surreptitiously to bolster the opposition with clandestine radio stations and a variety of other ploys that were frankly pretty anemic, pretty anemic.

Q: Well, this is basically the situation when you left?

BECKER: At the time that I left Panama in August 1988, I had no valid diplomatic visa because it had expired and the Panamanian government had not renewed it. I had no valid Panamanian driver's license or vehicle registration. Theoretically, on any of these counts we could be expelled from the country at any time. In fact the government of Panama declared two of our officers persona non grata and we refused to ship them out. There were real concerns that the government would block the out-shipment of our household effects by withholding official documentation. We were not sure what would happen when we took our families to the airport to get on the plane to leave the country, whether we would face any harassment or inconvenience or worse in trying to negotiate our exit without valid travel documents issued by the Panamanian government. It had descended to that level of diplomatic tit-for-tat. Most of our worst fears proved to be unfounded, but it became very difficult as things moved since in many respects we closed off the avenues to carry on a diplomatic dialogue and diplomatic discussions with the Panamanians at a time when relations required them. We didn't have the information base and we didn't have the relationships with Panamanians to be able to make more sense of the situation. It was the worst kind of political and diplomatic uncertainty in which to operate.

Q: Did we withdraw an ambassador at that time?

BECKER: We did not. I seem to remember we may have recalled our ambassador for consultations on one or two occasions during that period. Before "Just Cause" in December 1989, the ambassador was recalled permanently, but at the time that I left we were sending a lot of mixed signals to the Panamanians. We who were in the trenches were also the victims of these mixed signals.

Q: We'll come to the DEA thing, but just something which is not quite what we're talking about, but you know one talks about service in Panama, what about the ships going through? Did they play any part or was this just like oil coming out of Saudi Arabia. The oil came out and people did their things of turning on pumps and things like that or did the ships coming through the traffic there have any effect on work in Panama or anything like that or were they literally ships passing in the night and paying their tolls?

BECKER: Very much so. The canal continued to operate under our administration and with an overwhelmingly Panamanian work force with no hitches whatsoever. There were no strikes. There were no political protests. The Panamanian work force was loyal to the utmost. We maintained the canal and the canal operating areas in accordance with the treaty and we did not allow the politics going on bilaterally to interfere with that administrative function. And Noriega seemed to have recognized that failure to respect the normalcy of canal operations could well have tipped the Washington decision process against him much earlier.

Q: What about have we come to the DEA story?

BECKER: Yes, we've come to the DEA story. We had effectively shut down the Panamanian banking system. We were not paying our bills. There was no way that Panamanians could get cash and a lot of Panamanians were truly suffering because we had chosen to exercise our power over the flow of dollars.

Q: The dollar was the currency.

BECKER: The dollar has been the Panamanian currency since the country was founded. They call it the Balboa, but one Balboa bill is identical to a U.S. dollar with a picture of George Washington. Panamanian produced their own coinage, but all of the paper money was U.S.-issued. When the sanctions were imposed, we forbade any banking institution dealing with Panama, whether U.S. or foreign, from having any kind of relationship with the Panamanian government. Ultimately, virtually all the banks in Panama closed their doors. Panamanians traveling to the United States for tourism or business, assuming we issued them visas, were bringing back suitcases full of cash from U.S. bank accounts so that they could feed their families and maintain their businesses. All of their bank accounts in Panamanian banks were frozen.

I was preparing to leave. I wanted to sell my car. Panamanians didn't have any cash. I certainly wouldn't accept a check from a Panamanian. I didn't find any buyers in the diplomatic community, so I went to the local Mercedes dealer. The only time I ever owned a Mercedes and I couldn't sell it. I offered the dealer a commission if they found a buyer and they did. The gentleman showed up on my doorstep and said he wanted to buy my car. He had the cash to pay, and he didn't want to bargain. My antennae went up. I had expected a buyer to come from the diplomatic community, somebody who had access to money outside the country. But this was no diplomat. His dress was very flashy. He was wearing chains around his neck, rings on his fingers, and had an earring. He was a well spoken, smooth operator. I was as much a victim of stereotypes as anyone else in that moment. Instinct told me to have this guy checked out with our law enforcement people. They found out that he was a mid-to-major level Panamanian drug dealer. DEA and its Panamanian law enforcement counterparts had been trying to get this guy for some time. DEA proposed that the car purchase be set up as trap, with my car as the bait. I was assured that I would be perfectly safe and that I would be allowed to retain the proceeds of the sale. That was important to me even though who knows where the money came from. Once the sale was completed and I was out of the picture, Panamanian law enforcement would follow him and grab him. I felt had done my civic duty. I had identified a major drug dealer and the authorities would simply observe the transaction and follow up. The day of the sale came. I went to the dealer to sign the transfer documents. I walked away. I had obviously been tailed by both DEA and the Panamanian police. Somebody got very itchy, and I had hardly gotten off the premises and they moved in and grabbed him as he was buying some mag wheels for his new car. Definitely bad taste!

I was irate. I was extremely irate, and quite nervous. I had a wife and two children, whom DEA and the Panamanian police had put at risk of retaliation by local drug lords. I felt that my agreement with DEA, that I would not be connected to this operation, had been violated. I took my complaint all the way to the DCM, who called in the DEA agent-in- charge for an explanation. I requested that my family and I be allowed to advance our departure from Panama by two months. I argued that I don't want to be around here when this guy's friends start putting two and two together and decide that the car sale was the critical element. All of my concerns were basically dismissed. After all, we had a significant drug dealer in custody, and our counter-drug cooperation with Panama was intact. My request to accelerate my family's departure from the country was rejected. One of the most whimsical if not the strangest element of this sale was that the buyer brought the money to the embassy and allowed our budget-and- fiscal officer to count it. There was no attempt at that time to grab him when he was on U.S. territory, which I didn't want anyway. I wanted the sale to take place as far away from the U.S. official presence as possible. To see a budget officer counting the dirty cash that the guy had brought in to pay for my automobile underscored the absurd reality that our sanctions were not affecting those who had illicit sources of U.S. dollars.

Q: Yes. Well, this is almost always the case. I mean those that have control of power have other ways of taking care of themselves.

BECKER: Lessons learned from numerous applications of economic sanctions by the United States without international support and cooperation and consensus always are doomed to failure, and Panama was a very vivid example of that.

Q: How did the unions react to the sanctions and all this? Were they, did you find them, by the time you left, were they uncomfortable, unhappy?

BECKER: They were obviously uncomfortable. As a labor aristocracy in the eyes of many, they were seen as compromised by being part of the U.S. establishment. I'm talking about the labor unions in the canal area, the ones that I described earlier. They continued to get their pay regularly, while a lot of Panamanians couldn't claim they were being paid because their sources had dried up. Payments were in cash because you couldn't negotiate paychecks. You couldn't do direct deposit into people's bank accounts. The banking system had ceased to function. The economy was reduced to barter. These unions were perceived by the Panamanian government as suspect if not fifth columnists in the pay of the U.S. aiming to undermine the Noriega backed government. In fact, these were people who were just trying to survive, just like most Panamanians. The level of labor unrest directed at the U.S. declined precipitously because everybody was obsessed with survival issues. How to get by in a cash-starved economy was the overriding concern.

Q: Did you see a problem with our military? I was going to ask you did the army and the dependents there, the American army were they almost in a cocoon? Were they feeling any of this?

BECKER: They always tended towards cocoon-like behavior. They didn't regard themselves as a hostile enclave for some time. In fact, even while Noriega liked to put a lot of diplomatic pressure on us, he treated the military fairly well. Life went on on the military bases pretty much as it does in the United States - school, shopping, recreation, and the like. But that said, relatively few members of the military and their families ventured outside the gates of their enclaves. My daughter used to invite her friends in the DOD school system to come over to our apartment, as the kids liked to get together, but basically their parents recoiled. We don't send our kids to Panama. We pointed out on occasion that they were in Panama. They lived in Panama. They may have lived on a defense site, but they were in Panama. Obviously they had reason to be concerned once the harassment against the school buses and the commuters started, but by and large, the overall habit of most military families was not to venture off base. They had everything they needed there. Movie theaters, shopping, recreational facilities, familiar culture and safety. This was not really jeopardized. Not at all jeopardized by Noriega. He was very skillful in playing off those institutions with which he knew he had solid relations and, as I suggested, from which he may have gotten subliminal or unofficial assurances that all of our diplomatic and political posturing didn't amount to a hill of beans.

Q: I have to say that when I was consul general in Naples in the late '70s my wife one time was in the PX getting some shopping and all and heard two military wives talking and one was asking the other, have you been through the tunnel yet to see Naples? The other one said, no, no, I don't want to go there. I mean here's the whole city of Naples and you went through it in an automobile tunnel and she'd never been through the tunnel. That mindset.

BECKER: When my wife was evacuated from Romania to Germany for the birth of our child, she went off base to shop. She didn't speak any German, but tried to learn two or three key words and phrases to get around. She knew what a grocery store looked like. She knew what the products on the shelves looked like, and she could buy some basics she could take back to the hotel. It was a hotel frequented by military families who were TDY and transitioning in and out, and she overheard some military wives bemoaning the fact that they had run out of milk and other staples on the base and what were they going to do? How were they going to feed their children? She thought she was being helpful by suggesting that these staples were available, albeit at a slightly higher price, on the German economy to tide them over until there were new supplies on base. These people recoiled at the prospect that they would have to go off the base and transact a purchase in a foreign language, in what they perceived to be a hostile environment. Yet Germany was anything but a hostile environment for our troops. My wife, to whom Germany was just as foreign, and despite her very pregnant circumstances, simply had a more open outlook on life and life's encounters.

Q: Well, Rick, this is probably a good place to stop. Where did you in 1988, where did you go when you left Panama?

BECKER: We had been living abroad for six years straight, through two successive three-year tours, and I had one daughter who was about to become a junior in high school and another daughter who was just graduating from sixth grade and entering junior high. We decided, and made a commitment to them, that we would go back to the States and reacquaint them with the country of their citizenship and indeed try and get both of them through high school before we went out again. I was also tired of Latin America. Ever since Brazil, since '78 I had been in ARA, now the Western Hemisphere bureau, and I felt like I was all played out. I accepted an offer to become the desk officer for Romania, the country where I had started my diplomatic career. This was in 1988, just as things were heating up or falling apart, if you will, in that part of the world.

Q: 1989 was the most exciting year.

BECKER: So in August of 1988 I reported to my new job as the desk officer for Romania in the office of East European Affairs, flanked by the Hungarian desk officer on one side and the Bulgarian desk officer on the other, with the Polish, Czech and Yugoslav desk officers across the corridor. It was cozy little corner of the Department.

Q: Did you have any geographic disputes, we'll come to that next time. So, we'll pick this up in 1988 when you're back as the Romanian desk officer. I do want to ask one question, how did you and you can answer when we next get together, how did your kids adjust to school back in the States? It's been my experience and the experience of many, kids have a rough time going back to an American school mainly because they didn't find themselves as much a part of the community as they had been. We'll talk about this. Great.

Q: Today is the 21st of January, 2005. Rick, we're going to pick it up when you were the Romanian desk officer and you were doing that from when to when?

BECKER: From the summer of '88 to the summer of '90 I was the Romania desk officer.

Q: Okay. Let's talk about the kids first adjusting.

BECKER: That's a very interesting, perceptive question on your part, because in fact the kids did have a rough time cycling back to the States even though we had all talked about it and they very much wanted to do so. They had extracted a commitment from their mother and me to try to stay back in the States until they could graduate high school and go off to college.

Q: How old were they?

BECKER: They were 16 and 12. Increasingly, our transfer from country to country exacted a toll on their own friendships and sense of belonging. They had not lived in the States very much as they were growing up. We felt it desirable and they felt they needed to get acclimated to the stateside life. None of us had any inkling of how difficult it might be for the family. Unlike the transfer to a new overseas post, where we encountered a ready-made embassy community and support system, there was no red carpet laid out for any of us when we transferred back to Washington. We all had to adjust to a new neighborhood amid strangers. My wife faced the daunting challenge of finding a job without benefit of formal professional training or a work history that a stateside employer might understand. She eventually talked her way into a temporary, later permanent, job teaching Spanish at the high school level, but her wealth of experience living and working in foreign countries was never fully appreciated or rewarded by her supervisors. The biggest hurdles my daughters confronted involved adjustment to new stateside school environments. My older daughter entered school in Fairfax County as an 11th grader and found she could not break into the academic inner circle that Fairfax public schools wrap themselves in. The county claims one of the "finest" educational systems in the country. However, the high school was unwilling to take at face value my daughter's outstanding academic achievements at overseas schools to allow her admittance into GT and AP classes.

Q: AP being advanced placement.

BECKER: Advanced placement. It proved to be almost impossible for a student to gain access to these courses at that level, unless one entered the GT track in the 5th or 6th grade. In the end, she graduated as of the top five students in her senior class in Reston, but we had to fight for every consideration, every privilege, even when we knew my daughter had earned the right to compete and learn at that level. My younger daughter encountered a different set of adjustment problems. She went from a small private school of about 600 students in Panama, where she was the president of the lower school (K-6) and knew all the students and even the teachers on a first-name basis, to a middle school of almost 2,000 in Reston. She was plucky and announced she was going to run for student office the minute she landed and we got our bags unpacked. She had this grand scheme that as a 7th grader she was going to split the vote of the two 8th grade candidates and slide into victory - I can't remember what office, maybe it was president or secretary. She fell short, however, and it was a great disappointment to her. She also came up against racial, ethnic and class divisions and even some violence, which school officials in '88 and '89 did not like to talk about. She had a couple of scrapes with older, bigger and ultimately tougher kids who brought their home frustrations and violent behavior patterns to school. My daughter was used to standing up for her rights. She nearly became a victim of violence herself by doing so. We could imagine it might not only be fists but potentially knives, so it was a tough comeuppance. Again the question of acceptance into the right group was always out there. I remember my own teenage years where the caste system in school was pretty rigid. You were typecast and then put in the pecking order according to the category that you were assigned by others. My daughter faced up to that for the first time.

Q: Well, let's then return to the Romanian desk. 1988, '88 to '90, what were the issues you were having to deal with?

BECKER: It was a period of considerable ferment in Eastern Europe, as everybody knows. In nearly all of the countries, but especially in Poland and Hungary, there were movements afoot to try to liberalize, to gradually create an environment that provided greater economic and political liberty. The lesson, I suppose, was that gradualism was just as dangerous as opening the floodgates, because the pressures to embrace the culture of western freedom and democracy had been increasing for years. With modern means of communications, most of the communist governments could not keep them out. U.S. trade unions had been in the forefront of breaching the Iron Curtain and had worked for a decade by 1988 supporting the Solidarity movement in Poland by providing little tools of great significance, like copiers, typewriters and of course access to Western media. One of the first trips one took as a desk officer for a communist country was to Munich to visit Radio Free Europe, to talk with the management and the broadcasters to get their sense of what was going on. There was a steady stream of ï¿½migrï¿½s through Munich from all the countries of Eastern Europe. Voice of America, the official voice of the United States government, did not penetrate the region nearly as much and was not nearly as influential. People in those countries wanted to hear less about the United States and more about what was going on in their own countries, and Radio Free Europe helped to create an atmosphere of solidarity and hope as well as familiarity.

It was pretty clear that there was a great deal of tension within the Soviet empire and for the Soviet Union to maintain control it needed to maintain monolithic authority. We had a desk in Eastern European Affairs that particularly focused on ethnic and national issues relating to Eastern Europe. This desk worked very closely with the much larger Soviet Affairs office. Even though the Reagan administration talked very much about flexing our military might, building a 600-ship navy, outspending the Soviets in the military sphere, most of us understood that internal dynamics would determine the pace and direction of change in the communist world. I'm not sure any of us could have predicted what would happen when the Berlin Wall ultimately fell. When the Wall finally fell in November 1989, it was not a starting point, since Poland and Czechoslovakia ended up opening up their doors. Hungary, excuse me, Poland and Hungary opened up their doors. The Polish and Hungarian governments, as I recall, dropped or rescinded all of their border restrictions with Germany to permit their citizens to travel. Hungarians could suddenly travel fairly freely to the west, and in effect the elimination of border restrictions within the Soviet bloc created a great sucking sound as Poles, Czechs, Bulgarians and others would travel to Hungary because that was the best location to then pass through a relatively open border.

Q: Through Austria.

BECKER: Yes, through Austria and ultimately Germany. What happened was that East Germany, which was surrounded by Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, could not maintain strict Stalinist controls while everything was falling apart around them. The Wall could not hold in East German who could escape through Hungary. The Soviet Union under Brezhnev was unable to stem this tide.

Q: Gorbachev.

BECKER: Yes, Gorbachev. The Soviet leader was increasingly concerned with, first of all, survival of the USSR as a political unit and, secondly, with gradual liberalization that would permit communism to sustain itself. This was the purpose of glasnost and perestroika. So, the leadership, the direction and indeed the muscle that traditionally had maintained Soviet control over the East bloc was not there to apply. It certainly wasn't perceived as being there, and the Soviet Union seemed to be preoccupied with its own internal problems, many of which were ethnic and national as well as economic. There was effort by the parts of the Soviet empire to spin off. The Baltics were obvious candidates, but also some of the Central Asian and Caucasian countries were already starting to flex their muscles and this took a lot of attention and a lot of energy by the Soviet leaders.

Q: What about, let's go up to October and November of '89, prior to that, what were you seeing in Romania? I mean was Ceausescu sniffing the winds and making adjustments or trying to or what was happening there?

BECKER: Virtually no change. Virtually no change. Ceausescu had built an empire on his own. The internal Stalinist dynamic if you will did not depend upon Soviet might. The secret police were an ever-present glue that kept Romanian society in place. Ceausescu who had never bowed to events that had gone on in the rest of the bloc was not about to do so again. I visited Romania on an orientation trip in November of 1988, having just come onto the desk, and found it if anything a great deal bleaker than it had been when I had served there in the '70s. Bucharest was always bleak. They burn a lot of soft coal and in the wintertime the environment was sooty and murky 24 hours a day. The fact is that the Ceausescu regime deprived the population of all of the basic comforts, heat and light in the dark days of winter and certainly any kind of quality food products on the shelves. I remember inspecting the shops at that time. I saw Chinese canned sardines and cabbage and very little sign of meat, fresh fruit or vegetables. It was a terribly depressing environment. I remember thinking to myself that these people have virtually reached rock bottom and judging by what ferment is going on elsewhere, it's a matter of time before something significant will happen here. But nobody at that time, not even the Romanian desk officer, could predict that Romania any time soon was going to go the same route as the neighboring countries. Again, Ceausescu had built up his own system of repression and control which was not dependent on the winds of change in the rest of the East Bloc, and those controls were remarkably effective. There was no visible magnet for opposition and the population appeared to be thoroughly beaten down by their circumstances.

Q: Well, was there a significant number of escapees from the system who were coming out, I mean was there a Romanian community in exile of any importance?

BECKER: There was a Romanian community in exile, but not of any significant importance. The largest number of the Romanians who made it into exile were Jews who went to Israel. A lesser number came to the United States, having detoured from their declared destination of Israel, which was a war zone. There was a Romanian community in Paris, mainly the intellectuals. Leaders of the Hungarian community in Romania, one of whom had been my neighbor in the '70s, the head of the Hungarian language television and radio service, had managed to immigrate to Hungary in the '80s. Many of the Hungarian intellectual elite in Romania had gone to Budapest. There was a much smaller group of Germans, who had settled Romania in the 16th and 17th centuries, who had managed to get out to Germany. But for all practical purposes, there was no united or even linked voice of the Romanian community in exile that was trying to beat down the doors, nor did they have the economic means through remittances and other means of influencing to maintain any effective contact with the people inside. In fact Ceausescu had done a very effective job of eliminating any opposition, either inside or outside the communist party.

Q: What was the role of Madame Ceausescu in your estimate?

BECKER: It needs to be emphasized that Romanian communism had morphed at some point in time from a communist totalitarian dictatorship on the Soviet model to a family or Byzantine imperial dynasty. Romania was in fact the Ceausescu family plantation. The people of Romania were slaves to the family and to their excess consumption, personality cult, all the trappings of royalty in which the Ceausescus wrapped themselves. Ceausescu's son Nicu used to drive through the streets of Bucharest at high speeds in his Italian sports car. He was notorious for womanizing. Rumors of alcoholism and drug use abounded in the family. Elena Ceausescu, the "first lady," was a full partner in crime with her husband. She had some academic training as a chemist and became the regime's scientific guru, a kind of ideological point person. Once she and her pseudo-scientific cohorts came up with a new nutritional pyramid in which the few products that were available on the Romanian economcabbage, beets, carrots, corn, processed canned goods - were put at the top of the pyramid as the most nutritious, while condemning all fresh meats and fish, fruits, green vegetables which Romanians could not obtain in any event as unhealthy. In other words, she propounded a total distortion of scientific truth, substituting an ideological if not a theological overlay for the regime's policies.

The regime also perpetuated one of the most rigid and unremitting pro-natalist policies in all of East Europe. All birth control had been banned for many years. Romanians were exhorted to produce more children for the state. However, economic and health conditions were so poor that the result was a not a larger but a smaller birth rate. Abortion was rampant. Despite regime falsification of demographic and health data, the number of abortions was by all accounts off the map. After the regime fell, investigators found huge numbers of children of all ages abandoned by their parents, many to state orphanages. HIV- and AIDS-stricken babies were only a small proportion of the total of human cost of a regime that provided neither health care nor subsistence nor information on child bearing or child rearing. Young Romanians simply were not given the tools needed to survive. Of course, with two or three generations living in cramped, one or two bedroom apartments, this probably was one of the best forms of birth control. It was truly a dismal environment.

Q: Do we have any policy interests or what were we doing with it during the Ceausescu regime?

BECKER: Well, I think the Reagan administration had laid on a fairly full court press in an effort to exacerbate the internal contradictions and stresses in communist societies, and cultivation of Ceausescu as a communist independent dissipated during the '80s. It was very hard to find any reason to warm up to a regime like his. We didn't have a policy specifically geared to Ceausescu and his regime, but one that was more or less undifferentiated and, if anything, focused on Moscow. Our policies toward the USSR tended to filter through to those countries that were under Moscow's control or sphere of influence, of which Romania was sort of on the edge. Keeping in mind that Romania did not have a common border with any democratic country, the escape valves were very limited. The ability to flee to Yugoslavia, Hungary or Bulgaria did not represent much of a gain for most Romanians. Our embassy had pretty much hunkered down because we no longer were seeking to entice Romania away from the Soviet bloc. The Romanians had done achieved a degree of separation on their own, but yet it had not produced the kind of liberalization that we had hoped to foster in the 1970s when I served there. It was sort of a stand-fast, watch-and-wait, see what happens. To the extent that you could look at an Eastern Europe communist regime succumbing to outside pressures and to their own internal inconsistencies, Romania still seemed to be pretty much impervious to all that. So the communist regimes in Hungary fell, Poland fell, Czechoslovakia fell. Even Bulgaria drifted. Only Romania and Albania, also an independent Stalinist regime, seemed to resist the trend.

Q: Did you feel yourself kind of on the desk. I mean everyone who is on a desk is tainted with their own country and particularly in this case were you sort of the odd man out or did people lunch with you or not?

BECKER: I don't know whether it would have been better to have shunned me and put me at a table by myself or as it turned out keep me around as the butt of all of the cruel jokes, but I had a lot of colleagues commiserating with me. I was riding a dead horse. We held informal pools as to when such and such a country would go under. We tried to establish some levity, because we were all working extraordinarily long hours to keep on top of events, to support our embassies, to not be reactive but try to be creative and help our embassies seize opportunities. I found myself sitting there and the odds were always very much against my country joining the crowd of defections. Everybody in the office agreed that Romania wasn't going anywhere, no matter what was happening elsewhere in the Bloc, and that view prevailed up until almost the very end.

Q: You're talking about December '89?

BECKER: Well, the first fissures began to show in September or November of '89, I'm trying to remember the exact date. Romania was celebrating its national day in the great plaza in Bucharest, where Ceausescu gave his annual harangue a la Fidel Castro, expounding on what a great harvest Romania had had and what tremendous relations Romania had with the rest of the world and how they were going to defy the retrograde trends that were infecting and infesting other countries and all the glowing developments that had virtually no relevance and certainly rang very false to the Romanian people. What happened was a groundswell of protest, quite spontaneous, in which Ceausescu was shouted down by the hundreds of thousands of people who had been summoned, bused in as they always were to these events to be the passive witnesses to this repetitive call to national unity and follow-the-leader. He was in fact shouted down. He ended up retreating back from the balcony, while the police and security forces stepped in and quelled an incipient civil protest for the first time in anybody's memory. This happened about six or eight weeks before the roof ultimately collapsed in December.

Q: When this happened did you send up alert signals from the embassy and from you know?

BECKER: The events elsewhere in Eastern Europe kept all of us, in Washington and at our embassies, on the highest alert. We who were responsible for Romania did so even though our embassy was an island where we did not have anything that even approached semi-normal contact with the Romanian authorities, not with people within the party, not with people on the streets. Everybody was closely watched. There was a certain amount of intimidation of embassy reporting officers who stepped over the bounds. The embassy had been led until the summer of '89 by a very experienced team headed by Ambassador Roger Kirk and political counselor Mike Parmly. What happened on that national day had to be treated as something clearly out of the ordinary, even if the prevailing view was that one could not expect the Romanians to deviate from their ingrained passivity and fear of an unyielding police state. The national day protest was the first indication that Romanians were starting to feel that they had very little to lose by speaking out and venting their accumulated frustrations, as was happening with some effect in other communist countries. In fact, Ceausescu was unable to employ his traditional repressive methods to shut out radio and even word-of-mouth from the outside world.

Q: This is tape seven, side one with Rick Becker. Yes?

BECKER: The embassy redoubled its efforts to try to get out and gauge the extent and the depth of what might be a genuine protest movement in the making and even a movement for regime change. The spark, when it occurred, was totally unexpected. When it happened, Roger Kirk had already transferred out and we sent in a new ambassador.

Q: Who was that?

BECKER: His name was "Punch" Green. I'm trying to remember his first name.

Q: Yes, I know him as Punch Green.

BECKER: He was a Republican Party campaign and party chairman from the state of Oregon. He was coming out of retirement himself to do his friends Jim Baker and George Bush, Sr. a favor. I don't know if it was punishment for Oregon having gone to the Democrats in '88, but he was given Romania as his "reward." As desk officer, I did the best I could to get him ready for this assignment, talking to him about the limited possibilities of cozying up to a regime like Ceausescu's because almost every ambassador wants to go out and build a relationship. The anomaly was that he was going out with instructions that were 180 degrees from that - not to build a relationship but to stand fast for U.S. policy, which was in all cases reform if not regime change. By the time he went out to post, the ways of reform were well advanced in the other countries and he was told to stand fast in Romania. So he bore the brunt of the surprises that took place during the late fall and winter of '89.

Q: Well, just to get a feel. I mean here is a man who has made a mark, a significant mark in politics and in business in Oregon going out there. How did he, was he saying, why me or saying boy I can really do something?

BECKER: As I recollect, I think he went out with the idea that, even with these constraining instructions and policy directives from the White House and from the Secretary of State, he in fact could accomplish something. He thought he could reach out, that he could serve as a beacon, as a linkage between the U.S. and Romania, Americans and Romanians, but not surprisingly the few initiatives he took were rebuffed. We had entered into a truly adversarial relationship with the Romanians. The Romanian regime preferred to stand on its own even though they found they could not have the official support in the United States that they might have two, five or ten years earlier. The ambassador's hands were tied. After this national day surprise, the embassy started to gear itself up for what could be more of the same. There emerged a general consensus on the desk, in the analytical community and from embassy reporting that unlike the rest of Eastern Europe, if anything happened in Romania it would not be evolutionary or nonviolent because it was no basis for an evolutionary, nonviolent transition in the Romanian context. It was either going to be more of the same, and we were still betting that it was going to be more of the same, or it was going to be violent and nobody was prepared to predict how that might turn out.

When there was a protest, and the details escape me, it started out in Timisoara, which was the far western provincial capital, a multi-ethnic part of Romania near the Yugoslav border. There were a lot of Hungarians, a lot of Serbs, Germans as well as ethnic Romanians. Ethnic Romanians tended to stick with Ceausescu more than the other nationalities because as time wore on, Ceausescu and his family tended to play the Romanian card as had many previous Romanian rulers. He blamed the minority nationalities for all the country's problems. The minorities, who had resided side by side with the Romanian majority for centuries, were portrayed as alien and indeed hostile to Romanian sovereignty, national unity, and cultural purity. When things got tough, it was the ethnic minorities who bore a lot of the brunt. In Timisoara, there was a clash between local security forces and elements of the local populace. I seem to think there had been a spontaneous demonstration, a march to a cemetery to pay homage to some citizens who had fallen victim to security police excesses. The march was repressed violently. This time the whole province blew up and indeed it spread to other provinces. In a matter of days, and it was very difficult to get news out on what was going on, the entire country was literally up in armof 40 provinces, well over 30 of them were engulfed in popular revolt. The word of one uprising spread from region to region, and people shed their fear of the authorities and rose up. The Ceausescu regime took its usual take-no-prisoners and give-no-ground approach to these uprisings and ordered the security forces to do whatever damage they could to break the will of this incipient uprising. Blood flowed.

We found ourselves in Washington dealing with a major bilateral crisis that would become a major international crisis. You not only had the prospect of widespread violence within Romania that conceivably could spread to other countries where ethnic ties were strong, but you also had a sizeable U.S. and international community in Romania that was very much threatened by being the domestic violence. Nobody was pointing a finger at the Americans for having provoked any of this, but in fact we were there and we were very visible. Although there had been some discussion of voluntary embassy draw downs and departures, I cannot recall whether or not any concrete steps had been taken in the late fall or in the early winter prior to the Christmas season. It was actually thought that the unrest would die down because it was Christmas season. Things would not explode over Christmas. The regime might indeed survive this threat because who is going to provoke a revolution over Christmas? That the regime didn't recognize Christmas or any of the traditional religious holidays, and had suppressed the churches. It was in league with the Romanian Orthodox church in seeking to maintain a degree of calm and submission. In fact, the churches and religion did not play a major role in influencing public policy in Romania, as the Catholic church did in Poland and as both Catholics and Protestants did in Hungary. This being the harsh winter season, with little food on the shelves, conditions didn't seem promising for sustained civil unrest, and perhaps everything would blow over by January - but it didn't.

In the course of less than a week, we had to deal with a large-scale, violent national outburst against the Ceausescu dictatorship, a true revolutionary transformation. CNN was on top of it. The best reporting we got were visuals from CNN in Romania. We were suddenly faced with evacuating a good-sized embassy in the midst of a violent conflagration. It couldn't be done through military airlift, as the airports were closed. We were in no condition to fly troops into in this landlocked communist nation and help our embassy. So, the Department painstakingly organized a vehicle convoy from Bucharest to the Bulgarian border and their reception by Bulgarian and U.S. officials at the border. It was a harrowing enterprise, moving embassy employees and dependents to safety over 100 miles of territory thought to be swarming with Romanian army and security units as well as armed insurgents intent on seeking out the security forces and doing damage. We had an evacuation agreement with Britain, but we took it upon ourselves to accept into this convoy any member of what remained of the international community who wished to travel with us. There were some embassy vehicles, but most were private vehicles. We hoped that since we were not the targets of violence by either side we could get our people to the border. I seem to think that it was a two-to- four hour trip. Obviously a large convoy, containing a couple of hundred people if not more, would move much slower than one or two vehicles. One the vehicles got under way, the Department's Romania crisis task force, assembled in the 7th floor Operations Center, could only look on and listen. There were actually two crisis task forces running on the 7th floor at the same time. Operation Just Cause in Panama had been launched on the 19th or 20th of December, and the Department immediately set up a task force. The dramatic events in Romania began on December 17, I believe, and our task force was established at almost the same time. Since I was as the desk officer, I was designated deputy coordinator of the Romania task force. I think the East European Affairs office director was the coordinator.

We sat there and monitored the situation on a minute-by-minute basis. I recall there was a lot to monitor, but there was relatively little we could do. We watched the drama on CNN as Ceausescu disappeared from the presidential palace, I think, about the 23rd of December and nobody knew where he or his immediate family was. He and his wife were apparently identified and picked up apparently by Romanian army units which, unlike the state security forces, had by and large had refused orders to fire on the civilian population. The army basically broke ranks, stood aside and indeed there were reports of clashes between the army and the securitate, the professional state security force. The army caught the Ceausescus and lined the two of them against a wall and executed them.

Q: I remember watching it on TV.

BECKER: Yes. The army unit filmed the execution and broadcast it on state TV.

Q: Had we thought about just prior to this one of the things we often tried to do is if a regime is collapsing under pressure and all to ease the civil unrest is to offer asylum or get the leader out to another country and be gone and we've arranged for you to end up in Uganda or some other place like that. Had we thought about that at all?

BECKER: No. Our relations with the Romanian regime and with the Ceausescus had become formal, correct, but when events unfolded, they happened very rapidly and there was never an instruction, not even a suggestion, that we might intervene diplomatically. I don't recall ever discussing the scenario in any of our staff meetings that we might try to persuade some other country to take the dictator and his family, a la Haiti, and allow Romania to pick up the pieces without that impediment. To the very end, and despite the National Day rebuff in the streets, Ceausescu was supremely confident in his ability to maintain control. Had we raised the issue, he probably would have laughed at us. It was not raised and there was never any instruction. Part of it may have been that the tumultuous events in Romania were upon us without any real prediction or warning, and the myriad of other events, largely positive and evolutionary, taking place elsewhere in Eastern Europe were consuming our attention. Romania was certainly not seen as an environment that was propitious to our influence or our change.

Q: Was there any contact prior to the execution of the Ceausescus of forces within Romania coming to the embassy and saying, hey we represent the national liberation front or something like that or was it or were we out of it?

BECKER: When the Ceausescus disappeared from sight, they had issued orders to the state security people, do your worst, but they dropped out of sight like cowards and nobody knew where they were. Most Romanians were quite accustomed to an environment in which standing up and saying we represent an independent movement was quite alien behavior. Under Ceausescu's rule, there was no evidence of coup plotting or organizing an independent political or civic movement. Anytime somebody stood up to express a dissenting view, they were ruthlessly repressed, imprisoned, killed or pushed into exile. It was only after Ceausescu disappeared, and more so after it was clear that he and his wife had been executed, that these sorts of things started to happen. Even then, nothing of a popular or mass nature emerged, but rather small groups of party leaders stepped forward to claim the Ceausescu mantle or at least to have succeeded him.

Interestingly enough, it was one of those individuals who had been pushed aside by Ceausescu, exiled if you will to a provincial party post after being a member of the central committee a some years earlier. Ion Iliescu was not given a great deal of weight in the days before Ceausescu was clearly and truly dead and buried. Nobody wanted to put their heads up. Almost overnight Iliescu, who had been a fairly prominent party leader during much of the '80s, came forth and claimed the loyalty of the army and of most party leaders. Nobody really quite knew what to make of it. He clearly spoke for the party leadership. Before he made contact with the embassy, as far as I can recall, he appeared in public with a very small group of party leaders, most of whom had been shunned or demoted by Ceausescu. The group stood up on the same balcony where Ceausescu had appeared on National Day and declared itself to be a government of succession, reconciliation and reform. It very much appeared that this group was simply going to do away with or at least push aside the other leaders who had remained close to Ceausescu to the very end. Nobody knew what the character of this new leadership group. There had been no visible evidence that the party leadership was divided between reformers and traditionalists. From the outside, the party seemed quite monolithic and undifferentiated, except for those individuals who had once held power but had lost favor and position. Did having lost favor with Ceausescu make Iliescu a reformer, now that he was standing up and declaring himself to be the leader of a national reconciliation government? We were not too sure.

Q: You must have been sort of scurrying around trying to look at old files to find out what we had on him and the other one.

BECKER: That's right, because he had sort of dropped off the scope. He was not seen as a great light for reform. Nobody was. While you were in Ceausescu's good graces, you were undistinguishable from dozens of other party leaders in his favor and your policies were undistinguishable from his policies. Iliescu had a reputation for being an effective provincial administrator; and for not being overly heavy-handed. Aside from that, we knew relatively little about him. What was his true character, what was his true nature? At the moment, we were first of all heavily occupied with making sure that there were no American casualties, and secondly on the alert for just this kind of development, that is, the coalescence of a successor government. There were no tears shed and no regrets when Ceausescu left the scene, but we were concerned at the possibility of a huge vacuum because Ceausescu had created conditions whereby his removal and that of his wife and a small coterie of leaders who stuck with him to the bitter end would be quite likely to result in a huge power vacuum at the top. We were in a watch-and-wait mode with regard to a successor government. One did not want to be too quick to bless just anybody who stood up and said he was Romania's new leader. Our levers of influence over Romania were very limited at that moment. Ceausescu had made that very clear that his goal was national self-sufficiency. He had no foreign debt. He had liquidated Romania's through Draconian economic policies over a period of 10 years. He wasn't going to be dependent upon any foreign government for aid or support. He was trying to follow a North Korean model of autarchic development, which may have been part of his undoing.

Q: Were we at this point we've more or less figured that the Soviet Union is too preoccupied with its own internal things and the things were falling apart, that the Soviet Union posed no particular threat to moving into Romania or anything like that. Was that the calculation?

BECKER: That was the calculation. In fact, they had raised virtually no opposition, and made no effort to provoke counterrevolutionary activities in much softer targets like Poland and Hungary and even Czechoslovakia, where they had presumably more levers of control and support.

Q: And lots of troops.

BECKER: And indeed troops. So nobody really expected they would use their resources and devote their attention to try and influence the course of events. There were abundant rumors that the Russians were actively stirring things up to bring the confrontation with Ceausescu to a head, and that certain Romanian party leaders would emerge in the next few days as a successor government and swear allegiance to Moscow and the Warsaw Pact. These proved to be empty of substance. There were several contacts between the Soviet embassy and our own embassy in Bucharest. The Soviets expressed a high degree of concern that they would be targets of violence, because anti-Russian feeling was always high in Romania and the Soviets knew they would be blamed for whatever went sour. There was never any sympathy for the Russians, and any serious suggestion of Soviet meddling might have sparked an attack on the Russian Embassy, which didn't occur.

Q: What about a higher command. Secretary of State Baker, President Bush, was there much interest? This of course was a great drama to see for a couple of days on TV with CNN showing some of the quite gory details actually, but did you find that you were getting orders from above or briefing people from above or was this just something off to one side?

BECKER: No, it became center stage. Each country, as it moved from the communist to the at least post-communist stage, received an inordinate level of attention. Washington seized on every change and embraced the successor governments, one by one. No attention was paid to Romania until the very dramatic events of December 1989 appeared on all of our screens, and then due attention - a great deal of attentiowas paid to Romania. Deputy Secretary of State Larry Eagleburger had a lot of experience in the region and was a personal friend of any number of Romanian exiles, for example the grand rabbi of Romania, Moses Rosen, who used to travel in the West, to Israel and to the United States a couple of times a year. I had known Rabbi Rosen during the '70s when I was a junior officer in Bucharest, and I became his escort officer whenever he came to Washington. He always called on Deputy Secretary Eagleburger when he came to the Department, because they were friends from years back. Rabbi Rosen always brought little tidbits of information on the status of the Jewish community, which had always been of interest both on the Hill and in the White House. Most certainly he did not make a pilgrimage to Washington during that period, but he had visited early in the fall of '89, and had reported on the worsening conditions and the need to keep pressure on the Romanians to continue to allow emigration to Israel of the last of the Romanian Jewry, at that time down to about 20,000 from a post-war high of 400,000. Maybe there had been a total of 100,000 when I served in Romania in the '70s. That had dwindled down to a few thousand older folks, who were physically or psychologically not prepared to make the move to Israel. We had little leverage on the situation, since these remnants were not even applying for exit permits. There was always interest by the U.S. and international Jewish communities in the status of Jews in Romania and in ensuring that the doors remained open for ï¿½migrï¿½s.

Q: Were you preparing things whither Romania all the time, trying to come up with stuff?

BECKER: We were always preparing contingency papers, more info papers than action memos.

Q: Yes, well, I think this is probably a good place to stop and we'll pick this up the next time. We're still talking about the events of really December '89 and early January of '90. Is there anything else we should cover on that immediate period?

BECKER: I would simply add that conditions and policies were beginning to be developed for U.S. support to post-communist governments and societies, and legislation had been passed already to assist the successor regimes in the other countries to facilitate democratic electoral processes, bureaucratic reforms and socio-economic support. I think this all came together in 1989-90 in a package called the SEED legislation. I can't tell you what SEED stood for, but in fact it was very much organized with Poland and Hungary in mind. It was relatively easy to add new recipients to the package, which included electoral support, introduction of the Peace Corps, and large-scale human exchanges at all levels in Eastern Europe. The framework of a post-communist policy in the administration was already beginning to take shape at the time, not with Romania in mind but with some of the more advanced countries. There was a great deal of discussion about this. When the regime fell, the critical period of violence passed, and the new leadership took shape in the first months of 1990, we found we had a number of tools to draw up on, and it was simply incumbent on us to apply those tools in the best and most creative way possible. We recognized that the situation in Romania was far worse in terms of what needed to be done to effect a turnaround in the country's political and economic development. Romania needed to reconstruct an economy in shambles and reverse a decade of self-isolation by re-establishing effective international linkages, more than any other country in Eastern Europe.

Q: Okay, well, then we'll pick this up the next time of how Romania what you were doing with Romania as to get it integrated into the rest of the Eastern European situation as far as what relief and change and all that. Great.

Q: Okay, today is the 18th of February, 2005. Rick, just to put me back in the thing, you were on the Romanian desk when to when?

BECKER: From the summer of '88 to the summer of '90.

Q: Just to reprise a bit, what was the situation in '88 when you took over the Romanian desk?

BECKER: It was a mixed picture. On the one hand, the Romanian landscape itself was particularly bleak. The '80s were a very bad decade for Romanians. Human rights, social and economic conditions and indeed relations between Romania and all of its neighbors and with the United States had deteriorated from the halcyon days of the '70s, when Romania achieved a major opening with the West and gained most favored nation trade status with the United States. All of the promise that this was going to open up and liberalize Romanian society due to the attention we were lavishing on Romania had not come to pass.

Q: Now, it's coming back to me. I think we covered the fall of Ceausescu.

BECKER: We did, and we were talking about the aftermath. We had just covered the activities of the Romania crisis task force, of which I was the operating deputy, which was in existence over Christmas '89. The task force was concerned as much with the successful and safe evacuation of the U.S. mission and foreign nationals from a very unstable and uncertain situation in Romania as it was with trying to get on top of the political circumstances and monitoring how they would play out.

Q: I guess where we want to start is you know, you're looking, this is sort of after the fall situation and you're trying to, our policy was to bring Romania back into the system. How was that working for you?

BECKER: Well, there were structures in place. Congress had responded particularly to the liberalization and the fall of communism in Poland and Hungary in a very forthcoming way. As frequently occurs in these situations, the U.S. was expending huge amounts of money with little thought as to whether the recipients could absorb that much in short periods of time. The SEED program was designed to provide massive amounts of political, economic and humanitarian assistance to these countries, both as an incentive to genuine reform and as a way of furthering the disintegration of communism. The problem with Romania was that it was virtually the last country in Europe to fall, and a lot of the funds and attention that accompanied the congressional mandate had been committed to other countries. It was our job to fashion a set of priorities and programs for what arguably was the worst off of all the ex-communist countries, not counting Albania, and not punish it for simply being the last on the list to fall into the democratic or at least the post-communist camp.

We were a little hesitant to call what happened in Romania a democratic revolution. It was certainly a popular revolution. It was a violent overthrow which had not occurred in any of the other countries and we were not certain how deep and how far this transformation would go. Would it simply be a communist successor regime by another name, and would it be a source of long-term instability that we would have to live with? Nobody yet anticipated the kind of chaos that occurred in Yugoslavia later in the '90s as a result of the death of Tito and the disintegration of the Yugoslav Republic, but Romania may have been a foretaste of the dark side, the worst side of what was a major political reconfiguration. This was of course also before the Soviet Union, which was in the midst of some episodic and quixotic reform efforts, actually came to its end.

Q: Well, I would imagine that you would be looking very closely at the security forces. What were they called?

BECKER: The Securitate.

Q: The Securitate and the armed forces. This is after the fall. What was happening and what were we getting from our embassy?

BECKER: Well, to this extent the embassy did a really stellar job of reporting, even though they were primarily concerned with security of U.S. citizens at the time. The outbreak of violence came in such a way as to prevent the orderly departure of mission dependents and non-essential personnel. When the revolution occurred, airports were closed and there was no way to anticipate the need to evacuate large numbers of citizens. That certainly hadn't occurred in the fall of communism elsewhere. This kind of instability and insecurity had not occurred. Yes, the security of the mission was everyone's first concern. Beyond that, the embassy did an excellent job of reporting, monitoring, interviewing people from the provinces that touched base with us and reported first-hand on what was going on. People actually came to the embassy to tell us what was happening in the far corners of the country.

Q: Were they opening up to the embassy? Did they want, did the army want to let us know what was going on?

BECKER: No. The army may have feared retribution from whoever succeeded Ceausescu. It may have seen an opportunity to strike back at a regime and a security apparatus that possibly frustrated professionalism and even humanitarian sentiments that existed within an institution whose rank-and-file had been conscripted from the general population. The army, like all Romanian institutions, had been infiltrated by and subordinated to the security forces and the political commissars. The security forces were considered a dark force. Their membership and methods were the topics of folklore, like Romanian vampire legends. Nobody knew how extensive their network was. State security fostered an environment of fear. As we later learned, and as most people suspected during the Ceausescu years, everybody was informing on everybody else, just as they later found out in East Germany and the other countries. You didn't know if your neighbor was working for state security and people were intimidated by the utter lack of trust at a very basic level. There were some atrocities, actual massacres of civilians that took place in the days following the outbreak of the revolution, which everybody attributed to either revenge-taking or a ploy by the security forces to maintain a climate of insecurity and fear. Members of the securitate probably were in fear of their own lives now that their sponsor and protector Ceausescu was no longer around. People dressed in army uniforms or in paramilitary garb were marauding, running around the country targeting individuals and groups and then using the media or the ever-present rumor mill to blame it on this group or that group. This is the way the security apparatus had always worked. So, it was very difficult to tell truth from fiction from rumor, and there was a sense of panic that the system that had become total anarchy and that all semblance of personal security had disappeared, regardless of how people felt about communism. There was a kind of security in knowing who your master was and what was expected of you. This was no longer the case.

Q: Well, the American embassy, let's say even if you've got funds, was there any there to go to? Were you seeing a while you were on the desk a collection of authority that was gathering together or what was happening?

BECKER: What happened within about a week, actually before the New Year, was the emergence of a group of semi-senior and formerly senior party officials who proclaimed themselves a provisional government, a government of national unity or a successor government. They tried to reassure the population that there was continuity of government and that the country was not falling into anarchy, but at the same time tried to convince the citizenry that they did not represent the entire Ceausescu regime. The new leaders were already setting themselves apart from the institutions they had been either loyal to and subordinated to prior to December of '89. Every one of those leaders had a certain stature as a senior communist party member at one time or another. It was very difficult to tell how much change, how much forward movement, and how much linkage with the past would take place. There was no Romanian Vaclav Havel who could epitomize and inspire a democratic opposition to communist rule.

Q: You're talking about the leader of the Czech revolution.

BECKER: The Czech revolution, yes. And there was certainly no Lech Walesa.

Q: Poland.

BECKER: Romanian communities in exile were more or less fragmented and there were very few individuals, intellectuals or others, who stood up and spoke out on behalf of the large, disenfranchised Romanian population. Ceausescu's dictatorship was that effective. What Romanians were presented with was a successor of undetermined loyalty, intention and indeed credentials for putting together what we hoped would be a democratic beginning for the country. Our goals were the same in Romania as they were in the rest of Eastern Europe. Our primary objective once there was some reasonable establishment of order, even though there still were isolated instances of violence attributed to paramilitary actions against citizen groups and public officials. We made it very clear that we wanted to see a democratic transition and we were prepared to put resources and political clout behind an early call for national elections. That was one of the main efforts in which I was involved in the last six months of my desk tour, from January to my departure in the summer of '90. Keep in mind that AID had a lot of experience in other parts of the world with elections, but had no experience in Eastern Europe. AID didn't even have a European bureau, and certainly no experts on transitions from failed communism to successful democracy. That mission came with the legislation that lavished all kinds of resources on Eastern Europe. Many of those newly legislated resources went to other agencies besides State. One of the major Senate architects was Robert Dole, and his wife just happened to be Secretary of Labor, so there was a large labor component to the SEED legislation. We also were ramping up the Peace Corps to teach English in Hungary and other parts, basically to put a U.S. stamp on the transition in Eastern Europe. We needed to play catch-up with Romania.

Q: Were there sort of hurdles that Romania had to do that we were explaining before this money and aid would come in, if they got too communist you don't get this or something like that?

BECKER: I don't recall a lot of the details, but it was clear at the time that many in Washington were somewhat hesitant to throw too many marbles into the Romanian basket. We were prepared to provide incentives for change, but wanted to see results in short order to justify further support. In the winter of '89-90, our immediate goal was to provide PL-480 food aid, and I believe we did make unconditional food and humanitarian aid grants to Romania, as well as other countries, to provide for victims of winter famine or victims of the unrest. But here were other elements of aid that couldn't flow until some preconditions were met. We had an initial problem that there were no real recognizable structures, either in the government or in civil society, with which to engage to help mobilize and carry out effective and sustainable reforms. Our first instinct was to send in massive numbers of advisors, and the Romanians appeared to accept all of them with a lot of good grace, curiosity and an understandable degree of suspicion. Clearly we expressed our hope and expectation that the heavy-handed state apparatus, the virtual total state control over the economy and society, would be dismantled over time. We were prepared to provide expertise to assist in the destatification and decentralization of the economy. First and foremost, we saw early scheduling of democratic elections as perhaps more important in Romania than in any of the other countries, because it would be considered a litmus test of how we would be able to pursue some of our other goals with the new leadership, whose democratic bonafides we couldn't genuinely assess at that moment.

We tried to focus attention and resources on holding the first democratic elections in all of Eastern Europe in Romania, before Poland or Hungary, which all had interim post-communist governments with popular if not constitutional legitimacy. We wanted to see a constitutional, elected Romanian government that could lay claim to popular legitimacy.

Q: Well, was there a constitution that allowed this? I mean a lot of these, at one time I think the Soviet Union had one of the most liberal constitutions in the world, but it didn't mean anything. Did Romania have a constitution that would provide for the elections?

BECKER: No. I must say you highlighted an important part of the process that I simply can't recall. Clearly we did not want to delay mounting an electoral process with a perhaps more involved process of reforming Romania's constitution. This was not a lesson we learned well in subsequent transitions, because sometimes the constitutional changes that were enacted early on were quite hasty and ill-conceived and had to be corrected. In any event, I remember trying to mobilize U.S. organizations like IFES, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, one of many NGOs that had experience in organizing voters and elections in Third World countries.

Q: This was before the OSCE had developed its apparatus, which was used quite often particularly in _____.

BECKER: Right. The OSCE was still called the CSCE in those days.

Q: Yes and it didn't have the apparatus that later was used in Bosnia for example and Kosovo.

BECKER: No, and that apparatus was developed out of experiences such as those in Romania and other post-communist systems on how to put together an electoral process. We were not coordinating well at this stage with the Europeans and we did not see the CSCE, which if you recall still had the Soviet Union as a major player. Shortly before I left the desk, the CSCE held a major conference in Paris on human rights issues which had a very curious attendance. There was the still communist Soviet Union, and then there were a lot of former communist countries for the first time participating in a review of human rights, constitutionalism and human dignity issues. I have a framed poster at home from this month-long conference on human rights issues that clearly focused on the transition then taking place in Eastern Europe. It was still not a very responsive organization, because the Soviet Union sat at the table and its role vis-ï¿½-vis the successor governments were still a little unclear. There may have been new leaders with a different, Western oriented complexion, but all of these countries still bordered on the Soviet Union. We were still never sure how far the Soviet tolerance for dissent and independence would go. We were not fully aware of the turmoil that was going on within the Soviet Union. As we later learned, The Soviets were at this stage probably totally incapable of responding outside their own borders to independence movements, but clearly they continued to put up the same front that they had put up before in international fora.

Q: Now, Ceausescu had had this regime which essentially was starving the people in order to build up a large pile of money or something. I mean what happened to all the sacrifices of all the Romanians? Was it in a Swiss bank account? Was it somewhere that it could be used or what?

BECKER: My recollection was that we did some cursory investigations with our friends and allies in the West, in Switzerland particularly, to see if there were any secret bank accounts. What happened didn't turn up anything of major proportions, not billions and billions of dollars. We were looking for petrodollars in particular, since Romania was a net importer of petroleum and an exporter of refined product. Romania exported raw materials, agricultural products and even shoddy manufactured goods, which produced foreign exchange that was used to purchase capital goods from other countries. All available resources were plowed back into further industrialization for the purpose of building a totally independent economic and political base at the service of the Ceausescus. It was our estimation that one-third to 40% of all public expenditures was devoted to recapitalization, especially investment in heavy industry, which was a tremendously high percentage by global standards.

Q: I would think I mean this thing happening in the middle of the winter meant that you couldn't tap into the agriculture resources or richness of Romania which had been used to starve the people and get money for the industrial buildup. You couldn't turn that on right away?

BECKER: No, certainly and it was very difficult to find out what agricultural resources were available. There didn't seem to be large stockpiles. Apparently, the Romanian state sold everything of value abroad for hard currency so that they could buy machinery and technological processes. They had a fairly efficient military for the period, but both the military and security forces consumed a fairly high proportion of the national budget. Ceausescu's intent throughout the '80s was to liberate Romania from any kind of dependence on the outside world, a little lesson he learned after he visited North Korea in '79. His best hope for survival was not to be dependent economically and certainly politically on anybody else. He didn't want to be dependent any more on conditionalities from international lending institutions than on the Soviet-controlled bloc. He basically squeezed the pip until it was dry.

Q: What about all this outflow of people mainly for academic institutions and ï¿½migrï¿½ groups and all flooding to Eastern Europe full of advice, some of it must have been really out of this world, not based on reality, but whatever the latest economic scheme of Michigan State University's faculty or development or something like that. Did you have problems with that?

BECKER: One of the early decisions by the successor government in Romania was not to risk further disruption, further chaos and further uncertainty by adopting a drastic economic reform model. They explicitly rejected the "shock" approach to economic change and growth adopted by Poland, which ended up exacerbating unemployment and economic dislocation in the short term. They were also a little averse to turning over the keys to their industries to foreign investors. Most of the Romanian exiled community had been effectively cut off from contact with their homeland. It wasn't simply a matter of exploiting those ties, but of trying to move the government to make some initial adjustments, some small market openings, with the promise that there would be more reform down the road once that government was legitimized. The provisional government, and indeed the government that was later elected would not risk its own survival by closing factories and turning people out in the streets. There was virtually no private sector that could provide alternate employment. This was a sort of pie-in-the-sky goal as far as most Romanians were concerned.

The Romanians turned out to be the slowest of all the Eastern Europeans to institute fundamental reform. To paraphrase Lenin, they took two steps forward and one step back every time the pressures for economic liberalization got to the point that they couldn't ignore them. Ultimately, the successor leadership was communist and bureaucratic heart and the populace placed personal and economic security above even democracy and the free market.

Q: You're saying that the Romanian economy and all was very much a slow change.

BECKER: Yes. The communist regime had made it a ritual of reporting wildly inaccurate economic performance data to international financial institutions, and finally cut itself off from the institutions themselves. Nobody could find any accurate statistical records on what the economy was producing. We surmised that the Romanians produced at least two sets of books, one realistic set that accurately reflected the economic performance of the country, which in fact was a state secret because the performance was so poor. The other set was presented to the world, showing all of the planned targets being exceeded by a significant amount. The falsified data were produced not only to impress foreign governments and international financial agencies, but they were probably produced as a survival mechanism by plant managers and economic planners to save their jobs if not their lives by convincing Ceausescu that the plan was being overachieved. Romania awoke after the revolution to an economy that seemed to be virtually at a standstill. One of the jokes we used to hear frequently in the '70s, when I was serving in Romania, was the workers' plight about the worthlessness of the Romanian currency and the corruption and subterfuge that went on in the factories. The workers would say, "They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work." This was merely one pretense out of many that underlay the communist economy.

Q: Yes. Well, now.

BECKER: That corruption, worker and managerial cynicism, and the utter lack of concern for economic performance and efficiency certainly did not stop with the fall of Ceausescu. These were attitudes that were deeply ingrained in the society.

Q: During the time you were on the desk, did the election take place?

BECKER: The elections did take place in the spring, and they legitimized the government headed by Ion Iliescu. His sudden emergence with a group of so-called reformers after the revolution and his leadership of the interim government apparently won him sufficient popular support in the national election. Romanians were looking for security and they were used to looking up to leaders. Iliescu was the incumbent. His electoral competitors were candidates who either had little name recognition, who represented ethnic minorities or fringe ideological groups, or whose claim to truly democratic convictions could not be assessed in the course of a short campaign. Of course, Iliescu's campaign was based on distancing himself as much as possible from Ceausescu's brand of communism and on embracing the West whenever he had the opportunity. In order to present Iliescu's Social Democratic Party as a viable alternative to the communists, the provisional government banned the Communist Party, but many communists found a new home under Iliescu's political umbrella.

There was a Hungarian national party representing the interests of the Hungarian minority, a significant minority primarily located in Transylvania that had some separatist and extremist tendencies. There was also an extreme Romanian nationalist party that preached ethnic purity and wanted to recreate monarchy in some form, even wanted to bring back the king who was living in exile on the French Riviera or some other comfortable spot in Western Europe. King Michael had been deposed in 1947 and he was an old man and out of touch with all things Romanian.

Q: What about the security forces by the spring of 1990, had they been pretty well been absorbed? Where did they stand?

BECKER: They were formally disestablished. I seem to recall that there was some effort by the new government to try and convict some of their leaders as well as others who remained close and indeed strangely loyal to Ceausescu's memory even after the worm had turned. Several members of the Ceausescu family were also tried and convicted, including his son who was captured in the wake of the execution of his parents. All were imprisoned for crimes against the state, treason, corruption and diversion of public funds and resources. As for the securitate, it just sort of disappeared into the woodwork and its leaders and other perpetrators of violent atrocities and gross human rights abusewith few exceptions - apparently escaped to other countries. Many Romanians knew who they were, and their sordid record legitimately put them in fear for their lives. There was a genuine effort by the country's new leadership to bring the security apparatus under effective and accountable state control, so that it wouldn't be a personal tool by a successor leadership against its political enemies.

However, some Romanians questioned whether or not Iliescu and his leadership group maintained the core of the securitate intact and continued to use them as weapons against their political opposition. This view persisted throughout the '90s. The climate of fear didn't go away for years and years and years.

Q: Was there any effort on the part of the Eastern Europeans including the Romanians to get together and say, gee a new world is dawning, let's share experiences and that sort of thing or was each country on its own or was Romania just plain odd man out?

BECKER: I saw no indication during my tenure in the region of a collective approach by the Eastern Europeans to reinforce their new democratic credentials. Each country was consumed in its own way with domestic problems and issues, which varied from country to country. East Germany, always a harsh communist regime, was in the process of slowly positioning itself for unification and being absorbed by West Germany. The Czech regime was one of the harsher ones, but once liberated from Soviet control, quickly moved into the democratic camp under Havel's sage presidency, and then had to deal with its own separation between Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Yugoslavia of course completely disintegrated, which had little to do with what was going on in Eastern Europe, but much more to do with the disappearance of Tito and the communist party as a unifying force. Romania was treated with suspicion by all for a good while, because nobody was really certain about the bonafides of their new leadership.

Q: When you left there I guess the summer of '90?

BECKER: Yes.

Q: What did you think about Romania? Where was it going?

BECKER: I was upbeat. I thought we had made tremendous progress from an extremely low point in 1989. Clearly the country needed much more transformation on all fronts than could be achieved in a relatively short period of time. The poverty went deep into the population. We're not simply talking about the lack of consumer goods. In fact, consumer goods flooded the country as soon as the gates opened, producing rampant inflation as well as all kinds of crazy, unbridled, get-rich-quick schemes. There were ponzi schemes perpetrated by a number of ï¿½migrï¿½s as well as some homegrown Romanians who got rich almost overnight. Other Romanians, including some former communists, became millionaires by manipulating the divestiture of state enterprises. Other problems centered on the lack of modern educational and public health infrastructures, which were chronically ignored under Ceausescu. The widespread publicity given to the plight of the AIDS babies in Romanian orphanages was just one telling indictment of the social welfare and health care systems.

Q: This sort of parallels what happened in the Soviet Union?

BECKER: Yes, on a smaller scale it certainly happened in Romania and was one of those conditions that persisted, and indeed to some degree still persists, in the country, which continues to get low marks on the corruption-accountability scale.

Q: Where did you go?

BECKER: The European bureau transferred me to its office for regional economic policy, EUR/RPE as it was then called. RPE encompassed two offices in one. One half dealt with the European Community, whose relations with the United States were evolving rapidly. The other half of the office, where I worked, handled a hodge-podge of economic relations with European intergovernmental bodies, including the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation Development) in Paris, the social-economic aspects of the CSCE, later to become the OSCE, and the Council of Europe, to which the United States was an observer country. My portfolio included some OECD social and economic issues, which involved perpetually preparing written materials and building interagency consensus for negotiating positions. There was constant communication with our mission in Paris. One of our goals was to empower the OECD, among other intergovernmental mechanisms, to respond collectively to the reform needs of Eastern Europe. This was one of the reasons I was brought on board. Even though my title was that of international economist, I was recruited because of my political skills, my expertise derived from my service on the Romania desk, and my knowledge of Eastern Europe generally.

My portfolio also included COCOM, the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls, which was an intergovernmental mechanism for establishing and enforcing rules and procedures for the export of high tech goods and services from the West to other parts of the world, particularly countries of proliferation concern. COCOM was a Cold War institution that was intended to limit transfers of technology to target countries of concern like the Soviet Union, China, Libya and some in the Middle East that we knew were building nuclear and other high-end military capabilities. Our dealings with COCOM began with an interagency process in Washington that was pulled several ways. The Department of Commerce wanted an equal playing field for U.S. exporters to compete with the commercial interests of other countries. They were looking to lower high-tech trade barriers and improve our competitive edge in world markets. Of course they were heavily lobbied by industry groups. On the other hand, the Department of Defense wanted to close off all transfers of technology, even to some of our allies, whom they saw simply as way stations for the sale of dangerous technologies to politically questionable Third World and communist countries. The Defense and Energy departments often worked hand in hand. Within the State Department, I worked very closely with the Economic-Business Affairs (EB) and Political-Military Affairs (PM) bureaus to forge interagency positions that we could sell to both Commerce and Defense and then put on the table at the COCOM meetings in Paris.

Q: Who was the head of this organization?

BECKER: There was an international secretariat in Paris, but the State Department chaired the interagency. EB did most of the drafting and heavy lifting in the interagency negotiations and in Paris. I represented the European bureau in the interagency, in short, interpreting our bilateral interests and perspectives at stake with respect to the European members of COCOM. Australia, New Zealand and Japan were non-European members as well. COCOM's membership closely mirrored that of the OECD, but its policies were driven by the high tech producers and the biggest exporting countries. That was part of my portfolio.

A third part of my workload, beyond the OECD and COCOM, drew on my long experience with labor affairs. I persuaded the Secretary of State's coordinator for international labor affairs, whose name was Tony Freeman, to reestablish the position of regional labor advisor for Europe. It existed in most of the other regional bureaus but had been discontinued in the European bureau as perhaps unnecessarily duplicative of other portfolios. Labor affairs as a technical or professional calling in the Foreign Service was on the decline. The Department no longer found communism on the European labor front to be an issue of great concern, and U.S. labor's influence on our foreign policy had waned along with domestic union membership and political clout. While I was in that job, I drafted a fairly controversial paper on the future of the labor function in the Department and in our embassies. I sent it up the line and it didn't get the warmest reception from either Tony Freeman, who represented the old-style labor officer's perspective, or others on the 7th floor and in Personnel, who simply wanted the specialty to disappear. My paper advocated a reconfiguration of the labor function, which had traditionally focused heavily on building cross-national trade union relationships, reporting on worker rights, and monitoring the political activities of national and international trade union organizations, many of which were headquartered in Geneva and Brussels..

Q: This is tape eight, side one with Rick Becker. Yes?

BECKER: There were two emergent labor issues in Europe that caught my attention and that were apparently not on the scope of Department policy makers. First, in the wake of the fall of communism and the collapse of Cold War barriers, there was a historically significant movement of migrant labor within and between European countries, some from East to West and some among the Eastern European countries themselves. There were labor market implications for both losing and gaining countries. And there were political and social implications for all concerned. Because it was a transnational phenomenon, it seemed logical that labor officers were better positioned to track these issues than other parts of the embassy.

Q: This was before the major migration from Northern Africa.

BECKER: Well, this south-to-north migration was taking place at the same time as east-to-west migration. The European Community's commission and member nations were trying to establish greater internal unity by lowering intra-EC barriers to commerce and harmonizing domestic legislation, but were not very effective in establishing common external border controls. There was in fact a Europe-wide aversion to establishing external barriers to movement of people. Such barriers were associated with dictatorships and no European country, whether Eastern or Western, wanted to lend itself to a restrictive migration policy. Yet there was significant and persistent unemployment in Western Europe, double digits in some countries, and the reforms taking place in many Eastern European countries were throwing a lot of people out of traditionally secure government employment, even if such work was economically unproductive. Worker dislocation and the pressures to create jobs for migrants from other countries were creating more than ripple effects throughout the continent. They were feeding far right-wing nationalist fever in France, Germany, Spain and Italy. Switzerland was similarly affected; 25% of its work force were immigrants, and they were ineligible for citizenship. Labor migration was generating a lot of political, social and economic problems, including the growth of a permanent, disenfranchised under-class in Western Europe. For the new democracies in Eastern Europe, westward labor migration represented either a serious brain drain or an escape valve, depending on specific circumstances. I saw this set of issues as the number one labor issue for the future. It went beyond the traditional labor officer role of reporting on and supporting trade union rights and workplace safety. A second overarching labor-related issue centered on the harmonization of worker health, welfare, salary and social policies within the EC. These policies represented a cost of doing business in an EC country, and in some respects posed a threat to the competitiveness of U.S. businesses operating in Europe. If IBM needed to have different labor policies and practices in Europe than in the United States, the dynamics of transnational corporate activity would change significantly. I felt it was both logical and indeed essential for the State Department to centralize reporting and analysis of these issues in the hands of labor officers, and to develop U.S. trade and investment policies to address these new conditions. I used my platform as the European bureau's regional labor advisor to try to promote an overhaul of the labor function that would ensure its survival.

Q: I would think that you're up tilting at this very large window aren't you? AFL-CIO and the whole apparatus in the States is the labor apparatus is designed to promote unionism.

BECKER: Yes. The labor function in the State Department reflected to a large extent the international labor posture and priorities of the AFL-CIO, and had been particularly resistant to change since its establishment during the early Cold War years. Early foreign policy successes shaped by the AFL-CIO explain why the labor function at State became set in concrete and resisted change for so long. As time went by, the labor officer's role was given less and less attention at the policy level, and indeed State could not recruit new people into an activity which was not going to be career enhancing. In proposing major change in the labor function, I faced a generational problem. I was a second or third generation labor officer, with strong Latin American roots. I knew very well the degree of political clout and potential for social and economic disruption that worker organizations could play. The changes I observed in Europe were not truly appreciated in the dawn of the post-communist era, where the major ideological underpinning of our international labor programs was wiped off the page. I was trying to contribute to a dialogue on revitalization of the labor function within the State Department.

Q: How was that received?

BECKER: "Thank you." I thought it was one of my better efforts. I can say here and now in 2005 that I was thinking ahead of my time. The labor function continues to suffer some of the same structural and affiliation problems it did a decade or two ago. Certainly its focus on worker rights and workplace conditions remains very important. It's very important that we also address the internationalization of labor markets, including migration and business competitiveness.

Q: I'm not a laborer, I'm not an economist, but my sort of off the cuff observation is that the United States for the business market has a solid comparative advantage of being able to maneuver better than the European economy because it can let people off, it can change, it's not as tied into union and business regulations that the European Union had. One, is this true, I mean at that time were we seeing something like this developing that you were watching this?

BECKER: Can we pause for a minute?

Q: Yes.

BECKER: When you raise these issues with corporate America, you find that they have learned how to operate in a fluid international environment. They are perfectly comfortable waving the flag of the United States when they find it in their interest to do so. They are also capable of turning on a dime and becoming transnational enterprises, waving the flags of other countries where they have subsidiaries whenever this is convenient or self-serving. I learned on the COCOM front that while U.S. companies wanted to protect their patents and their technology from being lost to other countries, their subsidiaries in France or other exporting countries had a different stance that conformed to those countries' foreign trade and export promotion strategies. You could not mobilize the corporate world in any consistent way to support U.S. political objectives or export control strategy. Of course, we know now from Iraq, Pakistan and North Korea the extreme importance of how loopholes in the international export control regime have made possible the transfer of major technologies - for developing agricultural capabilities, for building industry, for entering the information age - which can be configured in certain ways to enhance military capabilities. This is truly frightening.

Q: Well, were you finding as you were dealing with this were the French particularly a problem?

BECKER: I won't say the French were a particular problem for us, but they represented a formidable voice and in many cases our most vocal opposition at the COCOM table. We also had our problems with the Japanese and the Germans. Every major exporting country had its interests. The interests of almost all of our COCOM partners seemed much more tilted toward export promotion, toward reducing the barriers to trade, than U.S. policy was willing to permit. For instance, DOD was intent on blocking the license-free transfer of cheap, low-power computers to developing countries, on the grounds that stringing together 1,000 of these devices could produce a potent tool for producing or guiding major military weaponry by China or Pakistan. DOD frequently argued for restricting the sale of commercially beneficial or essential products because of the hypothetical possibility that they could be used for non-benevolent purposes. Of course, it was an uphill battle at COCOM for the U.S. to win support from other producing countries for an oversight regime that barred recipient countries from importing unrestricted components. This is one of the dilemmas we dealt with in the export control realm. It's not like shipping weapons to countries with questionable intent. COCOM dealt with shipping dual use technologies and equipment that had legitimate civilian use, but which could be configured in other ways to give the recipient country they key to developing weapons of mass destruction.

Q: I would think that by the time you were doing this, you were doing this from 1990 to when?

BECKER: I was in that office from '90 to '92.

Q: I would think that you were at the point where all sorts of things in the economic field that the computerization of things was really beginning to hit its stride.

BECKER: It did, but it was not the only high technology that we were concerned with. We were concerned with chemicals that could produce mass weapons, as well as with industrial machinery that could produce military hardware with extremely precise tolerances. The Germans were well ahead of us in this respect. They produced steel or alloys with the capability of manufacturing key components for nuclear reactors or weapons systems. Much of our work turned on the potential for computers, which were a household item in most Western countries by the '90s. Computers enabled miniaturization and made possible the tolerances that modern weapons systems required. Computers were the key to tracking the movement of goods through other countries. It was often a frustrating procesfirst to hammer out an interagency consensus that we could take to the table in Paris, and then to forge an intergovernmental consensus that harmonized export control policies in a way that reinforced our own national policies. It was during this period that I became the European bureau's representative to the interagency group that was monitoring and enforcing U.S. and UN sanctions policies against Iraq, which came out of the first Gulf War.

Q: How did you find that, I mean, you know, later, I mean just as of now there's a lot of revelations about what went on, but probably after your time, wasn't it?

BECKER: It was mainly after my time. One main focus of our sanctions policy was to identify criminal organizations and individuals that were violating restrictions on sales to Iraq. If they had assets in the U.S., they would be seized or frozen. It was primarily Treasury Department's responsibility to develop and enforce financial controls on the transfer of goods and technology to Iraq. State reviewed what Treasury proposed on a daily basis with the view of ensuring the accuracy of Treasury's conclusions and assessing how our sanctions would affect bilateral relations with third countries, some of which were allies. Also on a daily basis, the interagency group made action decisions on the basis of intelligence collected by INR and the rest of the U.S. government that prohibited goods were probably being shipped into Iraq or that Iraq was illegally shipping oil and other goods out. We and a handful of maritime allies mounted a major interdiction program to enforce the UN sanctions regime, stopping and inspecting ships on the high seas based on these intelligence reports. There was a very quick operational turnaround. We would receive a confidential report from protected sources that prohibited goods were probably being moved. For instance, an Italian-flagged ship was moving through the Straits of Hormuz, reportedly carrying prohibited chemicals intended for off-loading in Iraq. We would turn the essentials of the report into a diplomatic demarche to the Italian government requesting permission to board and search. Most of the time the government agreed to allow the ship to be boarded and searched and the banned goods seized if found. In some cases the intelligence proved accurate, in other cases not. These were very heady times. INR became a major leader and shaper of State's policy machinery. You normally think of INR as a policy support rather than a lead bureau, since it ideally provides policy-free intelligence to the decision makers. But INR, or sometimes EB, would chair the sanctions meetings where the intelligence was presented and the recommendations made. Since this was also the aftermath of the Iraq-Iran war, we were also monitoring shipments to Iran as well. It was a very interesting venue to work in.

Q: Then you did this until 1992?

BECKER: Yes.

Q: Then what happened?

BECKER: Having served for four years in EUR, I felt rejuvenated and was feeling nostalgic for Latin America again. I was persuaded by some colleagues in WHA bureau, then still ARA because Canada was not yet incorporated into the new bureau, to take one of the vacant deputy director jobs in the Office of Central American Affairs. I had never worked in Central America. The closest I'd been was Panama, but the issues surrounding Central America seemed to be particularly compelling. I was coming from EUR, which was immersed in post-communist consolidation of democracy, and I was offered a job in an office that was immersed in post-civil conflict establishment of democracy in several Central American countries. Central America presented superficially similar transitional issues - economic dislocations, leadership and legitimacy questions, structural instability and social unrest. Since I had previous experience in Latin America, and now more recent experience in Eastern Europe, someone thought that this might be a pretty good background to apply to contemporary, post civil war Central America.

Q: Okay, well, why don't we pick it up next time, this is a good place to stop then. We'll pick it up then, shall we? This was 1992 to when?

BECKER: '92 to '94. I served two years as deputy director for Central American affairs.

Q: All right. Well, we'll pick it up then.

BECKER: Okay.

Q: Today is the 25th of March, 2005, Rick, 1992 to '94 you were Director of Central American affairs?

BECKER: Deputy Director.

Q: Deputy Director. How stood Central American affairs when you took it over?

BECKER: Well, the office was responsible for seven countries, including Panama at that time. The Panamanian desk always had a history of dropping in and dropping out of Central America, depending on how important it was to U.S. policy. It had rejoined Central American affairs with two, maybe three desk officers, more than Turkey, the United Kingdom and several of the other countries in Europe. There were always one or more countries in crisis to occupy one's time, even though these were very small countries. They were part of our backyard, our exposed underbelly. In '92 when I joined that office, Nicaragua was still recovering from a decade of Sandinista rule with a newly elected government. El Salvador was likewise coming off a prolonged civil war with a fragile democratic government. Guatemala was still lurching into a very thinly textured democracy, and was wrestling with a civil war in its third decade. Costa Rica, of course, was healthy by comparison. In Panama, we were still dealing with the aftermath of Just Cause in '89, helping a democratic government build legitimate and accountable institutions in the wake of the fallen Noriega regime.

Q: This was when we ousted Noriega and put troops in there?

BECKER: Yes. After Noriega was ousted and the democratic government elected in '89 was installed, we supported Panama with major assistance and recovery programs. Honduras was just Honduras. That's all you could say about it, and Belize likewise. It was a pretty much a mishmash of countries, most desperately poor. Honduras and Nicaragua vied for being the second poorest country in the hemisphere after Haiti. It was a level of general poverty and under-development that I hadn't seen in my years in South America, except perhaps in rural Ecuador.

Q: Looking at this was this because of civil unrest or was this just because of the location or the people or what?

BECKER: Central America had always been a backwater. The region is generally resource poor. Economic monocultures, whether bananas or coffee or sugar, faced intense international competition for limited space in the U.S. market. The civil wars had seriously damaged El Salvador. It probably would have been much worse had it not been for large influx of U.S. aid during the war years. Nicaragua was utterly destroyed economically and was pulling itself up. We pumped over a billion dollars into Nicaragua in three years after President Violeta Chamorro took office in 1990. When I made my first trip to Nicaragua, only a month or two after I came on board in the summer of '92, I was really shocked to see how desperately underdeveloped the country was. So-called super markets had very little on the shelves. The center of the national capital still had all of the scars from the 1972 earthquake. The city had never rebuilt along the major fault like that ran through the center of town. The city center was like a huge pasture with a few occupied buildings here and there and large ruins as if in a historical site, but with a million people struggling for existence and a government that was rather unsure of itself. The Sandinistas had been voted out of power, but were still very powerful and controlled large chunks of the judiciary, the most coherent political party in the country and the armed forces and police. A lot of my attention was drawn toward Nicaragua from the outset, because that's where really we had the most immediate problems. Guatemala was problematical. The government was at war with a persistent insurgency, but our relations were very much constrained towards the Guatemalans. There seemed to be no peace process on the horizon.

At the same time, we had continual pressure from both from the left and the right in the Congress to reopen old wounds in the region, thereby impeding any healing process that might be taking root. The desk officers and the office director and deputy director spent a great deal of time fielding demands from Senator Jesse Helms' staff as well as from Senator Chris Dodd and other liberal democrats on the Hill, all of whom wanted to dissect policy decisions made during the '70s and the '80s, to determine who shot Juan ten years earlier or to block the use of U.S. assistance to this group or that group. We had to deal with major declassification and disclosure issues because congressional offices were demanding unfettered access to State Department records. Retired State Department officers were almost permanently deployed to review documents for release to congressional staffs, without straying outside Executive Branch privileges or the need to protect sources and methods. It was very much a hotbed of domestic political intrigue and scapegoating.

Q: On this congressional side, what were their, I mean what outside of making political points, what was, what did this mean to the working officer like yourself?

BECKER: Well, it was a tremendous drain on Department resources. While we were trying to do something constructive in the region, managing large amounts of economic assistance that Congress had approved, there was active congressional interest in overseeing how previous aid was dispersed and in trying to second-guess how we were structuring our current aid programs. The fall of '92 was also the period of bitter presidential competition between George Bush, Sr., running for reelection, and Bill Clinton. There was a great deal of partisan tension, culminating in attempts to embarrass one side or another by disclosures from the '80s. Neither party on the Hill distinguished itself by elevating the level of discussion and debate over what we should be doing and where we should be going in Central America. Fortunately, AID was still co-located with State in Foggy Bottom, and our Central American counterparts in AID were just one floor below us. We had very good working relations with them, and found a lot of common ground on most operational issues. We were able to work things out on a personal level most of the time. I think things got appreciably worse years later, after AID relocated downtown to the Ronald Reagan Building. Our physical distance made daily policy coordination much more difficult, and accentuated the cultural differences between State and AID.

Q: Well, I'm trying to bring these countries out. Costa Rica I assume was off the map, I mean that was no problem?

BECKER: Actually, we had trade problems with Costa Rica, which was one of the more protectionist countries at a time when we were trying to liberalize trade with the region. One of our major economic objectives was to promote economic integration within Central America, pursuant to our larger goal of creating a hemispheric free trade area. Central American trade was overwhelmingly oriented toward the United States market. Each country tried to negotiate its own trade arrangements with the U.S., but there was little effort to mobilize Central America's collective weight in those negotiations. Because Costa Rica stood out as a democratic, progressive country, the trade and investment problems we had with them tended to be overlooked or downplayed by U.S. policymakers. I think there was a false sense of well-being in our economic relations with Costa Rica.

Q: What about say Nicaragua, what could you do?

BECKER: First of all, we had to keep policy on track and our policy was to promote institutional recovery in Nicaragua. As I said, there were pressures on all sides to do this, to do that, to work with one group or another group. The political divisions in the United States threatened to exacerbate the political divisions within Nicaragua, depending upon how we applied our economic assistance. A lot of our aid was in the form of development assistance, attempting to build democratic institutions such as an independent judiciary and legislature and government capacity to deliver benefits to a destitute and war-weary populace. Shortly after I came on board, there was a major falling out between AID and the Organization of American States, which operated its own development and conflict resolution unit for Nicaragua. The unit was named CIAV - the Spanish acronym for International Committee for Assistance and Verification, I believe. It had been created in the late '80s, initially to observe elections in Nicaragua, and later to promote peaceful reconciliation between the country's warring factions. CIAV was embraced by U.S. conservatives, especially Senator Helms, as a tool for funneling U.S. aid to the anti-Sandinistas, the ex-contras, in the post-conflict period so as to promote the "right" kind of people and forces in postwar Nicaragua. CIAV was funded out of the AID budget, and actually morphed into a fairly effective force for reconciliation and reconstruction in Nicaragua. At its largest, CIAV consisted of about 15 expatriates, mainly Argentines, Uruguayans and Chileans, and some 100 Nicaraguans. We at State found ourselves caught in the middle between CIAV, an arm of an international organization supported by influential U.S. conservatives, and AID, which was very uncomfortable with the brand of development that this organization was promoting and the degree of policy and operational independence it exerted from the funding agency. AID decided to bring an independent CIAV to heel in the only way it knew hocut off funding and terminate the program. It reminded me of AID's discomfort through the years with funding AIFLD, the AFL-CIO's union organizing arm in Latin America.

With the disconnect between AID and the OAS over CIAV worsening in Washington, I was asked to put together a mission to visit Nicaragua and survey CIAV's accomplishments and needs. The mission included my AID counterpart, the deputy director in charge of Central American programs, and a senior adviser working for USOAS, the U.S. Mission to the OAS. That senior advisor happened to be a political appointee assigned to our OAS mission, Roger Noriega, who is now WHA assistant secretary. Roger had been a Republican staffer for House Foreign Affairs Committee and a strong supporter of the Nicaraguan contras before his appointment to the State Department by the Bush I administration. I met Roger on the eve of our departure for Nicaragua. Since he had worked with the contras during much of the 1980s, he knew a lot of the players down there. My objective for the review of the CIAV program was to reconcile the deep political divide between AID and OAS, which threatened to undermine almost a billion dollars of assistance then flowing to Nicaragua. My bosses told me to knock some sense into my two colleagues, if I could, secure a compromise and get the program back on track. The CIAV program wasn't a billion dollars, but it was a very visible element of our commitment to Nicaragua's reconstruction. If it were dissolved, one could anticipate the entire AID program in Central America falling into disarray and disrepute.

Q: What type of things were they doing?

BECKER: Their mission was officially "repatriation, resettlement and rehabilitation," with particular attention to the former contras. They were also engaged in demobilizing armed groups and organizing community housing and other self-help projects, trying to reconstruct villages destroyed by the war through cooperative self-help efforts. In many instances, this required getting Sandinistas and contras in the same community to work together. Interestingly enough, many of those same individuals are working today in Colombia on community development and disarmament projects. The OAS-CIAV team had become adept at getting in and gaining credibility with disparate groups, even though their overall political orientation and raison d'etre leaned toward the conservative side of the spectrum. They had some very innovative programs, which didn't sit well with some of the bureaucrats in AID, which didn't like seeing its development funds being used in ways it hadn't specifically approved. For instance, AID didn't like community housing projects generally, but preferred to work through market mechanisms. They were also concerned about the pro-contra political tinge of some disarmament and reinsertion programs, which provoked some Democrats on the Hill to try to cut off what they saw as a partisan support program. Conversely, the congressional conservatives who backed CIAV were uncomfortable with the degree to which the organization worked with Sandinista community groups.

When I finally got to Nicaragua with my team, I found out that CIAV was much less partisan in practice than it appeared, and that there was some real progress taking place at the grass roots. This was one of the few programs that were making a real impact in the countryside, which was still beset by low-level violence between former combatants of various stripes. Indeed, many former combatants had turned away from politics and into banditry. Our mission succeeded in bringing OAS and AID a little bit closer together, at least to the extent that AID reaffirmed its funding of the program and, on the basis of our mission, was better able to justify its support for CIAV on the Hill. I ended up making some fast friends in Nicaragua and gained a much greater appreciation for what was going on in that country. My hands-on exposure to Nicaragua while working in Central American Affairs laid the groundwork for my assignment to our embassy in Managua in1994.

Q: Did you get a feel, how had the Contra leadership developed? I mean this is always a bit iffy. I've never quite understood. You knew where the Sandinistas were coming from, but what were you getting from the Contras at this stage?

BECKER: Well, in the early '90s the Chamorro government was committed to national reconciliation and reconstruction to overcome the wartime divisions in the country. However, they didn't have sufficient power to impose any particular solution on the Sandinistas, who remained a powerful force. The government also had to work with large numbers of returned exiles who represented very conservative elements and in some cases were allies of the contras. Moderate political figures as well were trying to return to Nicaragua after a decade of exile. Most of the returnees had been dispossessed by the Sandinistas, and were intent on recovering their property if not their former political and social status. It was a delicate political atmosphere for the Chamorro government, which I'm not sure was totally appreciated in the United States. Indeed, one of the major issues we confronted was how to deal with the question of compensation or return of property that had been seized by the Sandinistas during the '80s. The confiscated properties had been handed out, often without formal title transfer, to Sandinista supporters. Settling old scores was an issue with which the democratic government, a government we wanted very much to succeed, was saddled. There were probably thousands of parcels of seized property, resulting in well over 1,000 claims by American citizens for their return or, alternatively, for just compensation in accordance with international law. This problem was exacerbated pressures from conservative elements on the Hill to allow any Nicaraguan who became a U.S. citizen after his property had been confiscated to be accorded the same rights as a U.S. citizen at the time of confiscation. Of course, we had a growing body of Nicaraguans who were taking up U.S. citizenship, in part to get the backing of the U.S. government for the return of their property. Many of them wanted the return of property and they refused compensation, which they saw would be devalued by Nicaragua's unstable currency and uncertain political future.

Although I had no direct contact with or observation of the contra movement at the time of its origins or during the civil war, my overall impression, gained from observing them at a distance during the '80s and more directly in the post-war context, was that the movement's leadership had been pulled together from a hodge podge of largely anti-democratic forces that had influence during the Somoza dictatorship that preceded the Sandinista revolution of '79. Many were associated with the Nicaraguan National Guard, which had lost any legitimacy it might have had by becoming Somoza's personal army. Poor, landless, largely illiterate peasants formed the bulk of the contra military force. Most had been ousted from their lands, which had been given to Sandinista political supporters, had been conscripted into the Sandinista army or had been forced to join Sandinista political organizations. I had always thought we had very little justification for supporting the contra leadership in Honduras or in Miami to effect regime change in Nicaragua. Under the Reagan administration's policy, they were merely a means to an enoverthrow of the Sandinistas at any cost. For the contra leaders, alliance with the U.S. was also a means to an enrestoration of their political power in Nicaragua. Democracy was not a consideration for either partner.

Q: Were we concerned that the National Guard types the right wing might assert their authority and replace the Sandinistas and we'd end up with a nasty government whichever way or what was happening?

BECKER: I don't think this was a policy consideration by the '90s. One must recall that the overthrow of Somoza and his supporters was achieved through a national revolt, which the Sandinistas hijacked after '79. There had been hope in this period that the Sandinistas would accept a less than dominant role in a post-Somoza political coalition, but they held most of the weapons and were prepared to use force, not only against Somoza's supporters and the land-owning oligarchy but also against the Sandinistas' democratic allies. There was little doubt that the old regime types, who were thoroughly discredited, could reassert themselves in the '90s. There are certainly some parallels between Nicaragua's experiences in the '90s and what we might expect in a post-Castro Cuba. There were severe tensions between those who had returned from Miami after a decade of exile and those who had stayed in Nicaragua and co-existed with the Sandinistas. There was always suspicion in some quarters that those who had survived under the Sandinistas were somehow more corrupt, more opportunistic and less politically reliable than those who left the country.

Q: This is exile versus those who stay, this is true in every country that has this. Well, in the time you were there how did you see this play out in Nicaragua?

BECKER: I saw conditions play out with remarkably positive results, albeit much more hesitantly and incrementally than anybody hoped. Our billion dollars in U.S. aid laid a pretty good foundation, but certainly didn't turn the tide. The Sandinistas were and remained a formidable political force. There were a lot of Nicaraguans, however you measured it, 20-30% of the population, who were genuine beneficiaries of Sandinista policies in one way or another, and would continue to support Sandinista politicians out of gratitude or conviction. Our assistance to institutions helped to establish viable economic reforms in which the state-heavy, state-controlled economy was returned in large part to private hands. Interestingly enough, some of those hands were in fact Sandinistas, who became overnight entrepreneurs. Harvard University had founded a satellite institution in the Managua suburbs in the '70s, called INCAE, which offered Nicaragua's first masters program in business administration. The Sandinistas basically forced INCAE to relocate - to Costa Rica. INCAE reopened its Nicaragua campus in the early '90s, and among its early graduates were several former Sandinista commandantes. The joke was that after completing the ruin of Nicaragua's economy in the '80s, they were finally learning some useful economic and entrepreneurial skills to apply in the democratic '90s.

What happened in postwar, democratic Nicaragua was that the political pull toward the center divided and isolated both the extreme right and left wings of the spectrum. Centrist and conservative parties, grouped around the Chamorro government, attracted all but small elements of the unreconciled right wing, while the far-left Sandinistas left split once they had been thrust into the opposition. The hard core of the Sandinista movement remained quite loyal to the unreconstructed policies of Daniel Ortega, but other Sandinista leaders and institutions chose to find a place in the new democratic order. Early on, the police were formally separated from the army. Under Daniel's brother Humberto, the army retained a strong Sandinista orientation, but the police developed a much more pragmatic and professional ethic regarding their proper role in society. Although I was handling Central American issues during the period in question, I focused disproportionate attention on Nicaragua, because the problems of that country seemed to demand an extraordinary degree of hand-holding and management from the U.S. Most of the other countries under my direction were absorbing much less U.S. aid and seemed to be managing their problems with less tumult. Nicaragua was always the region's lightning rod, both in terms of U.S. domestic politics and in terms of managing their own problems.

Q: Did you feel Helms' staff, I know one of his was quite prominent at one time.

BECKER: Debra DeMoss was the most visible Helms staffer.

Q: Yes. Was this, did you feel that that this staff was essentially hostile to what we were trying to do or how did you feel about that?

BECKER: The Central American portfolio at State was subjected to a great deal of micromanagement and bickering from both sides of the political aisle. Staffers for Democratic Senator Dodd were just as hostile as the Helms staff to what the United States was trying to do in the region. Each side had its own favorite sons and betes noires in Central America. I concluded that if we are truly hated and reviled on both extremes, then we must be doing something right. We had very good professionals leading the State Department and in AID at the time. Brian Atwood was the AID administrator. He had formerly headed the National Democratic Institute, and I think he had a very good sense of what countries like Nicaragua needed for development. We had a very professional Foreign Service leadership at State as well, including WHA Assistant Secretary Alex Watson. We were very supportive of the Chamorro government's efforts to steer clear of extremist politics. We knew that the Helms staff did not like Chamorro. They saw her as a weak reed too willing to compromise than to deal firmly with the Sandinistas, a political symbol rather than a strong leader. In the run-up to the '89 elections in Nicaragua, the Helms staff had favored a no-nonsense, ideologically anti-Sandinista candidate, Enrique Bolaï¿½os, to challenge Daniel Ortega for the presidency, but Chamorro won the nomination and later the election. Right-wing hostility toward her continued well into the '90s. On the liberal side, some Democratic Hill staffers saw our reconstruction aid funneled toward groups that were too closely identified with the contra cause. Yet we managed to steer a moderate path, supporting Chamorro's centrist administration. We could confidently claim by 1993-94 that political institutions were beginning to strengthen, independent judicial bodies were developing, market mechanisms and economic performance were improving, political violence had subsided, and little by little investor confidence in Nicaragua was beginning to return, even though the land tenure question was still far from resolution.

Q: Was that getting anywhere when you were doing this?

BECKER: One of the most significant concessions to conservative critics of U.S. policy, perhaps to try to moderate Senator Helms' opposition to the confirmation of some senior Clinton Administration nominees, was State's decision to stray from established international law and precedent in advocating on behalf of the confiscados in Nicaragua, those who sought return of or compensation for properties seized by the Sandinistas. Under pressure from Helms and other conservatives, we went beyond our narrow, well-defined obligation to support the claims of those who had been U.S. citizens at the time of such confiscations to include Nicaraguan claimants who subsequently took on U.S. citizenship. As quickly as we were able to resolve claims filed by U.S. citizens, new claims by freshly minted U.S. citizens would arise. Faced with an overwhelming workload, State satisfied many of the demands and concerns of the political right by establishing an office, unique in the Foreign Service, at our embassy in Managua that did nothing but handle U.S. citizen property claims. It was staffed by one FSO and several Nicaraguan employees. We used all the creativity we could muster to find ways of dealing with this large and political influential constituency. We didn't want to push the Chamorro government to the wall by insisting that it resolve the issue in a particular manner. After all, the Sandinistas had created the problem, but the Chamorro government that we backed had inherited the obligation to solve it. I do believe we were able to mollify some of the worst, some of the most extreme the demands by this dispossessed group by providing a sympathetic ear, a loud voice, and a helping hand at the embassy.

Q: I would think that you would have a problem with officers or with dealing with them including yourself. I've had to in various positions as a chief of consular section had to deal with what I use Teddy Roosevelt's term hyphenated American. These are people who are Americans, but their heart and soul are really in the other country and they're using the United States as a weapon to get theirs. It must have been hard, these are not nice people for the most part.

BECKER: It was exceedingly hard, much more so than for most American citizens, who for the most part had relatively little interest in returning to Nicaragua and picking up their lives and properties. However, many of the recently naturalized Americans maintained strong roots in Nicaragua and would not settle for government bonds that promised to pay out five years to 15 years down the road. They wanted their property back. It's interesting that eventually members of the Somoza family became U.S. citizens and sought to follow the same route. The Somozas as an extended family laid claim to something like 40% of Nicaraguan property, superseding the claims of all the other confiscados combined. Indeed, Somoza had carried out his own confiscation policy against his political enemies, albeit on a smaller scale. Were the family to receive either land back or compensation for what they had lost, the amount would have literally broken the back of the Chamorro government and the democratic process, and set the Nicaraguan economy back well before the '70s. However, the new, expansive State Department interpretation of international claims law was not applied to the Somozas. We refused to take up any Somoza family claims, even though they asserted that they had rights equal to other U.S. citizen confiscados. They even tried to exercise political clout on the Hill, but even the most unreconstructed conservatives there were reluctant to take up the claims of the former Nicaraguan dictator.

Q: Was that congressman still around the roommate of Somoza at West Point or something like that or was he?

BECKER: He was still around. I'm trying to remember his name, but obviously Somoza had well-placed links to various political actors.

Q: He's not dead, but still.

BECKER: You're talking about sons, married daughters, in-laws, cousins as well as the senior political group around him. The Nicaraguans were always wrestling with who constituted a "Somocista," because the Sandinistas had never made a definitive list of those individuals who were "guilty by association" with the Somoza family, for whom there would be no access to judicial recourse after their political and economic rights were lifted. Since there was no definitive list, those who were perhaps on the margins of the Somoza power structure sometimes presented themselves to us as being much farther from the center than they may have been. The same could be said for the Sandinistas, those who made the policies and those who were simply followers and beneficiaries of those policies. We ran into some problems when we were trying to lease residential property for the American embassy staff. We had to conduct exhaustive title searches, not only on the owner of record, but also on who had owned this property previously. We ran into some potentially embarrassing situations, in which we had to either break leases or decline to lease a desirable property because it had been illegally confiscated at some time in the past.

Q: Who was our ambassador there?

BECKER: When I arrived in the Office of Central American Affairs, we did not have an ambassador to Nicaragua. It was virtually impossible to confirm a nominee because of the divisions in Congress which I described earlier. We had a chargï¿½ d'affaires for an extended period of time.

Q: Who was that?

BECKER: Ron Godard, who later became an ambassador and is now head of the OAS General Assembly coordination unit with which I'm currently involved. He gave way in 1993 to John Maisto, now our permanent representative to the OAS. I had worked with John when he was DCM in Panama during the '80s, and he recruited me from Central American Affairs to come to Panama as his political counselor in '94. Because I had a labor affairs background, I had been presented with an option to go to Brussels as labor counselor. I took one hard look at the situation in Brussels, as I was familiar with it from my days in EUR/RPE, and took the chance of jumping into the Nicaraguan cauldron full-time. It was a decision I never regretted, even though I gave up my only real chance for a Western European assignment.

Q: Well, one is fun and the other is really a professional challenge.

BECKER: That's true. Besides, the weather in Nicaragua was generally better than the weather in Brussels.

Q: How about, what was happening in El Salvador?

BECKER: El Salvador was going through an ostensibly similar process of reconciliation and reconstruction with some major distinctions. First, we had supported the elected government with substantial assistance during their civil war. Our aid prevented both political and economic collapse. That support continued. Secondly, there was a formal peace process in El Salvador that resulted in a signed agreement between the FMLN, the communist insurgent movement, and the government. The agreement laid out conditions for the reconstruction and provided for a certain amount of power sharing. It also called for a truth commission that would look into human rights excesses on all sides, particularly excesses by government forces during the '80s against noncombatant citizens. There was a process, and it included a degree of introspection and housecleaning in El Salvador that never took place in Nicaragua. The peace process was very ad hoc in Nicaragua and involved little more than providing for internationally monitored elections that brought Chamorro to power. There was a winner and a loser, but it did not change the configuration of power in Nicaraguan society. There continued to be a tug-of-war between entrenched Sandinista interests and the interests of the newly formed and very unstable elected government. The Chamorro government's victory had been made possible by a supportive coalition of 14 democratic political parties in '89 and '90. Once victory was in the bag, these parties found that their only point of solidarity was to win the election over the Sandinistas. These parties then went their separate ways and proceeded to fight as much among themselves as they did with the Sandinistas. Chamorro was unable to keep this fractured coalition together to build the new Nicaragua, and so had to make some very difficult decisions on the future of her country without a solid political base of support. In that sense, the Nicaraguan situation was fraught with much more uncertainty. The potential for weak governance and disintegration was much greater than in the Salvadoran situation.

We had much more confidence that the Salvadorans were in charge of their fate and were laying a solid groundwork for reconstruction than the Nicaraguans. That said, the return of Nicaraguan exiles to their country was a more positive development, because they brought back to Nicaragua money in some cases, but more often expertise and a commitment to democratic life and practices than the returnees to El Salvador. The exiles from El Salvador were not of the moneyed class; they were by and large poor and uneducated. Some Salvadorans brought back elements of gang culture and behavior from the U.S. cities where they had settled, and there was an explosion of gang violence and lawlessness in El Salvador that surprisingly we did not see in Nicaragua. Nicaragua was relatively peaceful and relatively safe. There were a few areas of the countryside which were still unstable, where former combatants on both sides had turned to banditry and political revenge taking, but by and large Nicaragua was a relative sea of calm compared with El Salvador, and compared with the conflict that was still ongoing in Guatemala between government forces and indigenous insurgents.

Q: What was happening in Guatemala?

BECKER: Guatemala, as you know, had lived with a 30 plus year insurgency that government forces, with all their determination and technical advantage, could not eliminate. The government never had any compunction about using brute force and fear against indigenous populations in an effort to break the back of the insurgency, which claimed inspiration from both Marxism and nativism. Government forces perpetrated uncounted massacres of whole villages, and vocal critics of government policies faced imprisonment or assassination. The insurgents were never powerful enough to topple the government, but the government was never able to win sufficient support from the indigenous community to defeat the insurgents. Both sides basically became exhausted from their long-term struggle and a peace process fostered by the Organization of American States was cobbled together. Although the U.S. role in the overthrow of Guatemala's democratic government in 1954 helped pave the way for the 30-year war, we subsequently distanced ourselves politically from successive Guatemalan governments. We had a policy of withholding assistance from the military and police. We fostered human rights standards that the government was never able to meet, but were never able to get the government to seriously considered a peace track. Guatemala seemed to have sharper class, economic and ethnic divisions that seemed to defy any real unified solution to the country's problem. By most measures, it was the naturally richest country in Central America. A physically beautiful country, with great tourist potential, it has never really able to solve its domestic problems or offer its people a promising future. Even after the peace process was launched in the mid-'90s, no strong reformist movement emerged to bring elements of the opposition into the government or even into the political mainstream. Political violence in the countryside turned basically to banditry and continued instability. The forces for public order, the army and police, have not taken any serious steps to reform and modernize themselves, and few government leaders have pressured them to do so. Evangelical religious groups have made great inroads among Guatemala's indigenous population, fueling conflict with the Catholic Church and deepening existing divisions. Perhaps 25% or 30% of the population of Guatemala is not Catholic. That figure seems to be growing.

Q: Honduras?

BECKER: Honduras was viewed by almost everybody in the office as a sort of backwater country. We tinkered with solutions to Honduras' economic problems, but the country seemed impervious to most outside influences. I seldom had to focus attention on Honduran issues. There just did not seem to be a great deal of policy interest, and Honduras didn't present us with any problems that required immediate fixes. There was no large group of Honduran exiles in the United States, and thus little pressure from that front. The Hill continued to raise the issue of alleged Honduran government complicity in the civil war in Nicaragua, especially the use of Honduran territory to support U.S. and contra military operations against the Sandinistas. We are now hearing once again the allegations that Ambassador Negroponte was aware of and abetted Honduran death squad activities during his tenure there in the early '80s. Those stories of course made the rounds in Nicaragua as well. Maybe the one issue that engaged everybody's interest in the early '90s was the trilateral dispute among Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador over fishing and maritime rights in the Gulf of Fonseca, which touches on all three countries. The issue impeded the prospects of any serious economic integration in Central America. An International Court of Justice award about 1990 of territory disputed by El Salvador and Honduras ceded large tracts of land, relatively large for those countries, to Honduras with populations that had always lived under the Salvadoran flag. This award resolved legal issues flowing from the so-called "Soccer War" in 1969, but the political bad taste that had festered for 30 years remained.

Q: How about the last, Panama?

BECKER: Panama was always on its own track. As I said, responsibility for Panama had gravitated into and out of the Office of Central American Affairs. We were of course very much interested in a smooth treaty transition during the '80s and '90s. We were helping Panama to reconstruct its democratic system and public forces after Operation Just Cause, which dismantled the Noriega dictatorship and the Panama Defense Forces. It was the one country where we had a substantial investment footprint. Panama seemed to be on a fairly positive track in the mid-'90s. There were no real political crises, and the country was moving ahead economically. We still had the lingering issue of Panamanian claims from the U.S. invasion, that the number of Panamanian casualties and disappearances approached 100,000 rather than the 3,000 that had been solidly documented. There were always ripples in Panama about the still visible U.S. military presence, including whether the U.S. really intended to abide by our treaty obligations and leave the country in 1999. But that's a story for another day.

Q: How much did you feel from the White House paid attention to what was going on? Were you way off the radar?

BECKER: After the peace accords in El Salvador and the democratic institutions in Nicaragua were under way, helped along by huge infusion of reconstruction assistance in '91 and '92, one can say that even the dearest country object of our affection is entitled to about 15 minutes of fame and a billion dollars of aid - and then we move on to the next crisis. The next crisis was Haiti. Aristide was toppled by the military in the early '90s after he had won popular election as president. When he was reinstated to power with U.S. and OAS backing, around 1994 I believe, we felt we had to make a major statement in support of Haiti's future stability and economic viability. You may recall that there were only two foreign policy issues that the Clinton presidential campaign ran on in '92. One was support for NAFTA and the other was concern for Haiti. Both had major domestic implications for the United States. The concern for Haiti was probably less for the country itself, which has always had a pitiful existence, but for the fact there were an awful lot of boat people landing on the shores of South Florida. We really felt the need to stabilize Haiti at home so as to block this flow of terribly impoverished Haitians to our shores. Indeed, we had ordered our Coast Guard to actually turn back a lot of the Haitian boats on the high seas.

In order to make a credible economic and political statement in Haiti, we went through a wrenching exercise of reprogramming large amounts of economic and technical assistance, most of which was pulled from reconstruction programs in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Hondurathe countries where we had made major statements of interest in 1990 and '91. By '93, '94 and '95, we found many of our Central American programs short of cash and short of high-level attention. Some were abbreviated and some were literally wiped off the map, as the Western Hemisphere bureau shifted very dramatically to Haiti. The reprogramming did not proceed quietly, however. Key members of Congress who had gone to the wall to approve reconstruction aid for Central America a few years earlier bitterly opposed the shift of attention to Haiti. The Republicans, in particular, distrusted Aristide and refused to approve fresh funding for Haiti. The Clinton administration, which had declared Haiti a top priority, was left with little choice but to undertake an unpopular and ultimately counterproductive reprogramming.

Q: Well, then in '94 you left there and went to Nicaragua?

BECKER: Yes. I might add one other program that was well worth mentioning during this period. While deputy director of Central American affairs, I got involved in a major program that we were trying to get off the ground to humanitarian removal of land mines that were a product and a legacy of the civil wars in the region. Most of them were of Soviet manufacture or were home-made land mines, although we had a role in mining harbors on Nicaragua's western coast. The land mines that were left in Nicaragua along the borders and in the conflict areas were of great danger to any kind of economic reconstruction. Unfortunately, the maps and records of where the land mines were laid were pretty poor. In some cases the authorities didn't want to share what information they did have. We felt that integral to the reconstruction of the country was removal of these land mines. I became very much involved in an effort to put together a land mine removal program. The UN had one in other parts of the world and we worked with other countries bilaterally, basically training their military forces to remove land mines. The principal focus in Central America was Nicaragua, where most of the land mines were. But we had no bilateral relations with the Nicaraguan military, a legacy of the Sandinista era. We put together a program through the Organization of American States, most specifically the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), to train Nicaraguan soldiers to remove land mines in their own country. The IADB recruited primarily South American trainers, whom we ran through training courses at Fort Benning, Georgia and in other sites in the United States. Basically, we created a number of filters that allowed us to put together, I think, a fairly effective, high-impact, high visibility land mine removal program that eventually was expanded to Honduras.

The Salvadorans took another route. They decided to contract a private company to remove their land mines. We're talking here about a multiyear program because you don't remove land mines overnight. The OAS-IADB programs are still in existence today. They're still removing land mines and making the cleared areas safe for agricultural reclamation and for basic movements of human beings. I wanted to highlight that program as an important and innovative humanitarian effort. Eventually the mine removal program was incorporated under a Department-led interagency committee that set worldwide priorities and approved funds for land mine removal, assisted by legislation sponsored yearly by Senator Leahy from Vermont.

Q: Well, then in '94 you were off, is that right?

BECKER: In the fall of '94 I arrived in Nicaragua. It almost seemed as if I had been working Nicaragua for much of the previous two years. I was very familiar with the country. I knew a lot of the political leaders by then, thanks to Roger Noriega and his contacts. I was well received by a host of Nicaraguans whom he knew. I'll always be grateful to Roger for taking the time to open doors that would have taken me months and months to do on my own.

Q: You were there from '94 to?

BECKER: To '98.

Q: Being on the ground when you got there, what did you see? Noriega, was the ambassador when you arrived?

BECKER: No, no, John Maisto was the ambassador.

Q: Oh, John Maisto.

BECKER: John Maisto was the ambassador when I arrived in '94. He had arrived in '93.

Q: This is tape nine, side one with Rick Becker. Well, so now we're back in Nicaragua, what, I mean we've already covered sort of what you were doing. How did you find the political atmosphere when you got on the ground dealing with this?

BECKER: When I started dealing with it on a daily basis, it became very clear to me that the political, social and economic fissures in Nicaragua were much more intractable than they appeared from the outside. The ability to make progress on any major front was a real challenge for the U.S. mission. We had a fairly large embassy, with a large AID component. We also had a very large Peace Corps contingent for Central America. Keep in mind that although we had a small defense attachï¿½ office headed by an army colonel, we did not have reciprocal military relations or any military assistance programs. Nor did we have any cooperative law enforcement programs, which would have involved the Nicaraguan police. These were all to come at some future point in time. So, it was not a full service embassy. We focused much more on developmental issues and on providing whatever material and moral support we could to the Chamorro government. By the time I arrived, the Chamorro government had already been in power for four years. The 14 political parties that had supported Chamorro in '89 and '90 had largely dispersed to the winds. They were all pursuing their own individual agendas. Some of them were openly cooperating with Sandinistas on the other side of the political divide. By the same token, the Sandinistas were divided politically. Those who accepted continuation of Daniel Ortega's leadership, a hard line towards the United States, a critical stance on a Nicaragua founded on the free market and pluralistic democracy, and those who wanted to work within the new rules of the game. There were commandantes on both sides of this divide. The government was steadily losing popular support, because expectations at the beginning were very high and, by virtue of the fact that they were a successor government after years of authoritarian rule, they had made some hard decisions that moved key political elements into opposition.

Two weeks after I arrived in country, President Chamorro had a very public dispute and falling out with the Ortega brothers on Army Day, in early September. She publicly announced that Humberto Ortega, the head of the Nicaraguan army since 1979, would be retired early in 1995. She was going to promulgate new regulations that would limit the term of the army chief to five years. The new clock had begun to tick the day Chamorro took office, in January 1990. The announcement was made in a full-scale public venue, with the Sandinista high command and troops in review, with the entire diplomatic corps and political class present, and with the media recording the event on national TV and radio. Violeta Chamorro is about 5' 10", a slim, statuesque woman who always dressed in white, a practice she adopted when she was campaigning for the presidency. She wasn't going to dress in widow's weeds, although she parlayed the immense popularity of her journalist husband who had been assassinated by Somoza's henchmen in 1978. Her husband became a national martyr, a symbol of the revolution against Somoza. She too was regarded as a national hero. When she stood up to her full height, she towered over the two Ortega brothers. By their body language and by their words on Army Day, they physically threatened her with dire consequences. I know some of the diplomats on the stage had to step in to shield the president from the two irate Sandinista leaders. She had the last word: "I am the president of the republic, and my word is law."

This was the beginning of a major transition in Nicaragua and in the Nicaraguan military. It also pointed to the fact that during the previous four years there had been an extremely tenuous, compromise-filled relationship between the democratic forces and the Sandinistas. Civility between the two camps was paper thin at best. Conditions were deteriorating in some respects, even though economically the country was growing and there was increased confidence that the government would survive until the end of Chamorro's term in 1996. There was no constitutional provision for reelection, so governmental processes were already showing signs of stalling, as ministers and other senior officials began to chart their own agendas for the future. Chamorro herself was showing signs of being tired of her position as president. She was not cut out to be the hard-charging president of a fractious republic. I have a theory about transitional democratic governments of this type. Their leaders need to recognize that they in fact perform an invaluable role in a country's political development. They are given the opportunity to set the country on a new track, hopefully on a better track, after a sustained period of authoritarian rule, but they should never allow themselves to think that somehow their continuation in power is essential to the country's well being. Yet Chamorro's nephew, Antonio Lacayo, was minister of governmena sort of prime minister. His mother-in-law the president had delegated to him a great deal of power and authority to direct the day-to-day operations of government, but he wielded this authority in a somewhat cynical, self-serving and tough minded fashion. Lacayo began making noises about running for president on his mother's coattails. By then the government was very unpopular. Some hard decisions had been made that had put the country back on track and established some semblance of stability and normality. The Chamorro government's political capital was very low and its based of support quite thin. According to my theory, it was time for the groundbreakers to move on and pass the baton to a democratic government that was committed to consolidating those gains in a less personalistic and more structured fashion.

The embassy started making plans to oversee what would be the first succession of one democratically elected Nicaraguan government to another in that country's history. This was a major undertaking and it required very clear, forthright embassy leadership. Again, we were not exactly on Washington's scope, except as the target of occasional sniping by congressional liberals and conservatives. We needed to secure the funds and political support from Washington that would be necessary to help the Nicaraguans solidify those institutions that would have to carry out a smooth and legitimate political transition from one democratic president to another. At all costs, Nicaragua needed to avoid a deterioration of the political climate, with a resurgence of past patterns of violence, from which only the Sandinistas could benefit.

Q: What was the regime?

BECKER: One of the great weaknesses of the 1989 elections was that large numbers of Nicaraguans had never participated, did not participate in that political exercise. Many Nicaraguans were still fighting. Others were still in exile. Large numbers of Nicaraguans were still in the United States, Guatemala, Colombia and other countries, awaiting assurances that they could come home in safety. The political complexion of Nicaragua changed significantly in just the six years that Chamorro was in office. Early in the Sandinista period, the regime had declared all citizens ages 16 and over eligible to vote. They thought they could capture the youth vote. By 1996 most young Nicaraguanand the country had a young population anyway - had never voted before. Older Nicaraguans had not had the opportunity to vote under Somoza, and many of them were out of the country or on the battlefield when the Sandinistas held their sham election in 1984 and when Ortega and Chamorro contested the presidency in 1989. We calculated that some 40% of the potential electorate in 1995 had never cast a vote in a democratic or even an undemocratic election in their lives. The embassy, and eventually the U.S. government, thus mobilized a major effort to help Nicaragua carry out a very physically challenging election in a politically divisive environment, in which the Sandinistas were clearly going to run Daniel Ortega again and the democratic forces were in disarray. Chamorro could not run for reelection, and her son-in-law had very little political support even if he had control of the governmental institutions.

The first task was to ensure that all Nicaraguans were registered to vote and that the voting mechanisms and rules were open and transparent to all. The Nicaraguan Supreme Electoral Council was actually a fourth branch of government, alongside the executive, legislative and judicial branches. The council represented a wide array of political opinions, but its head was a Sandinista, one of the so-called moderate or reformist Sandinistas. The Nicaraguans, with our help, had to construct an electoral system from the ground up. The Sandinista system developed for the '89 elections just wouldn't do, even though it had produced a democratic outcome. There was unprecedented collaboration between Nicaraguan and U.S. officials in '95, although there was also a degree of ambivalence regarding our role. To some our assistance was welcomed as a guarantor of fairness and competence, but to others of course United States involvement in the process was repugnant. We did make a major effort to get European countries involved in this effort as well. The European Union countries and the Nordic countries became our active partners in providing electoral support.

Q: OSCE was.

BECKER: Well, the OSCE did not operate outside of Europe.

Q: They wouldn't operate.

BECKER: Nicaragua had long been a major recipient for European aid programs. Some had been supportive of the Sandinistas throughout the '80s. Some had tried to maintain a degree of neutrality. We were of course always looked at with a certain amount of suspicion because of our anti-Sandinista policies during the '80s, but we developed a good partnership with the Europeans on the electoral front. This was in part an outgrowth of a World Bank-Inter-American Development Bank consultative process on post-conflict assistance to Central America. Every year, in either Paris or Brussels, the donor countries and international financial institutions would meet with senior Nicaraguan government officials to review its national development plan. The donors would pledge assistance to this, that or another project or area of development need. It was an attempt at donor coordination on a massive scale. From this mechanism a master plan for supporting the Nicaraguan elections was extrapolated. Some countries contributed to the physical registration process, others to training election officials and party activists, still others to voter education, others to electoral observation, while others contributed hardware to print ballots or tally votes. It was a major undertaking. Some of the most fulfilling experiences during my tour were traveling to the hinterlands, way out in the countryside beyond the paved roads, and helping to deliver electoral materials. The embassy was on permanent electoral watch. We sent out teams to observe and report on how the electoral mechanism reached out to the largely illiterate Nicaraguans. These elections enabled them many of them for the first time to participate in the political process.

In the latter stages of the campaign the Nicaraguan army, still under Sandinista leadership, was mobilized to deliver electoral materials to voting sites. Of course, there was the question of security to keep these electoral sites free from partisan violence or banditry. In some parts of the country, the only way people could get to the polls was to travel two days by canoe or foot. In the end, the electoral turnout was 83% - a tribute to the success of the election mobilization effort and the determination of the Nicaraguan people.

Q: How did it come out?

BECKER: The actual ballot - and I wish I had collected onwas formidable, probably two and a half feet wide. It contained the color photos of 24 presidential candidates, together with their presumably recognizable party symbols. The threshold for running a candidate was very low. The voter was supposed to sift through these candidates and symbols and make an intelligent choice for president and for a party list from which legislative seats were apportioned. In point of fact, no more than three or four candidates were considered viable, and in the end only two really mattered. One was Daniel Ortega, heading up the official Sandinista party. There were other Sandinista, or let's say formerly Sandinista, groups that also ran candidates on reformist or breakaway platforms. The Somocistas tried to raise the old National Liberal Party banner that they used during the '60s and '70s, but weren't able to get more than 1,000 votes. The biggest party was the Constitutionalist Liberal Party, headed by the very dynamic mayor of Managua, Arnoldo Aleman. Aleman was as physically big as the image he projected. He was probably the one political figure in Nicaragua who could match Ortega on a stump. He had a real feel for the people. He was a very popular, very visible mayor. I met him first at a reception in Washington while I was still working on Central American affairs. He blew into the room with his supporters and basically laid waste to the gathering by his force of character, a very impressive individual. Unfortunately, even at the time of his election, we were starting to get rumors out of Miami that he was linked to some less than reputable individuals and that some of his negotiations as mayor of Managua were not quite kosher. However, nobody could really put a finger on it at that time. Recognizing that he had a fairly freewheeling and questionable political reputation in some quarters, Aleman had chosen as his running mate a man much admired in Nicaragua for his ethical, forthright political reputation, a sort of "Mr. Clean." Enrique Bolaï¿½os is currently the president of the country, but was Aleman's running mate in '95. Bolaï¿½os had been Jesse Helms' preferred standard bearer for the democratic forces in 1989 over Violeta Chamorro, but he had been eased aside as too conservative, too tied to the contra cause. Helms never let anybody forget that Bolaï¿½os had been his choice.

The Aleman-Bolaï¿½os ticket won the election decisively over a rehashed and hastily refurbished Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas in the first round, avoiding a runoff. Ortega tried to make nice with the United States during the campaign, perhaps recognizing that of all of these sins he had committed during the 1980s, probably the worst in the eyes of Nicaraguans was to show open hostility to the United States. Of all the countries that I have ever served in, the Nicaraguan admiration of the United States was just incredible. This included large chunks of the Sandinista electorate. They were saddened and disappointed and angered when the falling out between their government and the United States occurred. There was always a lingering blame on Ortega for taking his political differences with the U.S. too far. There was also some resentment against the United States for having contributed to the breach, but in fact Nicaraguans would have voted overwhelmingly for any candidate that we said we supported. True to our best instincts, however, we refused to support any single candidate in '95. We stood four-square for the process, in which we were putting big bucks. In those days I believe we had sufficient faith that the Nicaraguans, if they could be brought to the polls, would make the right choices, would continue to reject the Sandinistas in favor of the democratic option. We refused to allow ourselves to become an issue in Nicaragua's domestic political debate.

Q: Did you find yourself having or the ambassador no longer to state this very clearly?

BECKER: Yes. We orchestrated this element very carefully. We spent a lot of money and attention and political capital to put in place a credible electoral mechanism and registration process, and we helped to create the means by which a huge percentage of the Nicaraguan public could come to the polls in safety and with clear choices. It was therefore incumbent upon us to maintain the integrity of that process in our political rhetoric as well. As part of our electoral support package, AID brought in five reputable U.S. non-governmental organizations to help the Nicaraguans organize their elections. These NGOs were responsible for guiding the Nicaraguans through the maze of voter registration and education, mobilizing the electorate, creating a transparent electoral process, and building election mechanics. There were the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI), both under the National Endowment for Democracy. There was the Carter Center, which had a great deal of experience in election monitoring, and Jimmy Carter's personal oversight of the '89 elections may have ensured a peaceful, democratic outcome. There was the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), which also had a long and effective history in managing the mechanics of elections. Then there was the Center for Democracy, which had cut its teeth on elections in Eastern Europe. I was familiar with a couple of these organizations from my period as Romanian desk officer, when we were trying to organize some of those elections. In addition to carrying out their own program of support, each of the NGOs set aside a portion of the funds to establish and train the first-ever Nicaraguan electoral observation corps.

So while the international poll watching contingent numbered in the low hundreds at its peak, by election day, the Nicaraguans themselves were able to mobilize a corps of something like 6,000-8,000 avowedly non-partisan observers in a highly partisan environment. This group set themselves the goal of ensuring the integrity of the electoral process at the polls. It was an impressive display of coordination and cooperation among U.S. NGOs, which wanted to leave some legacy behind rather than just a quick in-and-out. The OAS also came in and provided electoral observation that was largely funded by the United States. The American Federation of Teachers, which long had a program of civic education in Nicaraguan schools, used the elections as a laboratory for school-age kids to get first hand knowledge of the electoral process in their own country. One spin-off organization that we helped to foster during this period addressed the new face and future development of civil-military relations, a think-tank that flowed from our electoral support effort. Indeed, it was a national effort on many levels, which I was amazed and then highly gratified to see that we were supporting.

Q: What happened afterwards with the election? What happened?

BECKER: The U.S. administration was so nervous about run-up to the election that they asked John Maisto to stay on as ambassador through the final vote, even though he had been due to leave the summer before the elections. Within the embassy we had had a lot of continuity and effort. As political counselor I had put together an internal working group to plot our electoral strategy. AID, USIA and State Department elements were included. That collaboration in itself was unique in my experience, that these three agencies would work so closely together to design and carry out every element of the U.S. support for the electoral process. It insured that AID programs were well grounded in political reality, and it gave our State political officers the experience of working with and having responsibility for insuring the success of programs, not simply for the usual observation. As a professional development tool, the working group was invaluable. That summer, and I always thought this was part of John Maisto's grand plan, his DCM transferred out and he promoted me from the political counselor job to be the next DCM in Managua. However, I still had to sell this to the incoming ambassador, who was waiting in the wings.

Q: Who was that?

BECKER: Lino Gutierrez, currently our ambassador to Argentina. Lino had been selected during the regular process to succeed John. But because John was asked by the administration to stay on, Lino basically had to cool his heels until this electoral effort was finished. After I interviewed with and got the green light from the incoming ambassador that I would be his choice to be DCM, I moved over in the summer of '96. It was a natural transition in one sense, because I was familiar with everything and everybody and I could hit the ground running, to use a too often employed term. But in this case it really was the truth. On the other hand, there's always the temptation to second-guess your successor as the political counselor, to be a super political counselor in the front office. In addition, the fact that I was suddenly supervising personnel at post who were previously my peers required some adjustments on both sides. Friendships become harder to sustain when you are writing someone's performance evaluation. To shed the old hat while trying on the new one is a difficult job, but most of us worked through that transition without missing a beat.

Another advantage to my situation was that the AID director had arrived when I did in '94 and his tenure coincided with mine. There was never a break in AID leadership while I was at post. We were able to establish a cohesive team chemistry early on that carried us through the elections and beyond. It is vitally important for State and AID officers to work smoothly together, in Washington and in the field, and it cannot be taken for granted at the outset given their different bureaucratic cultures.

Q: How did the new administration work out with Nicaragua?

BECKER: I indicated that one of the drawbacks facing President Aleman was the fact that he was dogged by rumors of corruption and allegations that some of his key advisors were involved in questionable, self-aggrandizing activities. The other drawback in a period of consolidation was that he turned out to be just as partisan and confrontational as president as he had been as a candidate and party leader. The friction between Aleman and the Sandinistas emerged very quickly, and the political fault lines that had persisted through the period of Sandinista rule only deepened and sharpened. There was real concern that the new government would proceed with a sense of mandate, based on its 10-plus percentage point victory, and without due regard for the continuing ability of the Sandinistas to be as obstructionist as they possibly could. A lot of these fissures were papered over or partially filled in during the Chamorro years because of her emphasis on reconciliation. Reconciliation was not the highest priority for the Aleman administration. Indeed, Aleman was sometimes almost as hard as his minor coalition partners in the democratic camp as he was on the Sandinistas themselves. His free-wheeling populist style sometimes got in the way of sensible and rational policy making.

Q: Well, was this something, we were committed to this, were we able to try to consult to anything or were we in a sense out of the game and being an observer?

BECKER: We were fully committed to working with the new government, to advising the new government to ensure its success. There were some very good people in the new government. Indeed, the victory of Aleman tended to reaffirm to the international community that Nicaragua was on the right path. Nicaraguans weren't going to take a big step backwards by bringing Sandinistas again into the government. Keep in mind that the second generation of post-communist governments in Eastern Europe was in many cases a turn to former, reconstituted communist leaders due to disillusionment with the first, transitional democratic governments. There was fear that Nicaragua would face that kind of retrogression. So the international community, and certainly in the investor community, gave a collective sigh of relief that Nicaraguans had chosen to continue on the democratic and free market path. We saw investment increase. We saw a great deal of economic activity - shopping malls, upscale housing projects, tourism, consumer goods, agro-industry and small scale manufacturing aimed at the export market. There was new investment in the apparel industry, similar to what was taking place elsewhere in Central America. Nicaragua became an assembly point for finished apparel entering the U.S. market. For the Nicaraguans, these economic opportunities had not existed beforehand.

While some protectionist labor groups in the United States argued that much of the new job creation was a new form of wage slavery, and that American jobs were being exported overseas, in fact the creation of new manufacturing jobs represented progress for an increasing number of Nicaraguans. There was a boom in construction, mainly commercial centers and some middle-class housing. In retrospect, some of this seemed linked to the return from exile of prosperous Nicaraguans, who were basically taking care of their own needs, but there was some filtering downward to working people. Agriculture still languished, however. Markets that had been vibrant during the '60s and '70s, when the country had been the region's breadbasket and had exported beef, tobacco, cotton, coffee and other primary products, had been lost during the civil war, some irretrievably. Nicaraguans were still trying to find their way in terms of meeting the competitive demands of modern agriculture. Much of this early economic recovery was supply-side and filtered-down prosperity, but overall we kept seeing signs that more and more Nicaraguans at all levels were becoming a part of the new economy.

At the same time, we saw the beginnings of Nicaragua's integration into international criminal networks. It was in this period, after 1995, that the embassy was able to convince U.S. policy makers and law enforcement agencies, as well as the Nicaraguans, that it was time to enter into law enforcement cooperative arrangements to combat international criminal activity. The former Sandinista police, under reform-minded leaders, had already demonstrated growing professionalism by confronting party-inspired labor and political violence in the streets. We brought the DEA into Nicaragua to put together drug interdiction agreements with the Nicaraguan police, and had some fairly effective first-stage counter-drug programs. Nicaragua, like most of Central America, was on the major drug transit route from Colombia and Peru to Mexico and the United States. A lot of drugs we found were passing through Nicaragua using maritime routes off the Caribbean and Pacific coasts well as overland towards the north. Of course, we still were holding the Nicaraguan army at arm's distance because of its Sandinista tendencies, so our interdiction cooperation efforts lacked some effectiveness.

Q: You were saying you hadn't served in the WHA bureau for some years.

BECKER: Yes. One of the things I was concerned about at that time was my own career path. I was a fairly long-in-the-tooth 01 officer. I was concerned that I would be selected out, since my time in class was approaching. Although I was offered the opportunity to be a DCM in an at-grade position at another overseas post, I was frustrated that I had not been promoted in place in Nicaragua, particularly with what I thought was a very substantial record of accomplishment as both political counselor and DCM and a lot of support from the two ambassadors I worked for. Given the rules of the career game, I felt I needed to go back to Washington if in fact the system was about to give me the boot. I accepted the job as deputy director of the regional Office of Policy Planning, Coordination and Press in the WHA bureau. This was the office that handled the political coordination issues of a regional or a hemispheric nature for the entire Western Hemisphere.

Q: Okay, well, we'll pick this up next time in 1998, when you're back in Washington. Great.

Q: Today is April 15th, the ides of April, income tax day, 2005. Rick, you were in Washington from '98 to when?

BECKER: For not quite one year. '98 to '99.

Q: All right and you were in Regional Affairs?

BECKER: Yes. WHA has two regional affairs offices. One focuses on economic issues and summit affairs and the other one covers the rest of the waterfront, everything from political-military to counter-drug to administration of justice, human rights and the environment. I also learned the office handled a large chunk of support functions that the WHA front office required. It was like an extended staff for the front office. We were responsible for speechwriting, preparing briefing papers, planning WHA front office travel, and coordinating anything that went beyond the scope of a single country or a single sub-region. We were involved in a lot of inter-bureau activities, such as the UN General Assembly, worldwide human rights conferences and most importantly the bureau budget process as it fed into the Department's budget and resource management.

Q: Well, let's talk a little bit about the budget process. Was this a time still, I mean we'd had both under Bush, Sr. and under Clinton, this is kind of a rather sparse resource, wasn't it?

BECKER: Sparse resources were a given. While the historic watchword was doing more with less, we were gradually coming to the realization that we had to do less with less, or we had to find efficiencies in what we were doing. Budgets and personnel had been severely stretched during the '90s. If you recall, Secretary of State Baker in 1990 and 1991, faced with the breakup of the Soviet Union, chose to bite the bullet and not request more resources from the Hill to accommodate 14 or 15 new embassies. We were suffering from a deepening "rob Peter to pay Paul" syndrome. We spent a lot of time trying to rationalize program plans, trying to weed out activities that were of lower priority or that couldn't be supported with resources. All in all, it was probably a futile process, because every office, every unit of the Department, made its case for priority consideration and retention of essential programs, and WHA was no different. In addition, members of Congress had their pet foreign affairs programs that they were unable to give up or prioritize.

Q: In this year was there any event or something of you might say of particular interest or a problem you had to deal with?

BECKER: The most interesting aspect of this year, outside of my normal routine, was the opportunity to detail to a Department task force aimed at rationalizing our overseas operations. This time they called it "right-sizing," but in fact it meant downsizing. That is still the case, I believe. I was assigned as a senior bureau advisor to a Department team that traveled to several WHA embassies, conducted in-depth interviews with personnel top-to-bottom, and offered recommendations on how the posts ought to be staffed. This exercise, called the Overseas Presence Advisory Panel, was constituted at the top by public and private sector notables, including several former ambassadors. Our mandate was to look at embassies in terms of the efficiencies we could achieve, but also in terms of the new threat perception flowing from the upsurge of international terrorism. A Presidential commission had called for this review in the wake of the Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia and the bombings at our embassies in Africa.

Q: Kenya and.

BECKER: Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania.

Q: Dar Es Salaam.

BECKER: The general perception or premise under which the teams operated was that there were too many U.S. government functions lodged at our embassies abroad that could be recycled back to the United States. By doing so, we could make embassies more efficient, more secure and more attentive to this new environment in which we were now operating. Our team, one of maybe six or eight teams that fanned out worldwide, visited three "representative" WHA embassies: Ecuador, where I had served in the early '80s; Panama, where I had served in the late '80s; and Mexico City. Two were relatively mid-size embassies and one was very large. It was an exciting personal experience. It took me out of the normal realm of paper pushing and responding to the urgencies of the moment, and got me into the mode of thinking about how we do our job in the field and whether there were ways to do it better.

Many of us were quite skeptical of this initiative, having seen previous Department and embassy reform efforts either lie fallow on a shelf or be misapplied. We'd seen so-called economies and efficiencies implemented that didn't produce savings or better policy implementation. It was a useful exercise, however, and it took place at a critical momenthe dawn of what we came to believe was an age of persistent international terrorism. We had the impression that in some way, shape or form, we could make a contribution to the improvement of how our embassies operated overseas.

Q: Well, then after a year of doing this, you went where?

BECKER: I had no intention of going anywhere for a while. I had spent four years overseas, and I did get my promotion to the Senior Foreign Service that first year in Washington. The work of PPC, while essential, was a little less than thrilling. Besides the Overseas Presence panel, the other major project I worked on was a diplomatic initiative to establish a series of forward-based counter-narcotics operating sites in the Western Hemisphere. This idea took shape in the wake of a failed U.S. attempt to maintain a foothold in Panama by proposing the conversion of Howard Air Force Base into a multilateral counternarcotics center (MCC) jointly operated by the U.S. and Panama. The proposal was submarined on both sides for reasons too complicated to explain here. At the behest of the Pentagon, State pulled together an interagency team to develop the concept of what became known as a "forward operating location," or FOL, where DOD and law enforcement agencies could conduct counter-drug overflights of large sections of western South and Central America to track drug movements northward by sea, air and land. Panama had been the center of that activity while we maintained military bases there. The powers that be, principally in the Pentagon, determined that we could achieve broader and cheaper coverage by basically leasing existing airfields, dispersed through the region, to cover the Caribbean and the northern Pacific transit zones. The sites that were chosen initially were Ecuador and the Netherlands Antilles. Our negotiations with Ecuador for use of the airbase at Manta, which the Pentagon thought could be wrapped up in six weeks, took over a year to conclude. Even with our close and long allies the Dutch, reaching an agreement to use airfields on Aruba and Curacao also took well over a year to negotiate. Meanwhile, overflight operations had all but ceased in Panama.

Ultimately we also negotiated a FOL agreement with El Salvador. All of these agreements functioned very well, though they turned out to be much more expensive than DOD and others expected, even though operating the skeleton staffs on leased properties with security provided by the host country. The improvements that needed to be made to existing commercial and local military facilities were substantial, and each agreement carried with it certain political concessions that also cost money. Congress was very critical of the initiative. Many members continued to believe that Howard Air Force Base in Panama had been cost-free to us. So any expense we might incur to improve other countries' airfields for our own use was seen as excessive. We had learned a lot from the MCC negotiations, which had failed before my time, in part because the interagency couldn't agree on what it wanted and what it could live with.

Q: You said the MCC?

BECKER: Multilateral Counternarcotics Center, as the proposal to Panama was called. I think we were very ably led by Ambassador Rich Brown in the FOL negotiations. Before he came on board as chief negotiator, I did the basic groundwork. I identified the players in the Pentagon, the counter-drug community and the State Department. I also generated some of the initial agency-specific negotiating objectives and positions, which Rich Brown succeeded in forging into a single integrated negotiating position across the U.S. government, one that could hold its own in the interagency tug-of-war and on the Hill, where we had to defend those agreements and the budgets that supported them. That constituted a highlight of my one year in PPC.

In December 1998 WHA held its annual chiefs of mission conference at the conference center in Lansdowne, on Route 7 near Leesburg. All of the chiefs of mission in the hemisphere were assembled for the 1998 edition. I got a call one day from the WHA executive director, who said, "Rick, we've got a problem. We have a newly minted political ambassador and he has been unhappy with every single DCM candidate that we've put before him. We've put about a dozen names in front of him. I don't know what to do. Would you interview for the job?" I replied, "Look, I haven't even gotten my bags unpacked from Nicaragua. I've been here for three months. I have family considerations. We're just getting comfortable in our home." I didn't tell him that the job was somewhat less than I aspired to, but he convinced me to drive out to Lansdowne and talk to this ambassador. The man had been a real estate lawyer in Florida and head of the state Democratic Party that had delivered Florida to Clinton in 1992. He was now ambassador to Panama. I talked with him. He was intelligent, personable and seemed genuinely respectful of the professional Foreign Service. He seemed eager to take hold of his new responsibilities, rather than merely occupy a sinecure as some in his situation would be. I was impressed with him, as apparently he was with me. A few days later I got a call offering me the job. I turned him down for the same reasons that I gave our executive director. We'd gotten resettled in Washington. Yes, I knew Panama very well, having served there a decade earlier, but I wasn't prepared to go back, or anywhere overseas at this juncture. "Thank you, but no thank you." When I told my wife about this exchange - I had already briefed her on the Lansdowne interview - we commiserated a little bit about the opportunity and agreed we made the right decision.

Two months later, in February, I got a call again offering me the job. He'd gone through yet another dozen candidates without finding the deputy he wanted. He decided for whatever reason that he still wanted me. So, by then my wife had fallen on the ice, broken her elbow, and we were thoroughly disenchanted with winter in Washington and my daily commute to the Department from suburban Virginia. We were also thinking of my job in PPC, which was not getting any better in terms of creative or management challenge. Even though the name of the office was Policy Planning and Coordination, we did very little policy planning, but we did an awful lot of coordination. We were the ones who responded when the WHA front office snapped its fingers needing a speech or a briefing package for a visit or the assistant secretary's travel. I decided there was probably someplace in the Department I could be a little bit more useful, and so I accepted this second offer to go to Panama as DCM. Eleven months after having arrived in the States, we were back overseas again.

Q: Who was the ambassador in Panama?

BECKER: The ambassador's name was Simon Ferro. Simon, or in Spanish Simï¿½n. He's a Cuban-American from Miami. He seemed very well plugged into the political and business communities. He had been on the board of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), and he had a great deal of interest in trade and investment issues. As I later found out, he was rather clueless for a political appointee about Washington power politics. He didn't know a lot of the players on the national scene. He was coming out of Florida, which had its own rough-and-tumble political environment. Bill Clinton had tapped him to be ambassador to Panama, a pretty important country commercially, and he was arriving in time to oversee the turnover of the canal to the Panamanians and the launch of a new era in U.S.-Panamanian relations. There was an historic quality to it. When I left Panama the first time in 88, I had told my wife and some colleagues casually, "I have no desire to serve in Panama again. But it'd be nice to come back for a short visit and witness the end of the treaty process and see the canal officially turned over." I didn't realize I'd end up signing on for three more years just for that privilege. But that's where I found myself as DCM to a political ambassador, and with this transition as our first major responsibility.

Q: You were doing this really from '99?

BECKER: Summer of '99.

Q: To?

BECKER: To 2002. It was a three-year tour.

Q: Did you get any feel for what was the problem? I mean the man had looked at 24 or so DCMs.

BECKER: I was clearly suspicious as to why he was so exacting or unhappy with the other candidates, and my informal research shied away from asking one of those candidates where their chemistry fell short. What mattered was that Ferro and I hit it off well on both a professional and a personal level. He did not have the personality of a micromanager or taskmaster, and I thus put my initial suspicions aside. I had served political ambassadors as well as career ambassadors before, good ones and not so good ones in both categories, and wasn't intimidated by the idea of working for him. That I had served in Panama before was obviously a plus in his mind, as well as the fact that I had been a DCM before. That I had done economic and consular work as well as political work during my career may have given me the edge. I guess I was as close to his ideal candidate as he could find after an exhaustive search, and the others just didn't hit it off with him. Perhaps the biggest selling point for me was his express wish that I take full charge of managing the embassy, and he assured me that I would be his principal policy advisor and his deputy ambassador in every sense of the term. I couldn't ask for more.

Q: What was the situation in Panama in '99 when you got out there?

BECKER: There was a great deal of ambivalence on both sides. On the Panamanian side, there was mounting anticipation of being on the verge of getting back a major national resource. The Panamanians always considered the canal to be "reverted" territory, meaning that at the end of the year the canal would be returned to its rightful owner. It didn't matter than at no time in the country's history did Panamanians ever control the territory on which the canal was built. This was an unshakeable piece of Panamanian mythology. In the eyes of these Panamanians, the canal transfer was not a win-win situation, in which both countries stood to gain benefits, but rather a political and diplomatic victory over the United States. In addition, the end of the treaty would grant Panama a major piece of real estate, which many Panamanians regarded as a cash cow. Relatively few Panamanians focused on the high upkeep, the responsibility toward the international maritime community, and the requirements to ensure the defense of the canal against all threats. Panama's leaders said they would not run the canal the way the Americans did, as a non-profit enterprise and national security asset. They intended to extract as much profit as they could and use it to develop the country. However, when you look at the canal's bottom line, there wasn't that much profit to be had. There was a narrow elasticity in terms of how much you could manipulate tolls. There was a high upkeep, and certainly after 9/11 the Panamanians came to realize that defense of the canal was something they needed to invest a great deal more in. That's a different story and we can return to that issue, but clearly most Panamanians eagerly anticipated gaining control of the waterway and all its assets.

As I came to know the Panamanians better, I recognized that a segment of the local population truly regretted that we ultimately gave them back the canal. They didn't want the responsibility associated with control of a major international transportation asset. They hadn't had that level of responsibility in the past. Moreover, the security blanket Panama enjoyed by having a significant U.S. military presence had been an assurance to U.S. and foreign investors. In the minds of many, our presence, our control over the canal, was also a kind of guarantee of Panamanian political moderation and governmental integrity. Of course, the reality was that we were no such guarantor. Over the years, many institutions had been destroyed or corrupted by Panama's political and military leaders, the latest having been Manuel Noriega.

If the Panamanians were ambivalent about the future, so was the United States. There was a great deal of resentment against Panama, particularly in DOD, for having basically refused to negotiate a post-1999 relationship and literally kicking us out. Since five U.S. presidents had endorsed the idea of a treaty providing for the canal's transfer to Panama, and since the treaty signed by Jimmy Carter had a 21-year transition period, it was ridiculous to say we were being expelled from the country. Our immediate mandate at the embassy, and indeed in the State Department, was to make as clean, as dignified and as efficient a transfer of authority to the Panamanians as was humanly possible.

The last six months of the treaty period, from about the time I arrived to the actual turnover date of December 31st, 1999, was an incredibly intense period. U.S. policy makers did not want to think about what would happen afterwards. There was very much a "wash our hands of the matter" attitude. Critical implementing decisions that needed to be taken to wrap up the treaty in a dignified, efficient and effective manner, to leave as few legacy issues that could later bog down our policy in the hemisphere if not our bilateral relations, had been ignored throughout this 21-year period. They all came to roost in the final six months, during which we were trying to tie up loose ends, prevent hemorrhaging and lay some kind of groundwork for the future. There was no grand master plan for what our relationship with Panama should be or even what our strategic interest in the canal would be after we turned it over. As the principle custodian of the canal on behalf of the U.S. government, DOD was the worst offender. The agency refused to consider some of these issues. We had to cobble together a final accounting of pending matters in a very short period of time. On an almost daily basis, we flagged for Washington's attention one issue after another, whether disposition of removable property (the treaty dealt primarily with real estate) or worker claims on the U.S. government for severance, or any number of other issues that could loom as financially burdensome or diplomatically irritating after we physically left. We had a fixed deadline to wrap them all up. The Department did have the foresight to offer to assign to the embassy a full-time lawyer, who would address canal, security, even law enforcement issues on the ground. But Ambassador Ferro steadfastly refused to accept this offer, perhaps believing that the lawyer's true client would be the Department and not the ambassador. We were thus left to establish a long-distance linkage with the Department's Legal Advisor's office, which sometimes but not always was willing to drop other tasks to wrestle with Panamanian issues.

One major "left alone" issue required our priority attention. The treaty called for the negotiation of a cemetery agreement with Panama. The America cemetery at Corozal in Panama was the final resting place for several thousand Americans, several hundred Brits and a couple of thousand Panamanians who had died either building the canal or defending it over the course of the 75 or so years of the canal's life. We did not hold title to that cemetery, and the property was due for transfer on December 31. Six months from the end of our presence in Panama, we didn't have a cemetery agreement. A draft treaty had been produced in the late '70s, but had foundered on issues of whether a U.S. flag should fly anywhere in the canal area after we finally withdrew, whether the U.S. should have the right to hold and maintain any residual property in the canal area, and what kind of mechanism would govern the cemetery. These issues carried a great deal of symbolism for both sides. Panamanians were intent on securing complete sovereignty over every square inch of the canal operating area. However, veterans' and conservative political groups in the U.S. demanded that the U.S. not give away any ground, that the Corozal cemetery enjoy the same sovereign status as other American cemeteries around the world. Some in the U.S. insisted that we hold back transfer of our last military installations beyond December 31 until we got the proper cemetery guarantees. The matter came to a head at Christmas time, just two weeks before the canal was to be turned over. We were hoping against hope that the cemetery issue would not become a flashpoint for a full-scale diplomatic incident, with every potential for violence, which might somehow undermine the canal turnover itself. Add to that the fact that the ambassador was in Florida to visit his family for the holidays, and I was in charge.

We had to extract a cemetery agreement that the Panamanian government would treat as a valid international agreement even before ratification by both countries took place. We didn't know whether the ratification process would take three weeks, three months or would drag on for years. In my negotiations with the foreign ministry, I asked that Panama agree to treat our draft treaty as the real thing from the day that we transferred the canal. After a painfully long consultation with the Panamanian president, the minister agreed. I also secured Panama's acceptance of a mechanism whereby both U.S. and Panamanian flags would fly side-by-side over the cemetery (the only place in Panama where this condition exists), and that the grounds would be controlled and administered as a U.S. facility by the American Battle Monuments Commission, the same as other U.S. military cemeteries in the U.S. and abroad. We got everything we wanted and needed from a Panamanian government that didn't want any last minute glitches or crises. It was two or three months before the Panamanian legislature ratified it, but it was a done deal before the treaty went out of existence. This is just one of a host of issues that we had to resolve in the eleventh hour. We repeatedly had to get the lawyers and policymakers in Washington to wake up to these issues, and then to sit down and settle each of them. We were less successful in getting the U.S. national security community to start thinking in advance about our strategic interests in Panama that superseded the treaty and that would carry us into the 21st century.

Q: For one thing if I recall, there was a reluctance of anybody of anybody political stature to go down and sign the thing, wasn't there?

BECKER: There was nothing really to sign. The treaty was self-executing for the most part, but no U.S. political leader had the backbone to come down and make an appearance to hand over the symbolic trappings of canal ownership or at least canal management to the Panamanians. We could not get the president. We could not get the vice president. We could not even get the Secretary of State. So, what happened were two ceremonies. An international ceremony was held on December 14th, two weeks before the actual end of the treaty period, organized by the Panamanian government and attended by most of the hemisphere's heads of state, similar to the convocation that took place in 1977 when Presidents Carter and Torrijos signed the Panama Canal Treaty at the OAS headquarters in Washington. Rather than sending one of its own to represent the U.S. president, the Clinton administration asked retired president-politician Jimmy Carter to go down to Panama with a fairly prestigious delegation which included his own family, Sol Linowitz, a couple of senior U.S. military and State Department officials, some former U.S. ambassadors to Panama, and some other notables, but no current U.S. government representative above the level of assistant secretary. We organized their visit and worked out with Panama the details of an international gathering at which the U.S. would symbolically deliver the canal to Panama. It was actually a grand event, full of pageantry and logistical chaos as you would expect a Latin American political extravaganza to be.

What happened on December 31st at noon was the official turnover of the canal. All the U.S. government was prepared to do was to send down the DOD assistant secretary for civil works, a former member of congress, accompanied only by his staff to do the final honors. Security was a serious concern for us at the embassy. We had credible intelligence that there were groups that wanted to make a major political statement, again treating the United States as a defeated party in a prolonged struggle for this piece of territory. These groups were prepared to go to some lengths to disrupt the ceremony. President Mireya Moscoso of Panama contributed in some respects to this climate by insisting on delivering a Panamanian flag to students of a Panamanian high school, the Instituto Nacional. The flag in question had flown ever so briefly over the Canal Zone during the 1964 civil uprising, primarily students and agitators who had breached the fence separating the zone and Panama proper and had torn down a U.S. flag and raised a Panamanian flag over the Balboa high school. We considered this symbolic act would set off whatever violent actions being planned by an admittedly a small group of Panamanians. Moscoso could not be dissuaded from presenting the flag at the official transfer ceremony. Most surprisingly, the embassy could not convince the Panama Canal Commission, which was going out of business and which prided itself on its intimate relationship with the Panamanian government, to take these threats seriously with adequate security precautions. So the embassy made its own contingency plans. We convinced Washington that we should lower the U.S. flag at a small private ceremony the evening before, so that this highly symbolic withdrawal would not serve as a red cape in front of the bull. Yes, the Panamanian government would raise its own flag over the canal at the appointed hour on December 31st, but at the very least when people showed up for that ceremony the U.S. flag would have been withdrawn, lowered in dignity in a manner befitting the way we as representatives of the United States wanted it to happen. Of course, we got a lot of negative feedback from Washington, the media and the Canal Commissiobut no complaint from the foreign ministry - about how we had orchestrated it. It turned out to be the right thing to do. Consistent with our intelligence, there was an attempt by about 150 students to literally rush the December 31 ceremony in mid-stream and disrupt it. Several protesters were armed with Molotov cocktails and other weapons. The police conveniently let the protesters through their lines of control, but order was soon restored and the ceremony went on. We believed we carried out our mandate on that day in a way that sustained the dignity, discretion and magnanimity of the U.S.

Q: What was happening to the Zonians? Had they gone pretty much?

BECKER: Most of the Zonians, the most disgruntled of the long-term American residents of the canal zone, left after 1979 when the treaty came into being, after the fences had come down, Most went back to the United States. They had never thought Panama was their home anyway. Those that remained had integrated themselves into Panamanian society, married Panamanians, raised multi-cultural families, and made a home and a future for themselves. A surprising number of U.S. military personnel had served in Panama either a long time or several times, and had done the same, becoming a part of the new Panama. But the Zonians as an identifiable group and their mentality had all but disappeared in Panama by the late '90s, and there was no hint of the caste system that had existed as long as that fence, that wall was up between the Canal Zone and the Panamanian nation.

Q: Well, I would imagine that one of your biggest tasks following this turnover would be to monitor the situation and see whether all the accusations: that the Panamanians can't run this complicated thing, corruption, this must have been a major, however, brief on this part. Let me stop here.

Q: This is tape ten, side one with Rick Becker. Yes?

BECKER: This was a concern in some sectors in the United States, mainly political sectors and less so in the government where there was greater familiarity with how the canal was managed and how it was run. By the end of the canal period, over 90% of the workforce, including most of the senior managers, were Panamanians, and they had reached those positions of responsibility under U.S. oversight and control. If they were not fully capable of taking over the canal and running it, then it was our failure. It was not that the Panamanians were incapable of doing so. Those people who had any knowledge of the canal and its operations did not doubt that Panama was fully capable of running the canal. Indeed, after 1990 the canal administrator was a Panamanian and the deputy administrator was an American. The last administrator of the Panama Canal Commission, Alfredo Aleman, was ratified as the first administrator of the new Panama Canal Authority, an independent agency of the Panamanian government. The Panamanians did themselves credit around 1996 by passing an organic law that established the political autonomy, to the extent that that's possible in Panama, of the Panama Canal and its management. Although a board of directors with staggered terms named by the Panamanian president oversaw canal policy and operations, in fact the day-to-day management of the canal was in the hands of professional administrators, engineers, financial experts and technicians. The board had relatively little opportunity and perhaps little desire to micromanage the canal, and in most instances served as a buffer between the canal administration and a sometimes demanding and unreasonable Panamanian public.

The defense of the canal was another issue. Everybody realized that after 1999 there would not be an even symbolic presence of U.S. forces in Panama. One of my initial responsibilities when I got to Panama was to work with the Southern Command, which had already moved to Florida several years earlier, and the diverse commands still operating the canal area to ensure a smooth turnover of the last of our military installations to Panamanian control. All of the generals and the admirals who had testified before Congress during the 1970s that, whether we had 12,000 or 20,000 or 40,000 troops in the canal zone, we would not be able to defend the canal against a whole range of potential threats. This was one of the compelling arguments that convinced Congress, by a bare majority, to approve the Panama Canal Treaty. That fact was imminently true in the year 2000, in the age of terrorism and unconventional warfare, when the canal had become an open piece of territory. The Panamanians were of course very active in trying to develop both sides of the canal economically. They scored some notable successes, but some of their projects didn't quite pan out. That the canal was in fact a major international resource, valuable both to the United States and to the world community, concerned us greatly from a security standpoint. As I said earlier, it was very difficult to get the U.S. military community and DOD particularly to focus on this ongoing interest in supporting Panama in the defense of the canal. After all, U.S. legislation implementing the Canal Treaty asserted the right and responsibility of the United States to defend the canal against any and all threatin perpetuity. The Panamanians were always uncomfortable with this unilateral U.S. interpretation, but in the end accepted it as a geopolitical reality they couldn't alter.

We had succeeded beyond our wildest expectations when we invaded Panama in '89, kicked out Noriega and his dictatorship and literally destroying the Panama Defense Forces, which was supposed to be the legacy military force that would defend the canal against conventional threats. There was no army in Panama. There is no armed military force in Panama. Instead, there are basically three police forces, a land force, a maritime service and an air service, the latter little more than a couple of small planes for medevac and surveillance purposes. There are no war fighters, no armed air force or navy. What resources did the Panamanians have to defend the canal after we left? The Canal Authority had an industrial-strength security system equivalent to what a large U.S. industry might maintain. It relied heavily on pre-registration of vessels planning to transit the canal and on electronics. By pre-registering vessels for transit, the Authority obtains important information on each vessel's registry, crew, cargo, origin and destination, which it can cross-check against other data bases. The canal is also lined with electronic sensors from one end of the canal to the other. However, there was really no response mechanism had they actually detected any potential threat to the canal other than to call on Panama's public order forces. The canal was open at any number of locations. It was theoretically possible, even conceivable, that a skilled, determined group of terrorists could sink a ship in one of the locks and put the canal out of operation for six months to a year or more. Or they could booby-trap a transiting vessel with toxic or nuclear material threatening large populations, or hijack a cruise ship and hold 1,500 or 2,000 tourists hostages. These were all scenarios which were well within the realm of possibility but which made the canal indefensible in a conventional or unconventional environment.

This was of some concern to those of us who were closest to the situation. The Panamanians who emerged from the ashes of Operation Just Cause made a commitment not to reestablish an armed force, which most Panamanians associated with the repressive policies of Manuel Noriega. Panamanians were generally united against reconstituting an army that might become a tool inn the hands of an authoritarian leader down the road. The Panamanians, as I said, were split on the question of a U.S. presence. Some wanted the U.S. to return officially at some point in time and take up our historic responsibilities for defending the canal. Others didn't want did not want any militarized force in Panama. Some reasoned that the reintroduction of a U.S. military force, with the concurrence of the Panamanian government, might provoke a terrorist group to target Panama or its canal as surrogates of the United States. If the American military were kept out, there would be no cause for international terrorists to target the canal, its users or Panama. One can see the flaws in this kind of thinking. The terrorist mind does not necessarily require a U.S. soldier as a provocation. The World Trade Center was a symbol of international capitalism. So is the Panama Canal.

Q: While you were there, did you have anything, I mean let's say they took a cruise ship or something, was there any police force or something that had SWAT teams or something of that nature?

BECKER: The Panamanian public forces did develop fairly effective crowd control and public order shock forces. However, it was very difficult to organize specialized training and exercises for the public forces with the United States or with other countries, such as Israel or the UK, where this kind of expertise was concentrated in the military. We worked fairly closely with the Panamanians to improve their intelligence gathering so that they could detect potential conspiracies that might be aimed at the canal. We were well aware, as were the Panamanians, that leftist guerrillas from Colombia had infiltrated the southeastern part of the country, the Darien province that bordered Colombia, and had established outposts there. We were also well aware that Panama was a major, if not the major, outpost of Colombians in exile. Neither the Panamanian nor Colombian governments had any idea of how many exiled or expatriate Colombians were actually living in Panama. These people, perhaps numbering in the tens of thousands, were trying to carry on or to continue their business activities and maintain contact with their families in Colombia, but had found it too dangerous to actually live there. Living in Panama City or one of the other major cities in Panama was the next best thing.

As the problems of Colombia worsened, and as we intensified our training of Colombian armed forces and police to go after the drug lords, the leftist insurgents and the right-wing paramilitaries, Panama became much more important to some of us at least as a potential staging area for these violent groups. Panama was an area where these groups had established branch offices, shall we say, were collecting money or were operating businesses, the profits of which were funneled back into Colombia. These Colombian groups were deeply engaged in international criminal activities of various sorts, particularly drug and arms trafficking, auto theft, smuggling and all kinds of profit making activities. Panama was a safe haven in one respect, because the Colombians who were conducting illegal activities in Panama did not want to upset the apple cart by targeting Panamanians or others on Panamanian soil, but simply wanted to use Panama as a base of operations, a very profitable base of operations. We felt that one of the best and most effective ways of strengthening Panama as a bulwark against international terrorism and terrorism was to help train their law enforcement community - their land forces, their maritime service and their air forces - as well as their intelligence gathering capability and judicial process, because the fault lines were in the area of criminal conspiracy rather than actual military threat.

Q: Did we have any joint exercises with what remained of the Panamanians to rapid response teams? I'm talking about plans to do this with the Panamanians.

BECKER: Initially we did not. Of course, the U.S. had a whole range of contingency plans for intervention in Panama. There was a conviction in our military establishment that if there were truly a serious crisis, we doubted the Panamanians' ability to deal with it and we also doubted that the Panamanians would invite us in to help out. But since neither Washington nor the Panamanians in the immediate post-treaty period seemed to have an interest in discussing renewed or updated bilateral security ties, we at the embassy initiated a major review of what would be necessary to reestablish a solid, constructive and forward looking security relationship with Panama. We determined that it would be necessary to establish a legal framework for the reintroduction of U.S. forces. There was no basis in the Panamanian constitution or law, or in any existing bilateral instrument, to allow a member of the U.S. forces to enter Panama for exercises, training, joint operations or even humanitarian activities. So we set about very early in the year 2000 to try and convince both governments to agree to a legal instrument, an agreement because a treaty would have had to go through a very public and presumably contentious ratification process in Panama. We wanted some kind of agreement that would permit temporary visits and deployments of U.S. military forces for whatever purpose the two countries could agree to.

One of the strongest proponents of such an agreement happened to be the new Panama Canal Authority, because it recognized that cooperation with the U.S. military was deeply embedded in their own history. They also recognized that the U.S. military had expertise in key areas that they wanted to continue. First of all, they wanted to renew a cooperative relationship with the Army Corps of Engineers, not soldiers with weapons, but a technical relationship which the Corps had had throughout the history of the Panama Canal. The Corps built the canal and the Corps was there at every turn to help the administrator and the managers of the canal with watershed, water resource management and canal maintenance problems. The new Panama Canal Authority wanted the Corps back in Panama for its technical expertise and for its image, since the Corps would give the new Panama Canal Authority credibility in the eyes of the international maritime community. Finally, the administration of the canal was looking forward to a major expansion of the waterway. The canal was being used close to capacity and, lacking the capacity for expansion to meet the future needs of the international maritime community, other competing transportation facilities would become more viable and economical. Looking down the road 25, 30, 40 years, the Canal Authority administrators recognized that the canal had to grow or would die. The Army Corps of Engineers was seen as a key planner and engineering brain trust to ensure the canal's profitable future. The Authority thus pressed the Panamanian government to come to some arrangement so that the Corps of Engineers could return to Panama.

We also had established a position in the '90s for a marine safety advisor to the Panama Canal, which was held by a fairly senior U.S. Coast Guard officer. The position was part of the embassy country team, but the Canal Authority wished to maintain that position much for the same reason that they wanted to maintain a relationship with the Army Corps of Engineers - because it gave the canal credibility in the larger maritime community. Practically speaking, this could have been done by a private sector contractor, but it was important for the Canal Authority to maintain that link to the U.S. military establishment. We needed to find a way to make that possible over the long term.

From the moment that we broached our concept and goal with Washington, DOD insisted on a formal treaty. It took several months to convince Defense Department officials that they could not have a security cooperation treaty, or even a conventional military relationship with Panama, because Panama didn't have and didn't want a military. Politically, a new security treaty with Panama would smack too much of another Panama Canal Treaty, and this would never fly with the Panamanians who would have to see to its public ratification. But we said DOD could have something which could lead to that kind of relationship and which was sufficiently flexible to permit a wide range of joint military-type activities. What finally pushed our negotiations with Panama to allow temporary U.S. military deployments into the realm of acceptance was the inability of the Minnesota National Guard to maintain a "good uncle" support relationship with a local Panamanian elementary school. The Guard had visited Panama every year since the mid-'90s and delivered computers, books and sports equipment and even helped to build new classroom buildings. It was a public relations bonanza for the school, for the Minnesota Guard and for the U.S. military. Once the canal treaty was terminated, there was no way that the Minnesota Guard could come back and continue its relationship.

Well, we finally negotiated a bilateral temporary visit agreement, less than two years after the Canal Treaty was terminated and a great deal quicker than anyone expected. (By comparison, it took the U.S. and the Philippines over seven years to allow U.S. troops back in that country after we closed down Clark AFB and Subic Bay Naval Base.) The embassy would make case-by-case requests to the Panamanian foreign ministry for visits by contingents for U.S. military personnel, specifying the purpose, duration, whether the troops would be in uniform or carry arms, and any other conditions that would govern the visit. One of the first contingents to visit Panama under the new agreement was the Minnesota Guard, which visited the school, in uniform, and presented the staff and students with new computers and software. The event got a lot of press play, focusing on the non-military face of the U.S. armed forces. We also brought in medical assistance teams, hydrographic researchers, and a large number of non-uniformed military officers and DOD civilians to carry out a range of non-defense related activities with Panamanian institutions and communities. With every visit, we built a new receptivity in the minds of the Panamanians for a modern security relationship with Panama. Of course, we also brought in teams to help train Panamanians in building emergency response mechanisms that could be used not only for natural disasters but for terrorist crises, as well as to train up police and intelligence operatives to be an effective first line of defense if there were ever a threat against Panamanian sovereignty or security of the canal. The temporary deployment agreement was one of my proudest achievements as chargï¿½ d'affaires. It was called the Becker-Aleman agreement in the Panamanian media (I signed it along with Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Aleman). The agreement was hailed by most Panamanians as a new, positive chapter in U.S.-Panama relations, while critics pilloried our two governments as having sold out Panama's sovereignty and independence once again.

Q: What happened after 9/11?

BECKER: I was chargï¿½ d'affaires by then. After the change of administrations in January 2001, the new Republican leadership understandably had a lot of early priorities, but finding a new ambassador for Panama was apparently not one of them. So I became chargï¿½ d'affaires when Simon Ferro, the Clinton administration's appointee, departed post in March. I was unaware at the time that I would remain chargï¿½ until I left post 16 months later. A few days after the attack on 9/11/01, I was in Washington on consultations and received a call from SOUTHCOM in Miami. They wanted to send in a military team to survey the canal's vulnerabilities for defense against a possible terrorist attack. Obviously the canal remained a potential target on SOUTHCOM's and DOD's scope. A DOD threat assessment had not been done since the mid '90s, when we controlled the canal, and an update was sorely needed. I agreed in principle, but said I would have to discuss the matter first with the Panamanian president and foreign minister. Our temporary forces deployment agreement was not yet in place, and indeed negotiations were at a particularly delicate stage. We had received an outpouring of sympathy and support after 9/11 from the Panamanian government and public at large. One of the first condolence calls I had received on 9/11 was from the President Moscoso, who said, "The United States is my second country and you have my full support." I took her at her word. I said we needed to fortify the embassy against a possible attack. We wanted to close off the streets surrounding the embassy, including some major thoroughfares. We might need the government's permission to build some new jersey barriers on the embassy perimeter. We were going to need Panama's help to defend against a threat that we could not assess at that time. Nobody knew after 9/11, after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, how widespread or imminent the danger was, but we were taking precautions on a worldwide basis. My responsibility was to see to the well-being of 19,000 U.S. citizens who lived in Panama, as well as the security of the entire U.S. mission. U.S. strategic interests in Panama also included protection of other critical targets, first and foremost the canal.

I was quite aware of Panamanian sensitivities about relations with the U.S. military, and I wanted to move on SOUTHCOM's initiative with appropriate speed. Panamanians were very much concerned after 9/11 that the canal would be a target, but many felt that the canal would be targeted by terrorists only to the extent that it was still identified with the United States. There was a small but disturbing groundswell from some influential Panamanians that Panama had to assert its territory, and especially the canal, as neutral ground. They argued that Panama would not take a soft line with terrorists, but should not openly side with the United States. However, neutrality at this moment was unacceptable to the U.S. We needed to rally the world against international terrorism, and we needed Panama's loud voice and active cooperation on multiple fronts. By the time I got back to Panama two days after the call from SOUTHCOM, I found that somebody in Miami had already signed off on an executive order that began the mobilization of the DOD team to travel to Panama, even without formal clearance from either the embassy or the Panamanian government. SOUTHCOM's military planners had heard what they wanted to hear and gave no regard to the sensitivities and qualifications I had outlined to them in Washington. I immediately called the SOUTHCOM commander, and he immediately understood the situation. He told me he would put things on hold until I worked out modalities with the Panamanian authorities and gave him a formal green light. It took me several days to work out an arrangement acceptable to the Panamanians. The first step was the travel of senior Panamanian officials - the foreign minister, chief of national security, and minister of government who oversaw all of the public forces - to SOUTHCOM, where they were briefed on the proposed survey of canal security. While in Miami, the Panamanians and SOUTHCOM worked out the terms of engagement, if you will, which permitted a military team to come in and assist the Panamanian government to conduct the survey. It was important that they not conduct a survey on behalf of SOUTHCOM or the U.S. government, but that their visit be couched as assistance to the Panamanian government, which had requested such a survey. Through a step-by-step approach, building on the common interests of the U.S. and Panama, the embassy was able to overcome an initial logjam and potential misunderstandings in a way that avoided a great deal of backlash from vocal elements in the Panamanian population.

Q: Well, then how did you find the government of Panama at the time from the president on down?

BECKER: The Panamanian government that I dealt with then is now out of office. We at the embassy, and in Washington, shared the general perception that that government, although basically pro-U.S., was inept, corrupt, and largely devoid of direction or vision. President Moscoso was the widow of a longtime Panamanian political caudillo, who had been deposed by the military four times after having been democratically elected president. She had been groomed as a First Lady and probably perceived herself as the rightful heir to privilege, even though she herself was not a child of privilege. She was narrowly partisan, and proved incapable of reaching across partisan political lines within Panama in order to build a consensus. She treated government as a source of patronage and self-aggrandizement for herself and her party. She had a few very good people working for her, but she also had some advisors and ministers with their own personal agendas. It was exceedingly difficult to establish a relationship with that government based on trust, reliability and mutual interest between sovereign states. I may seem unusually harsh towards that government, but it was extraordinarily difficult at times to get things done, even when we agreed on a common outcome. Frequently our most reliable, forward-leaning interlocutors were either not in positions of highest authority or their good-faith efforts were stymied by the machinations of others. The embassy tried to work closely with the maritime authority director to strengthen port security in the post-9/11 period, but we continually ran afoul of self-interested second-echelon appointees to the authority whose primary goal was to extract personal profits from the transit of vessels and the registration of Panamanian flag vessels. Panama has the largest merchant fleet in the world, and the sale of registrations is a major revenue generator for the government and for the officials who do the paperwork. It was very difficult to get the Panamanians to clamp down on their own registration process so that it could not be corrupted or used for nefarious purposes.

That said, we established some very fruitful law enforcement relationships in other areas. The embassy had six U.S. law enforcement agencies under its umbrella, and they generally worked very effectively and harmoniously with their professional counterparts in Panama. Despite the passive resistance of the Panamanian immigration service to fundamental reforms, we eventually made progress in helping the Panamanians to strengthen airport surveillance and security. The Panamanians were highly embarrassed when three Irish Republic Army activists transited through Panama and ended up in Colombia, where they advised the leftist guerrillas in bomb making and other techniques that the Colombians had not used in the past. The Panamanian authorities had no way of knowing who was crossing their territory and for what purpose. Panama's international airport was a transit point for international flights to at least five, maybe seven, U.S. cities. We knew that ships transiting the canal also presented a potential threat to U.S. ports, and we worked very vigorously with private port operators, some of whom were American firms, to tighten port security measures. We worked very closely with the Panamanians to clamp down on drug and stolen auto trafficking through Panamanian territory, and we negotiated several agreements that strengthened cooperation between our law enforcement agencies. The U.S. Coast Guard was a major player in developing the capabilities of Panama's maritime service, During my tenure in Panama, we transferred a half dozen used U.S. Coast Guard frigates that were excess to our own needs. With our assistance, the Panamanian maritime service became one of the most credible law enforcement units of its kind in the region, even though the political leadership above that institution was less than reliable.

Q: Did you find other than not getting an ambassador, did the change of American administration have any impact on policy towards Panama?

BECKER: There was a general feeling in Washington when I went down to Panama, and when my political ambassador went down to Panama a few months earlier, that nobody wanted to hear about any problems in that country. I was repeatedly reminded that there were enough other hot spots occupying Washington's attention, and once the canal treaty issues had been settled, that policymakers would not have to worry about Panama. In fact, a State Department inspection in 2000 all but reaffirmed the conclusion of a previous inspection in the mid-90s that Embassy Panama could be dramatically downsized to the level of a third- or fourth-tier diplomatic mission. By contrast, we in Panama perceived a broad, modern and potentially dangerous threat environment posed by international criminal organizations, and we tried to raise Washington's awareness of the need to address alien smuggling, financial crimes, auto theft, and port security deficiencies closer to their sources. We were frequently met with deaf ears. To some degree, we were able to forge relationships and take initiatives in Panama because nobody else was interested in doing so. But we failed to make significant progress on many fronts because most initiatives of this type require resources and some degree of active policy attention at the transnational level.

For example, nobody in Washington in the days before 9/11 was at all interested in the issue of alien smuggling. We were. Panama was a center for alien smuggling from the Andean countries, from the Middle East and Asia. Large numbers of mainland Chinese passed through Panama, where very well organized rings operating throughout Central America sent them as indentured labor in the United States. We recognized before 9/11 that, at the worst, these smuggled aliens could be terrorists intent on harming the U.S. In the summer of 2000, Ambassador Ferro and I organized a regional conference of U.S. officials from Washington and our embassies from Guatemala in the north to Peru in the south. The conference produced a regional action plan that, unfortunately for all, failed to win either friends, endorsements or follow-up in Washington. On our own, Embassy Panama proceeded to create, for the first time in the region, a bilateral counter-alien smuggling task force and a work plan with Panama that we hoped would be replicated in other countries in the region. Effective responses to alien smuggling, like a host of international criminal activities, cannot be addressed on a single country basis.

It appeared that the State Department professionals lacked confidence in my ambassador, whom they apparently considered volatile, not politically savvy, and out of tune with Washington political realities. It is true Simon tended to go his own way on occasions. He did not understand some of fine points of Washington bureaucratic politics, and he was impatient with some of the constraints that Washington said were operating, why they couldn't or wouldn't do things that made sense in the field. He had a running feud with the Justice Department as well as with key senior officers in WHA over our ultimately successful effort to cancel the U.S. visas of Panama's ex-president Perez Balladares and other officials of his administration for their complicity in alien smuggling activities. In short, he never got the support that he and his initiatives probably deserved. I inherited some of that resentment from Washington's worst side. I was not the kind of DCM that some in WHA expected me to be. For one thing, I felt my primary duty was to advise and support my ambassador as best I could, rather than trying to keep him in line as several WHA naysayers wanted me to do. I think this tension played out in a number of ways that were inimical to the good working relationship we had with Panama as well as with our ability to carry out a vigorous policy that was ahead of what Washington was prepared to consider. Before 9/11 you could not get law enforcement money from Congress unless it was for counter-drug programs. But drugs were not the big problem in Panama. Alien smuggling, auto theft, money laundering and potential terrorist inroads were.

Q: Yes?

BECKER: Panama, with a large international banking presence, had traditionally been a center for money laundering. Clearly in the post 9/11 period there was a great deal of attention being paid to financial flows by terrorist organizations. We hammered out an agreement with Panama to exchange confidential financial information on suspect monetary flows through the Panamanian banking system. We trained the Panamanians to make the system work. It became a model for other countries in the region, but it was mainly because Treasury was the lead agency and was interested. State was not particularly interested, however.

An even more egregious example of the Department's tendency to think and act small was right after 9/11, when I was chargï¿½ d'affaire. The Consular Affairs (CA) bureau under Assistant Secretary Mary Ryan sent out hastily drafted instructions to the field for interviewing Middle Eastern applicants for U.S. visas. Already sensitized to the connection between alien smuggling and terrorism, we determined that the new guidelines required a much more rigorous interviewing profile and technique to uncover possible terrorist links. I had my consular section chief craft a cable to the Department recommending appropriate changes. CA's reaction, sent off-the-record, was astounding. We were all but accused of insubordination for having sought to improve on a Department product, and via a front-channel cable for all to see. We later learned reliably that senior officials in CA also intended to blacklist our consular chief, possibly ruining his career. When I couldn't get the WHA bureau to intercede with CA in defense of the post, I at least felt compelled to protect my consular chief. I nominated him for AFSA's annual constructive dissent award, which he won. Eventually CA modified its guidance to the field along the lines we had recommended, but the post's image in CA and WHA remained under a cloud.

Q: By the time you left there when?

BECKER: I left Panama in the summer of 2002. We still had no ambassador.

Q: Did you feel that there was a new assistant secretary for the Western Hemisphere affairs and all, did you feel you sort of alluded a distancing, I mean you just didn't belong? Was there a change in attitude there?

BECKER: There was a general turnover in the WHA front office about the same time that I left post, so I did not have the benefit of working with the new WHA front office. I have no doubt that some of the bad blood that bubbled up with the previous WHA leadership poisoned the well for an onward assignment there. My one advocate and friend in the bureau, my former ambassador Lino Gutierrez, was the principal DAS in WHA at this time, but he was unable to secure a good onward assignment for me. In the end, I washed my hands of Panama and WHA, and the bureau obviously washed its hands of me. I did not lobby for any senior position in the bureau, nor did anyone in WHA try to recruit me for an appropriate vacancy there. While several of my contemporaries were being promoted to SFS minister-counselor, I remained at the counselor rank and could not effectively compete for the more desirable senior slots. I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to be a political advisor (POLAD) at the Pentagon, working under the aegis of the Political-Military Affairs bureau.

Q: Then you did POLAD work for how long?

BECKER: I did POLAD work for two years.

Q: How did that go?

BECKER: From a personal standpoint, it was a tremendously eye-opening and rewarding experience. From a professional standpoint, it was one of the most frustrating two years of my career.

Q: What was frustrating about it?

BECKER: Most frustrating was the deep cultural and political divide between the State Department and the Defense Department, which during this period became even more attenuated over the decision to go to war in Iraq. There was an ingrained lack of understanding and appreciation in both State and Defense for what role the POLAD could play in assisting the army chief of staff in making his policy decisions. There's the sheer weight of the Pentagon bureaucracy, which makes it very difficult for an individual to make any serious impact. The POLAD is on detail to the principal, the service chief in this case, not the institution as a whole. During his tour of duty, he no longer represents or answers to the State Department. Basically unattached, his only cachet is that he's a personal advisor to the chief of staff. He doesn't belong to any of the big analytical or operational units that support the senior Army staff. He's not automatically included in the inner policy circle unless the chief wants him to be. Within the Pentagon, the making and the conduct of foreign military policy is not a high priority for the service chief. The primary responsibility of the service chief - whether Army, Marines, Air Force or Navy - is to supply the trained manpower and whatever materiel and logistical support the forces in the field need to carry out their responsibilities. Foreign policy is not usually central to this mission.

Q: You were there at a time when it got very political about when the Army chief of staff testified that it would take 300,000 troops to go to finish the job in Iraq and Rumsfeld essentially disavowed him. Did you get involved in that?

BECKER: I didn't get involved with that analysis before it became public. The issue I became most involved with - and it was only after a lot of strenuous lobbying to gain admittance- was the Defense Secretary's proposal for worldwide military reassignment and retrenchment, called "global force realignment" in DOD jargon. This was a grand plan conceived by Rumsfeld and company to pull most of our troops out of Korea and Europe, to station more troops back in the States, and to replace large overseas formations configured primarily for defense and training with smaller rapid deployment units, some of which would be forward-based closer to areas of potential conflict and instability. It would require establishing new military relationships with countries in those forward areas, countries which I argued at the time were not likely to be as hospitable or politically stable as the ones we were deserting. Most of the DOD planning took place without any real State Department input on the foreign policy and strategic implications of these changes. When my service POLAD colleagues and I saw this emerging as a major policy issue, we offered our views and assessments not as advocates for the State Department, but as advocates for including the trained foreign policy specialist and diplomat in the policy deliberations. Needless to say, there were those within the Pentagon who welcomed our fresh views and those who didn't.

I worked for two chiefs of staff during my two year detail. The first year was under General Eric Shinseki, who made that historic public statement that it would take several hundred thousand troops and several years of sustained commitment to pacify Iraq and that we should plan on that. Subsequently, I was POLAD to General Peter Schoomaker, a very different chief of staff who was brought out of retirement to succeed Shinseki. The feud between Shinseki and Rumsfeld and between the Army and the political leadership in DOD was palpable throughout my two years in the Pentagon.

Q: Civilian political leadership.

BECKER: Civilian leadership. The feud was deep and abiding well before I came on board.

Q: Well, I mean, did you sense any sense of either frustration or resentment about going into Iraq that it wasn't well planned? I'm not talking about the war plan, I'm talking about the aftermath. Was the military concerned about that?

BECKER: Whatever I was allowed to see that came out of the office of the Secretary of Defense had virtually no planning for a post-conflict military role in Iraq. The premises, which were highly questionable even at that time, was that we would be met by a largely receptive population, that we could basically remove Saddam and his supporters through high-tech surgical means without destroying essential human and physical infrastructure, that a successor Iraqi government would emerge and that we would be able to withdraw in short order. The concept and the experience that had guided Army planning and culture was that "boots on the ground" would be necessary for an indeterminate period of time after active hostilities subsided. The introduction of large scale civilian humanitarian and development assistance would have to await establishment of a high degree of order on the ground. Of course, this view was specific to the Army and not strongly shared by the other services. General Shinseki had been the head of NATO forces in Bosnia in the '90s, and he was well aware of the fact that active military operations are frequently going even while the foundations for peace and order are being established. He had dealt with political advisors, ambassadors and foreign governments during this period. His experience made him a hard-headed realist about the need for sufficient and varied military forces on the ground to ensure a smooth transition to civilian rule. He knew the pace and the intensity of that transition could not be predicted ahead of time. The military had always prepared for the worst-case scenario and this is what he was calling for in Iraq.

Q: Were you there when we went in?

BECKER: I was in Washington when we invaded.

Q: Yes, by this time Shinseki had been removed and retired?

BECKER: No. We invaded in March and he retired in June. I was in on a lot of the preparatory coalition building because it was a key to our war planning. We had to establish firm, reliable means of getting our troops to the conflict zone and of having allied troops alongside us in the staging areas and in Iraq, so that we could have the best chance of success that Rumsfeld insisted upon. So we were negotiating with the Brits, Italians, Poles, with Romania and Bulgaria, and we were negotiating with Turkey, all key NATO allies. Our plan required Turkish territory and Turkish cooperation to establish a northern front to complement the southern forces that would attack Iraq from the Gulf. I was instrumental in getting Shinseki linked up with Undersecretary of State Mark Grossman, who had been ambassador to Turkey and who understood as much about what motivated the Turks as anybody at State. Shinseki knew the head of the Turkish joint chiefs, who had been the army chief, I believe, when Shinseki was assigned to NATO. However, he did not know the new Turkish army chief and was uncertain about current dynamics. This speaks to the importance the U.S. Army places on establishing relationships with counterpart army chiefs and military institutions. They can trade on those international relationships at critical times. The contacts between Shinseki and Grossman were a very effective reality check as to whether and how much cooperation with Turkey would be possible in the run-up to our invasion. I got into the habit of sending weekly e-mail updates on worldwide diplomatic and political-military developments directly to General Shinseki. I gleaned these reports from the State Department's cable traffic and internal memos, to which I had access but which the Army staff didn't, and I picked up items of interest from the corridors and offices at State where I spent time. Shinseki was very good about replying to all of my bulletins, showing that he took an interest in broader interagency and global issues. Even a short reply - "Thanks," "This is interesting," or "Would you please follow up on this and get me more information?"

What I found out after only a short time in the Pentagon was that the service chiefs of staff who sit on the Joint Chiefs of Staff are privy to heavily filtered and edited briefing materials on their decision agenda and on related world affairs. The limited amount of information contained in their briefing books for these sessions is understandable, given the number of military issues they must normally juggle in their 24/7 workload, but it is apparently very difficult for any of the chiefs to have a very good feel for a related foreign policy issue of some complexity. However, they are supposed to advise the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who in turn advises the secretary of defense and the president, on the impact and implications of military policies and decisions. The Pentagon is a nearly impregnable institution that resists outside-generated information at every turn. The POLAD has his own sources of information and is not controlled by anybody in terms of how and what he presents to his chief of staff. One day in November I was reading through the traffic.

Q: November of?

BECKER: Of 2002. I saw a brief report on the recently held Turkish national elections, in which a religious party - and I knew nothing about Turkey at the time - had been elected to power and was already showing signs of friction with the military leadership. Knowing that we were planning a major initiative to get Turkey on board as a staging area and cooperating ally, we were watchfully waiting to see how developments in Iraq would take place. I sent Shinseki a little note saying it looks very much like there was a split between civilian and military leaders in Turkey that could complicate our ongoing negotiations and our strategizing for Iraq. I promised him I would follow up with contacts at State to learn whatever I could about this development. It turned out to be as bad if not worse than anything we could have imagined. Though the Turks were our allies in NATO, they refused to allow U.S. forces stationed in Turkey or U.S. forces that we wanted to bring in from outside to establish staging positions on the border with Iraq. The Turks also had their own intelligence operations in northern Iraq, where there was a large Turkish minority, the Turkomans, who had suffered discrimination by both Iraqi and Kurdish overlords. The Turks were manipulating political events in northern Iraq in a way that made our own military planning difficult to do because we were not apprised of these other activities and agendas.

Because we could not negotiate a common agenda with Turkey, we were unable to establish a northern front as originally planned. The Army had to divert major resources intended for Turkey to other staging areas in the region. When the invasion finally occurred, we had to airlift troops from the south into Mosul and Kurdistan in the north in order to establish a credible presence there, but this effort made post-conflict stabilization that much more difficult. We didn't have the right array of forces on the ground and we didn't have the right alliances in place by the time the president gave the order to attack. I was in a very good position to help my general feed into the strategic process by pointing out some of the difficulties and complexities that the Army's and DOD's military planners, and even the Central Command's military planners, had not folded into their overall knowledge base.

Q: Well, did you get any feel for a significant split between let's say the political planners headed by Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz and the military about this how to go in, the mix of forces?

BECKER: From the Army's standpoint, the Air Force and the Navy were the favored services. They represented the high-tech future of the U.S. military in Rumsfeld's view. The Army seemed to be mired in the past and seemed to be the most resistant of the services to major reform, even though it was Shinseki who back in 1999 coined the term "transformation" and started a process of changing the Army's culture and realigning its forces and capabilities to meet the demands of future conflicts, which would require greater mobility and forward projection. Rumsfeld came into office in 2001 and adopted transformation as his own watchword, but was intent on moving much farther and faster than the Army was already doing. He chose to do so by fiat rather than bringing the culture of the military along. Shinseki was quite a student of leadership, and closely studied the decisions of other public and private sector leaders faced with the need to modernize their organizations. He understood that a commander could order his troops over the hill and they would follow because they were under orders to do so. But the essential weakness in this approach is that too many commanders cannot lead, cannot inspire a fundamental change in the organizational culture that will provide a more solid impetus for the troops to follow and contribute creatively to the success of the mission. At Shinseki's retirement ceremony, he spoke of the distinctions between command and leadership. He said that many are given the authority for command, but very few are true leaders who could inspire and change mindsets. He was making a very pointed gesture toward DOD's civilian leadership, who by the way were not invited to the event. The current situation within DOD has always pained me, because I believe very strongly that civilian leadership of the armed forces is a foundation of our democratic system. But here we have a civilian leadership that appears not to have listened to the professional military, or the professional diplomat, on key issues relating to war and peace, and most importantly the conduct of diplomacy that supports successful war. As I have learned through a 30 year career, diplomacy is our first line of national defense. It's what saves lives, if and when you finally have to make that fateful decision to commit military forces.

Q: How did Schoomaker fit into this? I mean where was he coming from?

BECKER: It appeared that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz had a great deal of difficulty in identifying an active-duty four-star or even a three-star general who could or who would succeed Shinseki. When Shinseki retired in June 2003, at the end of his four years in office, there was still no successor named. General Jack Keane, the vice chief of staff, agreed to stay on temporarily as the acting Army chief until a new chief was named. Two months later, in August, retired four-star general Peter Schoomaker was unveiled as the new chief of staff of the Army. A lot of people suspected that he would not have the allegiance of the Army leadership or ranks, but that was not the case. He had a very distinguished military record, principally in the Special Forces, and presumably this was seen by the civilian leadership as the kind of transformational model the Army needed at the time. The civilians felt the Army needed a leader who was not wedded to the armor or the light infantry or the conventional forces, but who was highly attuned to unconventional forms of warfare, who appreciated the role of technology, and who needed to imbue the Army from top to bottom with a new ethos. So Schoomaker was brought in. He seemed to be accepted readily by the entire active-duty Army leadership, although he was brought in specifically to do a job that Rumsfeld had defined. He made it very clear at his first general staff meeting that he was not merely following marching orders from Rumsfeld, but was completely attuned to Rumsfeld's priorities and to what needed to be done to bring the Army into the 21st century. He also offered the still dubious proposition that conducting wartime operations and transforming the Army at the same time could be an advantage, since Congress was now providing additional resources for human and weapons development.

Q: How did that work for you as a POLAD officer? Did you feel he was most receptive?

BECKER: I had encountered problems at times gaining access to Shinseki, but we had found a way to work with each other. I think he genuinely appreciated my role on his staff, and he did make use of my capabilities and the resources I could muster. I traveled with him on his plane around the world to meet with his national counterpart army chiefs, except into combat zones or to visit the troops. Our travel together was an opportunity for face time. We got to know each other, and my wife got to know his wife. Schoomaker had had State-assigned POLADs when he was at the joint Special Operations Command (SOCOM) in Tampa and when he was the head of the Army's Special Forces Command at Fort Bragg, and they thought very highly of him in those contexts. But he seemed to have no interest in or regard for the POLAD position in the Pentagon, or appreciation of the value added that I could bring to the job. There's a bit of contrast here, because his vice chief of staff, General George Casey, appreciated having a POLAD around. General Casey and I had more substantive conversations than I did with General Schoomaker. It was exceedingly difficult to break into Schoomaker's inner circle and make my presence and my value known to the general. I did not travel with him on his plane where my services were needed. I took commercial flights and was expected to be at our destination when he arrived, along with other members of the Army support staff. We had no real face time to get to know each other, and I had no chance to assess his needs. I recalled that Shinseki had commented to me, before he knew who would replace him, "You know, the danger always exists that the new chief of staff will come in and immediately get wrapped up by the five walls of the Pentagon and with Pentagon-specific issues. He will be driven by a wholly Pentagon agenda for the Army chief, which is narrowly restricted to acting as an agent for supplying the strategists and the war fighters in the field, and he will fail to establish a vision for the army outside of that existence. The new chief will have to be alert to this bias and resist it." Schoomaker did not resist the bias. His agenda did not include the international dimension that the POLAD and indeed a significant element of the Army staff could bring to the table.

Q: Just one further question on this, while you were POLAD I take it you would go over to the Department and walk the halls and talk to people. During the time they were building up to this Iraq war, were you sensing a feeling of frustration in the State Department that they were out of the decision making process?

BECKER: Very much so. State was clearly out of the decision making loop on preparations for the Iraq war. State was out of the loop on the proposed realignment of military forces worldwide, which had significant diplomatic as well as military implications. State was not part of any effective interagency consultative process on a whole range of political-military issues, whether it was dealing with terrorism in the Philippines or working to build political-military relationships with India and Pakistan. State desk officers and office directors, and even their DASes, were always eager to know what was going on in the Pentagon. However, I found very few people at fairly senior levels in the State Department who saw the POLAD as a potential resource to learn what was going on in the military mind. I have to say that while I worked for the Army chief of staff, and with the Army staff itself, I had few if any contacts with the office of the Secretary of Defense. I was as closed off to those civilian leadership decisions in the Pentagon as anybody in the State Department was. I could not shed any light at State on those decisions or on how they were reached, and I certainly didn't get any feedback from my bosses in the Army as to what additional information or guidance they might need to fortify their role as advisors to the Chairman of the JCS or the SecDef. I did not know if what I was doing for my chief was useful, was too little or too much, was on point or off-base. I was basically running on my own instincts and my own experience in scanning the world of intelligence and political-military information and feeding pieces of it to my boss. I was given very few taskings. The senior Army staff tended to leave me alone and seldom included me in their own deliberations. In response to my persistent request to be a part of the team, I eventually got a seat at the table at weekly staff meetings of the Army's intelligence directorate (G-2) and operations directorate (G-3), but these discussions were very operational and seldom turned on policy. It was an exceedingly frustrating period. Despite these constraints, State seemed blissfully unaware that the POLADs, even though they were not working for Colin Powell, could be useful information resources and conduits for expanding the diplomats' understanding of what was going on.

Q: Did you in your contacts at the State Department sense any frustration on the part of State Department people that were dealing, I'm particularly talking about the Iraq business and all, that Colin Powell didn't have, I mean was Colin Powell losing his, there was sort of an aura about him, but in a way his credibility because he didn't have clout or did that manifest itself?

BECKER: Although I did not work at State, I believe there was real concern at the working level there that the White House and the DOD civilian leaders were out of control and that State had been pushed into the policy wings. State officers continued to hold Colin Powell in high regard, and many hoped that he might bring sense and rationality and a clearer vision of where we were going, that he could pull this rabbit out of the hat. But Powell and Rumsfeld did not play on a level playing field. As admired as Powell was at State for garnering resources and modernizing the Department as a diplomatic institution, he could not give State and the diplomatic function equal weight to the military. Indeed, I believe the civilian leadership at DOD was the only part of the national security bureaucracy that was clearly directed, knew exactly what it wanted and precisely how to get there. And it had the resources to make things happen. In my view, Powell was too much of a deliberate, reactive person, juggling a host of international issues and crises beyond Iraq on a daily basis. He did not exhibit the same drive, commitment and single-mindedness as Rumsfeld and company, who were prepared to get down and dirty in the national security trenches. Powell was also served by policy advisors at State who offered him sharply different views on key international issues, which may have enriched State's internal debate but which the building was just incapable of turning into a coherent policy option for White House consumption. For instance, under secretary John Bolton was a strident voice in favor of "hard" diplomatic options, frequently overriding the views of Department professionals who pushed "soft diplomacy" and qualified their analyses and recommendations. I detected such frustrations from conversations with State's office directors and desk officers on Asian issues, particularly Korea and India-Pakistan dynamics, where they felt outgunned. In short, State was less directed, less determined, and less manipulative at the top than Defense. The White House, already inclined to look to the Pentagon for policy direction and rationale, seemed inattentive to Powell's attempts to offer diplomatic alternatives, which in any event were always nuanced and qualified.

Q: Well, Rick, this is probably a good place to stop. You retired after this, didn't you?

BECKER: I retired in the fall of 2004, right after finishing my two-year tour as political advisor and completing State's 60-day retirement and job search seminars. Somewhat to my surprise, the Army accorded me departing honors similar to those arranged for career flag officers who retire or transfer out. I was presented with the Army secretary's distinguished civilian service award. The departure ceremony was held in the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes, surrounded by the names of all of the Medal of Honor winners, and was presided over by Army vice chief of staff General Richard Cody in lieu of General Schoomaker, who as I recall was called away to a White House meeting. The PM bureau had arranged for me to receive the Secretary's career achievement award at the time of my retirement, and I asked that a senior bureau official present that award to me at the Pentagon ceremony. I orchestrated the event as a joint Army-State ceremony for the benefit of my Army hosts to show that these are two essential pillars of our national security system. It was a small gesture on my part, which I hoped would have some kind of ripple effect in terms of convincing each institution that the other merited greater interagency attention, dialogue and understanding. To State, I tried to highlight the value of having State political advisors working in the Pentagon. To the Army, I tried to underscore the value of including diplomatic expertise in their own policy calculations. For the sake of our national security, I continue to hope this message will get through.

End of interview