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

THOMAS F. JOHNSON

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Q: When and where were you born?

JOHNSON: I was born in Galesburg, Illinois in 1940. I had my first contact with foreigners when I was four. German prisoners of war were working at a local military hospital. My older brother and I sometimes went with our father to the hospital Sunday afternoons to watch the POWs play soccer. The German POWs worked in the laundry and as grounds keepers. The prisoners, mostly Afrikakorps veterans, led an existence of opulence compared to their comrades who were fighting in Russia and Italy.

Had a professor at the American University in Beirut not delayed his retirement for a year, I might have born in Lebanon. In the mid-30s my father was offered a job at AUB but the incumbent decided to teach for another year or so and by the time he called it quits, war clouds were looming over Europe and my parents decided to stay in this country. I sometimes wonder what a different life I might have had, had I grown up in the Middle East.

Q: First, could you tell me a little bit about your father and his family background?

JOHNSON: My father was a professor of classics at Knox College. He used to relax reading the works of the great Greek and Roman philosophers in the original. He was raised in the South of intellectual, but modest circumstances. He did his undergraduate work at the University of Michigan and his Masters and PhD at the University of Chicago. My mother was from a solidly middle class Irish Catholic family that lost everything in the depression because my grandfather made some bad investments. My mother was from the northern peninsula of Michigan. My parents met at tryouts for a Shakespeare play. They had a wonderful union which lasted more than 50 years.

My mother, a high school teacher, supported my father while he was doing his PhD. In about 1928 they moved to Asheville, North Carolina, where dad taught classics the elite Asheville prep school. My mother worked in the administration office until the birth of my older brother in 1937, then they moved to Galesburg in 1938.

Q: What do you know about your father and the Johnsons?

JOHNSON: The Johnsons landed in New Jersey in the late 1600s and settled in the South. One ancestor was William Ward Burroughs, a South Carolinian, who was the first Commandant of the Marine Corps. And he brought the Marines from Philadelphia, which was the capital at the time, to Washington. He also established the Marine Corps Band. Another ancestor, Richard Johnson, was vice president in the not very distinguished administration of Martin Van Buren. The family's political fortunes have declined steadily since he left office. My great grandfather was a town elder in Culpepper. Before the "War Between the States", he built the town hall and other major buildings. During the "War of Northern Aggression" he was a quartermaster for the Army of Northern Virginia- a civilian position. In 1865 his name was apparently on the Union army arrest list, and so he and his family fled to Buckingham County- south of Charlottesville- where my grandfather was born as a war refugee on May 31st. A few weeks after, as my auna professional southerner would say, "Robert E. Lee reunited the nation", an interesting interpretation of history. My southern kin always referred to our sixteenth president as "Mister Lincoln," not President Lincoln. Although my father was raised in Kentucky, he was never a true southerner.

Q: And on your mother's side, where did they come from?

JOHNSON: Most were Irish. Some came through Canada. The ones who came through Canada, the Fitzpatricks, are hard to trace. The Goodmans arrived in 186two brothers and the mother who died and was buried at sea off the coast of Long Island. The film "The Gangs of New York" is cogent to our family because as they arrived - it was before Ellis Island - and stepped off the boat, they were given two papers to sign: One was their immigration papers and the other was for enlistment in the Union Army. They said they wanted no part of the war. And brother one went off to dig gold in Colorado and was never heard from again. My great grandfather, the other brother, made his way to northern Michigan to build the railroad during the Civil War. The railroad provided a steady supply of iron ore to the steel mills of Indiana and Illinois when the Great Lakes were frozen. My maternal grandfather owned a lumber mill at Little Lake.

Q: Knox College, what sort of school was it?

JOHNSON: It is a small liberal arts school in Galesburg, Illinois. Dad was called there by an Carter Davidson, an old friend of his from high school. We lived there from 1939 to 1948. During World War II the college trained men for the Navy. After the war my father and his colleagues had the great pleasure of teaching the students who were in college on the GI Bill. According to my father, these were the most serious students he ever had.

Q: Did any of his students join the Foreign Service?

JOHNSON: One, Joe Sisco, who was one of our most senior officers. He made his career in Washington. I met him when I was a junior officer and reminded him about the time he and his fraternity brothers at TKE placed a bucket of water over a door expecting a fellow student to enter the room. The next person through the door was Professor Norman Johnson who was drenched. Suppressing his laughter, Sisco remembered the event all too well and asked me to tell my dad that he remained contrite.

Q: When you were in Galesburg, you were just starting school. Were you a reader from the beginning?

JOHNSON: Actually, I remember when I started reading the summer of about third grade. We were in Frankfort, Michigan, and my mother took me to the town library. I wasn't much interested in reading, but the librarian asked, "What do you really like?" I said, "Raccoons." She said, "Well, I have a book on raccoons." So she gave me a book called "Ricky and Rocky, the Raccoons" and I was enthralled. I've been an avid reader ever since. That kindly librarian enriched the lives of many local and summer residents. There is a tree dedicated to her outside the library.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JOHNSON: I had two brothers- one older Alan- one younger Bruce.

Q: What was your home life? Did you sit around the dinner table and hash over the events of the day?

JOHNSON: We had a different sort of dinner table from most families. My parents would read passages from the Old Testament or something else "enlightening". It often bored my brothers and me. My father insisted on good table manners and a crashing hand came out of nowhere for stuffing your mouth or making a disrespectful remark. He was very strict but he was also totally devoted to his family, particularly to the education of his three unruly sons.

My mother was an English teacher and was easier to manipulate. She loved to read psychology and let us get away with a lot of stuff my father would not tolerate.

Q: What about religion? Was Knox a religious school?

JOHNSON: Not as I recall. My mother, as I said, was Irish Catholic, and I was raised in the Catholic Church although my father was an ordained minister. I was confirmed in the Catholic Church but left it in college, primarily over the issue of birth control. My maternal grandmother was a very solid Irish Catholic. I remember when she would lose something, such as her glasses, she would pray to Saint Anthony, and my father would get down on his hands and knees and find her glasses. Saint Anthony always got the credit, which was the subject of some irritation to him. It was a fairly tolerant family and scholarship was very much a part of it

Q: Were you raised in a Catholic school?

JOHNSON: No and I gave up Catholicism, smoking and the Republican Party, in that order.

Q: During elementary school did any subject particularly appeal to you?

JOHNSON: I loved writing, history and social studies. I had a wonderful teacher who would type our themes so we could see them in print.

Q: How about reading? Do you recall any subjects or books or authors?

JOHNSON: My parents bought us a set of World Book Encyclopedias when we were in primary school. We used to sit and read those volumes for hours on end. It was a curiously wonderful investment in our education. Later I developed a great fondness for military history, which I still nurture.

Q: When you moved, where did you go?

JOHNSON: My dad was offered a headmastership at a country day school outside Indianapolis, and he took it thinking it would improve the education for us three boys. Unfortunately, it was not a good choice for him, because he was a teacher and not an administrator. He lasted four years. But we had a wonderful home outside Indianapolis, which is now part of the Marion College campus. It was the old Fisher Body Works estate located between the Stokley Van Camp estate and the Allison-Chalmers estate. I thought it was such a huge house. I went back there last year, and I couldn't believe how small the house was. In fact, my dad's office was in the old villa. I went to 3rd through 6th grades there.

The area in which we lived was an idyllic place. In the summers, we would wander off in all the fields and go down fishing in the creek. I regret that I shot more than my share of birds with my BB gun. Now I love birds and maintain a large feeder in the back yard. My relationship with deer is less pacific.

Q: What did you want to be as a child?

JOHNSON: A cop. I am sure I was influenced by radio and television dramas such as "Dragnet". Jack Webb was my idol. However I remember when I was about ten, I went to a Halloween party as a diplomat. I wore a broad red ribbon across my chest and some homemade medals. My mother even made me a black swallow-tail coat. I assumed that all diplomats were ambassadors. I never became a cop or an ambassador, but as I write this my younger son is a detective with the Roanoke Police Department.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

JOHNSON: We moved to Schenectady, New York when I was twelve. An old friend of my father, the same one who hired him at Knox, was the president of Union College. My dad had lost his position as headmaster when the trustees decided they wanted a fund raiser not an educator. Davidson offered my dad a temporary job. We exchanged a beautiful home for pre-fab World War II housing at the edge of an Italian ghetto, which was a real cultural shock for this very privileged little boy. I was suddenly faced with some pretty tough kids. My parents got the idea that I was in danger of becoming a criminal. Being a bit of sadist a heart, I played on their fears.

My father was soon named interim pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church, and so we moved into the parsonage, which is a very nice house, formerly owned by a senior GE executive. Then my father was named Professor of Classics at Union College. He was also chaplain of the college, although he quietly did away with that title. He remained at Union for the reminder of his career. My mother meanwhile became an English teacher, first at a private school and then a public school. They both were both in the careers they loved.

Q: What was Schenectady like during the 50's?

JOHNSON: General Electric dominated the city with a huge factory that produced everything from small motors to monster turbines for hydroelectric dams. A few blocks away the American Locomotive Works (ALCO) was turning out medium tanks for the Army. Schenectady was prosperous. The Anglos dominated the country club class, while the Italians and Poles provided the blue collar workers. There were very few blacks and no Asians or Hispanics. Beginning in the 1960s, GE began to relocate its manufacturing elsewhere and ALCO went out of business. The city lost more and more of its population.

Q: Did you get involved in the Italian section of Schenectady?

JOHNSON: Not really. My family moved to the suburbs after only one year where we resumed our comfortable middle-class experience. My friends and I commuted into Schenectady to attend high school since our suburb provided no schooling beyond ninth grade.

Q: What did you do in high school?

JOHNSON: I was an okay student and certainly no athlete. I was manager of several teams so I could be with my more athletically gifted friends and I participated in many other student activities, including Key Club. By eleventh grade I was really settling down when I suddenly realized I had to get into a good college and do something with my life. I was always under subtle pressure from my scholarly parents to get good grades. My father received straight A's from seventh grade on and graduated first in his class at the University of Michigan. Of course in those days if you didn't get into college you were likely to get drafted.

I was offered a free ride at Union because my father was on the faculty. I applied myself to my studies and did well. No one associated me with my father. I didn't take any of his classes, and I had four very strenuous years. Standards were very high at Union and a 35% attrition rate was considered normal. Students who flunked out of course lost their draft deferments and were soon snapped up by the Army. Many retuned to finish their degrees mature and serious.

Q: You were at Union from when to when?

JOHNSON: 1958 to 1962. In the summer of 1961 I received a grant of $300 and went to Europe for the summer. That was in the days when one of the most popular travel books was "Europe on $5 a Day". I traveled for a month, and then spent a month at a work camp in northern Germany helping to build a youth center off the Baltic. It was that summer, in July, that I went to Berlin. I had seen a program by Walter Cronkite about Berlin, and I wanted to look at the Brandenburg Gate. I liked Berlin and I went out to the U.S. Mission to see what a mission did. In those days the door was open, and I walked in and there was a guy reading a newspaper. I said, "Who are you?"

He responded, "I'm Fred Irving, the cultural officer."

"What's that?" I asked.

He told me about his work and said, "What are you doing next year?"

I responded, "I'm going back to Union College and then to law school."

He remarked, "You ought to think about the Free University of Berlin."

I thanked Irving for his time and forgot about the Free University for several months.

In August I went to my work camon the 13th the East Germans built the Wall. In late August I returned to Berlin. I had a press ID from my college newspaper and I wrote a series of articles on the wall. During my senior year in college, I thought I would attach my star, small though it was, to Nelson Rockefeller. He was then the charismatic governor of New York. I was sure he would be president one day. I worked on his campaign for governor and planned to follow him to Washington, but as an attorney. The night before I took the law boards, he announced his divorce from his wife, and I realized he would not be president and that I was probably not cut out to be a White House staffer. I did terribly on the law boards. Then one day walking past the college library I had an inspiration, I would go back to Berlin and attend the Free University for a year or so.

Q: I'd like to talk about being in Germany during the building of the Berlin wall. What were your observations at the time?

JOHNSON: My German was still rudimentary. I had just two years of college German. When the news of the division of Berlin broke, I wasn't sure what the Germans were talking about. The word for wall was not in my vocabulary. Then I saw pictures in the newspaper of the barbed wire and I pieced together what was happening. So in late August when the "wall" was just being built, I headed right back to Berlin. Around Check Point Charlie, the confrontation was intense and photogenic. I could go back and forth taking pictures and talking to people. The situation on the "wall" was scary. I was all of 21, and I kept looking at these kids, 17 and 18 years old, and both sideEast Germans and Americanwith their guns pointed at each other. At Check Point Charlie the barrels of one of the American tanks would almost touch the wall when the tank was being fueled. I didn't know it at the time, but the main gun was loaded.

Q: Did you learn a lot of German that summer?

JOHNSON: I had a wonderful long haired dictionary named Dorothy, an art student from Hannover. She helped me a lot and I was not shy about speaking. I often got lost in my own sentences and was sometimes the source of great amusement for the Germans. One evening we were in a Gasthaus drinking beer and we all took turns describing our favorite sport. One guy was an ardent soccer player, another loved sailing and Dorothy was great at tennis. It came my turn and I proceeded to brag what a great hunter I was. Indeed I practiced a lot by shooting at targets and then I successfully shot deer, squirrels, rabbits and pheasants. My exploits reduced my listeners to tears of laughter. It seems I had reversed the "i" and "e" in "schiessen" (shooting) and thus I announced that all the previously named objects were victims of my "scheissen" (shitting).

Q: At Union, what sort of things were you involved in?

JOHNSON: I played football during my freshman year until I tore out a knee. I was president of the pre-law society and was head of publicity for the student-run fast food/bar until the Health Department closed us down. I was too poor to join a fraternity. I was involved in the Republican Party and worked in the Nixon campaign in 1960. Mostly I studied.

Q: What sort of courses were you taking?

JOHNSON: Primarily political science, history and a minor in English. I had two years of creative writing, which have served me better than anything else that I took in college in the Foreign Service.

Q: While you were at Union, of course you went to Germany, but was the outside world as a whole being reflected at Union?

JOHNSON: I had some understanding about the world as a whole from my studies and my limited travel. Most students were pretty provincial. One day in a lounge somebody said, "Oh, that's a political problem, ask TJ (me). He reads TIME magazine." The person who said that was a physics major engineer who eventually ended up in the Foreign Service and did well as a science attachï¿½.

Q: Who was that?

JOHNSON: Leroy Simpkins. In fact, there were three of us in the class who ended up in the Foreign Service. Vernon Penner who was a consular officer lives in Annapolis and I see him from time to time. Roy lives up in Reston. His wife is an FSO.

Q: You were there at Union in '60. Did the Nixon /Kennedy campaign, which engaged an awfulot of students at that time, engage you?

JOHNSON: Yes, in fact, I worked for Nixon as part of my political science program, and went door to door in a neighborhood which was solidly democratic. I remember showing up at the home of the local democratic organizer and here I was, a Republican. He was not too pleased to see me. My neighborhood went for Nixon, although I don't know if I had anything to do with that or not. And then I did a paper on public opinion polls and a random sample on the effect of the debates on the decision, the outcome, and yes, I discovered that the debates were decisive in Kennedy's victory in that very small area.

Q: With Kennedy and his call for people to serve their country and all, did that strike a chord?

JOHNSON: Very much so. Of course, we did not know about Kennedy's other activities at the time, but he instilled an idealism in our generation. I remember when he was inaugurated I was inspired by his address that snowy day. I thought very seriously about joining the Peace Corps and often wish I had. I did the next best thing, I married a Peace Corps volunteer. Our daughter was also a PCV.

Q: You graduated from Union in 1962. Then what?

JOHNSON: I applied to the Free University of Berlin and was conditionally accepted upon passing the language exam. I applied to the American Friends, a Quaker organization, and I said, "Send me to the worst place you can find. I want to see if I can take it because I may join the Peace Corps."

They responded, "Have we got a place for you."

In June I presented myself to coordinating office in Belgrade. The Yugoslavs said, "Who are you? We don't have any paperwork on you from the American Friends but no matter, you can go to Velika Plana." Velika Plana is a little town southwest of Belgrade where I worked on a highway, the "Autoput,"- Yugoslavia's version of the Autobahn. There were five brigades assigned to the project, four of Yugoslav university students and one of international students and workers. Yugoslavian students were expected to do voluntary service during their summers. I think that is a pretty good way to occupy students. The international brigade was composed of young men and women from about 15 countries including, the UK, Poland, Belgium, Holland and Germany. A dozen Ghanaians participated in the camp. The Ghanaians were on their way home from having been trained as MiG pilots in Czechoslovakia. They were very clear that they disliked the Czechs and despised Communism. Other than that it had been a very successful training program.

Q: The East Europeans called them derogatory names?

JOHNSON: No. The Ghanaians were a very likeable lot. I met one of Belgians twenty-five years later in southern Zaire. More about that later. After a month working on the road I left Yugoslavia, moved to Murnau in southern Bavaria to take two months of intensive German at the Goethe Institute. I mixed studying with seeing as much of the countryside as I could on my motor scooter. When I took my final exam, the chairman of the panel told me, "You have excellent "Gasthausdeutsch" (pub German), now focus on broadening your vocabulary. I arrived in Berlin the first week of October 1962 and took the entrance exam at the FU and passed it. And of course, I soon experienced one of the scariest several days in my life, the Cuban Missile Crisis. I almost joined the U.S. Army in Berlin, although I don't know what they would have done with me.

Q: Let's go back to Velika Plana. What were your impressions of Yugoslavia at the time?

JOHNSON: It was very poor, very hospitable, and the Yugoslavs tried their very best to be good hosts. Food in the camp was limited and boring. As an American I had money and could go out and buy some supplemental things, but I lost about 112 pounds. I have a picture of myself then, and I was very thin. The country was still scarred by the war. Several times townspeople took me to a mound at the edge of VP on which there was a plaque in memory of more than 700 villagers murdered by the Croatian fascists. Yugoslavia shares with Poland the sad distinction of being the only countries to lose more than ten percent of their population during WW II. In Yugoslavia the main fighting was between Yugoslavs, and not against the German and Italian invaders. It was hard to imagine a civil war between the parents' generation of my Yugoslav friends who worked together so harmoniously. I have often wondered how many of those campers fought one another in the most recent civil war.

Q: Did you get a any feel for the difference in Tito's communism at all?

JOHNSON: The Yugoslavs would say that they have many differences, but Marshall Tito has brought them together. I had the sense hat he was really the lynchpin of that whole society and was genuinely revered. I remember one camper, a tall, slender Montenegrin. She said that her father had been the chief judge in the purges that Tito had used to settle scores with his opponents after the war. The Yugoslavs I talked to were tremendously grateful for economic assistance from the United States. More than once, I was grabbed by a villager in Velika Plana who pointed at one of locomotives they had received from the United States and said enthusiastically, "Kennedy locomotiva", "Kennedy locomotiva."

Q: Did you ever get to the American Embassy?

JOHNSON: No. I was only in Belgrade once for a day or two.

Q: George Kennan was ambassador at the time.

JOHNSON: I would have loved to have met him.

[Q: In 1962 I went out there as chief of the consular section].

JOHNSON: I didn't hear about Velika Plana again until the air war against the government in Belgrade. There was a picture in the Washington Post of a bridge that we had helped prepare abutments for. There was a very large hole in the bridge.

Q: In Germany, could you explain what was the Free University?

JOHNSON: At the end of the war, there were two universities in Berlin near the center of the city. After the allies divided up the German capital, the Technical University was in West Berlin and the Humbolt University in East Berlin. It didn't take long for the Soviets and the East German Communists to purge the faculty and the student body at Humboldt of anybody who opposed them. In 1948 a group of students and professors went to the Americans occupation authorities and announced that they wanted to start a university free of totalitarian control. The Americans provided them a building that had been a German military hospital and some material support. That's how the Free University of Berlin was started. Today the old hospital building is German Studies Department. I studied Thomas Mann and Goethe there.

In 1962 the relationship between the FU and the U.S. Mission was very close. Part of the student orientation for foreign students took place in the American Officers' Club, which has now been returned to the University and is the guest house of the prestigious Max Planck Institute for scientific research.

Q: How was a Free University different from an American university of about the same size?

JOHNSON: The heart of a university in the US is the library which has open stacks and is open from early morning to late at night. At the FU the library had closed stacks was and open 9-6. The students at the FU were somewhat older than their American counterparts because the West Germans have 13 years of school and many of the students had served two years in the military prior to entering the university. Tuition was nominal, about $100 a year. With the exception of medicine and some sciences the German students had the luxury of "akademische Freiheit", i.e. they could study as long as they wanted. I knew one guy who had started at the university before I was born, but then WWII came along, followed by several years as a POW. The students at the FU were much more sophisticated politically than American students.

Germans don't identify with their alma mater, i.e. there is school spirit nor is there financial support of the alumni for the university. Traditionally German students tied their studies to professors they admired and followed professors to another university if the professor was offered a better position. It was also easier to change universities for other reasons. Medical students were limited to one year at Austrian universities because they spent so much time skiing.

One aspect that I found a bit spooky at the FU was that I never met a German Jew. I had gone to high school and college with lots of Jews. Sometimes I would be sitting in a large lecture hall and think about who would have been in the empty seats had it not been for the insanity of the holocaust. I am not superstitious, but I almost felt there were unseen students in the room.

Q: What about German? How did your German go?

JOHNSON: I had a German girlfriend who said to me one day, "Your pronunciation is atrocious. Be at my apartment on Sunday afternoon." She drilled me Sunday afternoon after Sunday afternoon, reading out loud until my pronunciation got to be quite good and my vocabulary expanded. Willi Brandt, who was from Lubeck, was Lord Mayor. Brandt spoke with a wonderful rolling "r" which I mastered. Later I met Brandt while I was serving in Heidelberg. He was running for chancellor at the time. He inspired me.

I majored in mass communications and minored in political science and modern history. I had a minor which was required in German studies which turned out to be very helpful. I wrote my thesis in German on propaganda analysis on East German radio programming aimed at American soldiers stationed in West Berlin. The Communist broadcasts were very primitive and I very much doubt they had any effect on the morale of the GIs.

Q: How did you find the German attitude during the Missile Crisis?

JOHNSON: I can only speak about the attitude of Berliners. I arrived in the divided city at a time when the U.S. reputation was at an all time high. The Germans greatly admired the young and vibrant JFK. Their chancellor at the time was the grizzled Konrad Adenauer. I helped prepare for the visit of John Kennedy to the Free University and have an amusing story about that. It may be in his papers somewhere. He arrived in Berlin one spring morning and, of course, was taken to the Wall and then went on the Schï¿½neberg Rathaus where he gave his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech. His next stop was to see the U.S. military, where he pressed flesh and gave a pep talk to the families. And then he came to the Free University. The Ford Foundation had given the Free University money for this very nice building which he toured briefly. The day had started cloudy but the afternoon was bright and sunny, very warm and the beer truck had done a very good business and a lot of us were feeling no pain at all. We had this huge speaker system so you could hear every word.

He came through this big glass wall and on his left and right were professors in their medieval academic regalia. He looked out at the student body as far as he could see, all the way to the student dining hall some 150 yards away, and there was this great shout, "Kennedy!" Apparently taken back by our raucous greeting, the president put his remarks aside and observed, "You know, Bismarck once remarked that German students could be divided into three groups: a third work themselves to death, a third drink themselves to death, and a third will rule the realm. Looking at this group, I'm not sure what group I'm talking to." It brought the house down. We don't remember what he said after that. But it was such a wonderful opening.

Some months later, I was visiting a friend of mine, Bob Blucker, a consular officer. When I returned to my dorm a German friend embraced us, and said how sad he was. I said, "What are you talking about?"

He said Kennedy was dead of a "Kopfschuss."

For some reason the term "Kopfschuss" didn't ring a bell. Suddenly, I realized "shot in the head", of course, and that was how I found out he'd been assassinated. Four of us, including a girl from Dallas, piled into a Volkswagen and drove down to the Schï¿½neberg Rathaus where the sound system had been set up but there were no lights. Lord Mayor Willi Brandt gave one of the most moving and eloquent speeches I ever heard. It was rumored later that the lord mayor, nicknamed "Schnapps Willi", was drunk that evening. Whatever his level of sobriety, Brandt filled the streets with his personality. He clearly spoke from the heart and moved many of us to tears. Until 9/11 that was the saddest day of my life.

Q: Did you get much from other students about what was happening on the other side of the wall?

JOHNSON: It came about it a strange way. Several students, including close friends of mine, had fled just before the wall went up. Americans were asked to take candy and goodies to their families. About a year after I began my studies, a friend from college showed up and said he wanted to see East Berlin. I said I would take him over. I had to go East Berlin anyway to get a transit visa to travel to West Germany. So I walked him around East Berlinear the Humboldt University there is a cafand I told him, "Stay here. Don't go anywhere. I'm going to get my visa, and I'll be back in half an hour." I came back. He wasn't there and I waited. When he came back, I asked, "Where've you been?"

He said, "Aw, I went in this big building down the street. We walked in it."I replied, "That's Humboldt University. They let you in? I have never gotten past the door."

He said that he told the person at the reception desk that he was an American and want to see inside. And so they called some students down, and they showed him around the institute.

"I'm going to see them tomorrow," my guest continued. "Do you want to join me?" I said, "I would like to?" Anyway, we got together with a bunch of East German students who were studying American-British studies. I don't remember what we did or where we went, but my friend went home and I remained in contact with the young East Germans and got to know them better and better. I eventually discovered a source of free paperbacks, the US Mission, and sent the books to them care of their department at the Humboldt University. The tomes seemed to get through customs without any trouble. This was in 1963 and more than forty years later, we're still friends. And my children are friends with their children. Meanwhile, the American, who brought us together is now a superior court judge in New York, has no recollection of the event.

When I joined the Foreign Service, I could go into East Berlin without being checked and I would take a briefcase and have books all over me. I guess over the years I must have taken several hundred books to them. I felt that in a way I was a small window into the world for to people who were born in the wrong side of town. They gave me a wonderfully unique perspective of their lives and we shared many happy experiences. In fact, one of the mothers and fathers lived up in Pankow, a district in the northern part of East Berlin, and we would go up there on Sunday afternoons maybe once a month for coffee and cakes. I once celebrated New Years Eve there one night and did not endear myself because I got a little happier than I should have and made a proud toast off the balcony, "To the President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson." Mind you, this was about a 100 yards from the higher-ups of the East German government. My hosts turnewhite, but there were so many fireworks going off that I don't think that anyone else heard my indiscretion.

Q: Did you get any feeling about this time that Berlin was going through a decline because of the conditions there with the wall? There was a period of decline and young people getting out.

JOHNSON: If you looked at East Germany and West Germany and East and West Berlin, there was never any comparison. East Germany was always the poor cousin. They paid the high price of communist bureaucracy and an economic system that never really worked very well. On the other hand, compared to Eastern Europe, the GDR looked really good. Now, I didn't get to Poland. The only east block country I visited was Czechoslovakia. The Czechs were noticeably poorer than the East Germans but they were more openly defiant of the system than were the people in the GDR. I recall a joke from those days about the two dogs, an East German and a Czech, who meet at the border, and the East German dog asks the Czech dog, "Why are you coming here?" He says, "I'm coming to eat." The Czech dog asks the East German dog, "Why are you coming here?" He says, "I'm coming here to bark."

One day while I was in Prague to get away from the wall and Germans, I walked into the university and met some Czech students of journalism. One Czech student and I met up a few months later in East Berlin. Apparently some of our indiscreet remarks must have been reported to state security in Prague because my friend told me that he had been ordered to inform on me for the police, which he refused to do. He confided to me the code word "Vasheck" he had been told to use in reference to me. I never saw him again.

Rudi, another Czech student, ignored similar demands by the police. He and I are still friends more than forty years later. Rudi, who was a sports reporter, spent a year in prison in part, he thinks, because of his contact with me. Several years ago Rudi and I had breakfast with a classmate of Rudi who had made a career with the Communist party newspaper. Rudi clearly bore the collaborator no animosity, this in sharp contrast to my East German friends who shunned classmates who were cooped by the SED regime.

Q: So did the Czech secret police have a reputation for efficiency?

JOHNSON: Compared to the East Germans the Czechs did not have a reputation for effectiveness. A friend of mine at our embassy in Prague told me that he had learned that the Czech secret police had lured a Middle Eastern diplomat into a compromising situation with a school boy. The men in long leather coats confronted the diplomat with clandestine photos of his romp in the hay with the boy and threatened to give copies to the ambassador unless the diplomat agreed to provide them with certain documents. The Middle Eastern diplomat allegedly responded, "That will be fine. He's gay too."

Once returning to Berlin, and as I was leaving Czechoslovakia and about to enter the GDR, a Czech customs officer asked me if I had any Czech Crowns with me. Crowns were not to be taken out of the country. I said no and reached into my pocket where I usually kept my West German Marks. I must have mixed up pockets because out came a bundle of Crowns. "And what are those?" he asked.

"I guess they're Crowns," I responded sheepishly.

"Are you ever coming back to the CSR?" he asked calmly.

"Definitely," I replied truthfully.

"Please spend them then," he smiled and shut the train compartment door.Had he been a GDR customs officer, I would have lost the money and perhaps a day or two of freedom. The East Germans used to grumble that the Czechs were "sloppy Communists." From my point of view, the Czechs were simply less rigid than the Germans. They were more humane.

Q: Were the East German authorities notoriously difficult to deal with?

JOHNSON: The worst thing about them is they tended to be very arbitrary. A particularly disagreeable matron on the east side of the wall at Checkpoint Charlie earned the nickname "Betty the Border Bitch."

On the other hand, there were reasonable Vopos too. I once lost my currency declaration and a customs officer fished one of his pocket and asked me if it were mine. Of course I said yes. He told me to be more careful. The same night a friend misplaced his declaration and spent several hours being interrogated by the "Stasis" (GDR version of the Gestapo).

Q: Did you talk with the Germans much about World War II and the Third Reich?

JOHNSON: Yes, both to my fellow students and with their parents. On many Sundays I was invited for typical "Kaffee und Kuchen" (coffee and cake) in Berlin homes. The Germans were only too willing to talk about their experiences during the war and the Third Reich. Most conversations concerned the hardships caused by the allied bombing of German cities and the loss of loved ones during the war. Several families talked about their chaotic evacuations during the last months of the war. A few were still bitter about being expelled by the Poles, Czechs and Russians from former German homelands.

Perhaps the most graphic story I heard came from the grandmother of one friend who told me that her son had been a chemist employed by IG Farben. She said he was very cheerful and outgoing until he came back from a trip to Poland. Suddenly he was withdrawn and depressed. About a week after his return to Berlin he disappeared. The family made inquiries at his office and at the police but there was no trace of the young man. Finally the grandmother discovered his body hanging from a rafter in the attic. In his pocket was a letter in which he explained why he had become so despondent. In the letter he stated that he had been one of a team that developed Zyklon B which was being used to gas vast numbers of Jews. The grandmother and her husband, a Luftwaffe general, went to the authorities and demanded to know if their son's allegation was true. The Gestapo confiscated the letter and warned the parents that if they told anyone about the letter they would suffer the direst consequences.

One friend told me that his father had been a pilot for one of the planes that transported Hitler during the war. I asked him if he wished his father's aircraft had crashed. He thought for a moment and responded, "I could not have wished death on my father." However another student said to me, "My father was killed during the war. It is good that he died, for he fought for such an evil cause."

As a student I did not have much money, so I often hitch hiked around Europe and frequently got rides with Germans who were WWII veterans. They all seemed to have fought on the East Front. Therefore I believe that there is a chapter of military history to be written about the mercenaries from nowhere that contested Eisenhower's campaigns so bitterly in North Africa, Italy and France.

Q: In your opinion, the allies did a good job in reeducation?

JOHNSON: I think the real reeducation was the product of the passage of time and the unrelenting efforts of the mass media, particularly television. I saw some very powerful anti-Nazi documentaries on German TV.

Q: Did you work part-time to finance your studies at the Free University?

JOHNSON: As part of my studies I worked for a couple months in the sports department of a television station in Cologne and then in the youth program department of RIAS, Radio in the American Sector. At that time the latter was operated by the U.S. Information Agency. The director was Bob Lochner who spent much of his childhood in Germany. Bob's father was Louis Lochner, a famous wire service correspondent who after the war edited the diaries of Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels.

I also taught English to German employees of the U.S. military in Berlin. My first teaching assignment was tutoring German interrogators in English at a safe house run by the Defense Intelligence Agency. A couple times a week I dropped by the villa on my way to the Free University for 90 minutes sessions. I gather interrogators tried to get whatever useful information they could from people who managed to escape from East Germany. Even after the wall was built, there was always a trickle of Germans, Poles and Czechs who managed to get into West Berlin. I did not have a security clearance and was not involved in the interrogations. I did not even know the real names of my students.

Q: What were you thinking about regarding your future when you were doing all this?

JOHNSON: By that time I had decided there were two careers I might pursue: either be a foreign correspondent or a foreign service officer. In the early 60s Berlin was a center for the international media. Most correspondents used the divided city as a base of operations to cover much of central and Eastern Europe. I knew a number of these reporters and sometimes ran errands for them such as securing news photos from German sources, writing the captions and then getting them on direct flights to New York.

I worked for Russ Jones, a wonderful wire service reporter, who taught me a lot about the news business and how to deal with pressure. For example, one lovely summer day an airplane crashed into a lake in the French sector. Most of the newsmen assumed that the aircraft was one of the commercial flights of British Airways, Air France or Pan Am and rushed off to the crash sight. Russ told me to stay at the office while he called contacts in the Berlin Police and in the headquarters of the three western allies. In about a half hour he had his story on the wire and had scooped his competition. The airplane was not one of the jet airliners which had recently replaced prop planes serving the divided city, but rather a Soviet fighter that suffered engine failure. The Soviets demanded that the French return the dead airman and the wreckage immediately. The allies returned the body of the pilot promptly and with full military honors. Moscow had to wait for several months before it got back its fighter, which was flown to the UK for careful study by NATO technicians.

Meanwhile I had become friends with Bill Woessner, Bob Blucker, Jerry Livingston, Foreign Service Officers at the U.S. Mission. I determined that they lived well and worked reasonable hours. Most the journalists, on the other hand, were divorced and never knew where they were going to be the next day. Foreign correspondents lead a very nomadic and often lonely existence. The Foreign Service by comparison looked like a little more stable and interesting life. Many of our Mission officers occupied villas that had been taken from the Nazis who had confiscated them from Jews. I took the written exam for the Foreign Service in what had been a wartime conference room of Hermann Goering.

Q: Did you ever meet anyone from our embassy in Bonn while you were in Berlin?

JOHNSON: I helped set up a couple round-tables for Ambassador George McGee, who came to Berlin on a regular basis. McGee was a very likeable oil man from Texas. Although his command of German was mediocre, he communicated very effective through the sheer force of his personality. He was also very knowledgeable. Students respected him.

The U.S. Mission also prevailed upon me to put together a program for Eleanor Dulles, sister of John Foster Dulles and Alan Dulles, who was retired from the State Department. She had held some very senior positions and was a real expert on Germany. As I recall her she spoke fluent German. Eleanor was a bundle of energy and a real intellect.

Q: Did the Mission do anything for you in return?

JOHNSON: The main benefit I got from cooperating with the Mission was exposure to the Foreign Service. However I was also named to a meeting of "student leaders" in Iceland in August 1964. I guess I qualified as a student leader because I was president of the student body at the Institute for Mass Media Studies at the FU. I traveled to the U.S. Mission to NATO in Paris for two days of briefing and then along with two other Americans hopped a U.S. Navy flight to an air base in England and then on to Reykjavik for a four day conference devoted to NATO.

Q: Let's talk again about your master's thesis. How did the station that was aimed at the GIs work? What were they after? How did they compete with American Forces Network (AFN)?

JOHNSON: Very poorly. First, they were on for about an hour very late at night, about eleven o'clock. It was run by a couple defectors, some Canadians, and some East Germans. I still have the thesis around and some pictures.

Speaking of AFN, the station had a major impact on Germans- particularly the post-war generation- in Berlin and in the states in the U.S. zone of occupation in the southern and southwestern part of the Federal Republic. AFN's German audience was bigger than its American audience. AFN also had an appreciative audience in East Berlin and in portions of the GDR near U.S. garrisons in the west. Many Germans learned their English from AFN. AFN also provided German audiences plenty of pop music, including rock, jazz and country and western. AFN Berlin aired "Stick Buddy Jamboree", an afternoon request show of country and western. The G.I. disc jockey would announce, "OK, this next song is going out from Renate to Klaus and from Hildegard to Frederick. Oh, yeah, Jim to Betty too." When the Germans would overload the program with requests, the disc jockey cut back their dedications to give the out numbered Americans a chance. Unlike German stations which tended be full of talk and educational programs, AFN played almost entirely music with news on the hour.

The other great English teacher for the wartime generation of Germans was the POW camps in U.S. Of course, there was a subtle competition between those who studied British English and those studied American English. My friends who studied British English would say to my friends who studied American English, "You're uncouth," and my friends who studied American English would respond, "You're obsolete." Usually that was the end of the conversation.

Q: When I was in Naples, I kept looking around for a good Italian classical music station, but I couldn't find one. It was always Il Professori talking about classical music. They would finally get around to playing one piece while an American station could probably play three solid classical music things while Il Professori was yakking away.

JOHNSON: The same thing is true of French radio, which seemed to be non-stop talk. In the eighties when we were in Frankfurt, there was a program out of Baden Baden that played hard rock with very little talking. The German programmers were competing with AFN and an AFN reporter complained to me, "We're losing our soldiers to that German station!"

Q: On the East German radio station aimed at the GIs, it seemed to be partly conceived by someone who wanted to say yes, we are doing something. Someone trying to cover their ass from the GDR side

JOHNSON: It may well have been. There was never any evidence that anyone defected because of it. I doubt most GIs even knew it existed. We did have one defector in Berlin before my time, supposedly the nephew of John Reed.

Q: The American correspondent buried in the Kremlin wall?

JOHNSON: That's right. He wrote Ten Days That Shook The World. I knew of a couple of other defectors from garrisons in West Germany. When I was there - I don't remember what year it was - an American captain who went off the deep end. He was in a scout unit and came to the border with an NCO. He pulled his gun out and said to keep on going. They went into East Germany or Czechoslovakia. They held the NCO for a few hours. Then about four years later they sent the captain back. Apparently he had become obnoxious. I seem to recall that the captain was sentenced to six years in Leavenworttwo years for desertion and four years for stealing the jeep.

Q: While you were in Berlin did you witness any harassment of West Berlin by the East Germans or Soviets?

JOHNSON: The East Germans sporadically slowed down access to the city along the access roads through the GDR. The Pankow regime also imposed requirements on visitors to spend a ten or twenty Marks per day while in East Berlin or East Germany. Once when the Bundestag (West German parliament) met in West Berlin, the Soviets flew fighter bombers over the city and caused sonic booms. I remember looking up and seeing a MiG that was flying so low that I could see the pilot turn his head.

Q: When you left Berlin and the Free University, what degree did you come out with?

JOHNSON: I was working on my PhD, but Frank Meehan, Chief of Eastern Affair in the U.S. mission, told me that no one cares about a PhD in the Foreign Service. "Do your masters and get out," he said. I'm glad I did. Frank was later ambassador in Prague and East Berlin. He was an exemplary officer.

Q: When you came back, did you take the oral exam?

JOHNSON: I returned to the U.S. in December 1966 on a small Norwegian freighter- just after Christmas. The food was terrible and the seas were very rough. We were three days late getting into New York. We had sauerkraut in the bow and Heinekens beer in the stern. I have not been able to drink the Dutch beer since.

Q: Where did you stand with the draft board now that you were no longer a student?

JOHNSON: Upon arriving home I learned that I had missed my induction physical. I promptly presented myself to the board and explained that I had been on the high seas and showed stamps in my passport to prove it. The clerk told me to come for a physical two weeks later. I responded I was on my way to Washington and planned to join the Foreign Service. She shook her head and said, "I think the Army can do without you. You are kind of old." I was 26.

Q: Do you recall anything regarding your oral exam?

JOHNSON: It was on 20th Street just off Pennsylvania Avenue. There were three examiners. Part of the exam was to tell the panel about yourself and then there were questions about specific topics and theoretical questions. One guy played the tough cop, one played the good cop, and one functioned as moderator.

Q: Do you remember any of the problems or questions put to you?

JOHNSON: One was: "You hail from New York State, give us a thumbnail sketch of the history and economy of the state." Another question was "Suppose a cabinet member of an African country were to tell that you he is going to the United States for the first time in a few weeks and then asks you what three books should he read to help him understand the States. What three books would you recommend?" Afterwards, Art Bardos, the panel chairman, informed me that I had passed the exam and could expect to be offered an appointment in the near future.

Q: Where else did you work while you were in Washington?

JOHNSON: I arrived in Washington in January 1967 and promptly found a job in the Library of Congress as a book-shelver. I chose the Library of Congress because I loved the building and because you did not need to take the civil service exam to work there. While I was slaving away at the Library of Congress I met Carolyn Fitch, a public affairs officer, but more about her later. In June I accepted a GS-7 position as a civilian personnel officer with the DC Police Department. I was in charge of the crossing guards and janitors. They were an interesting group of people.

I kept my interest in Germany while at the police department. I watched the activities of the American Nazi Party with a mixture of disgust and amusement. Its headquarters was in Arlington and George Rockwell was the self-styled Fuehrer. Periodically Rockwell would call the police department and announce that he and his storm troopers would demonstrate on a given day and at a given time in front of the White House. DC Police protected the Nazis from the irate citizenry. Rockwell's rise to power was cut short by a bullet from one of a man he had kicked out of the party because his mother was Jewish.

In August 1967 I was offered a very tempting job by U.S. Marine Corps as an oral historian in Vietnam. I was to join a small group of historians conducting after action interviews with officers and enlisted men. However I wanted to be a Foreign Service Officer, not a civil servant so I turned the job down. I figured I would be going to Vietnam anyway.

There was an amusing story concerning my physical. I went to the State Department medical unit to get my EKG. When I arrived I noticed that the technician was quite flustered. I asked, "What's wrong?" She said, "I did something terrible. See the man walking out of here? You know what I did? We were talking, and I forgot to wipe the paste from the contacts off his chest. He put his shirt on and his shirt stuck to his body. It was total mess." I asked who it was. She replied, "the Secretary." (Dean Rusk)

Q: How long did it take you to get a security clearance?

JOHNSON: My security clearance was less complicated than I expected. The oral interview with the agent lasted about two hours. I was very upfront him and told him about all of my travels in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. When asked how often I had been in East Berlin, I said, "About once a month." "That's nice," the agent replied and went on to other topics.

Q: Did you ever consider going into consular work in State?

JOHNSON: I had two friends in the consular section in the U.S. Mission in Berlin, Bob Blucker and Sophie Kerney. They told me a lot about consular work. I even helped out once. In 1964 an American student rolled a motor-scooter on his leg while transiting the GDR to Berlin, and was taken to a hospital in Burg near Magdeburg. Bob Blucker asked me if I would accompany his family to translate for them. Bob said that he couldn't go because the hospital was next to a Soviet tank unit and was off limits to official Americans. By the time we arrived at the hospital, gangrene had set in and the boy's leg had been amputated. I got to know the doctor. We were there for several days and we had the young man evacuated to West Berlin. The amputee went on to be a surgeon. It was my introduction to consular work. As a postscript, 40 years later following an accident I would end up in the same hospital with the same German surgeon examining me. Fortunately no amputation was necessary.

Q: When did you officially enter the Foreign Service?

JOHNSON: October, 1967

Q: Do you remember who swore you in?

JOHNSON: I believe it was William Bundy, then Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. I remember he encouraged us to do our best, but that the Foreign Service was not the only way to serve our country and that if any of us was bored or felt serious pangs of conscience regarding what we were doing, we should resign.

I few days later I met a former Secretary of State. I was hurrying from the old USIA (United States Information Agency) building on Pennsylvania Avenue to the State Department when I rounded a corner at a building site and I ran smack into a dignified little man. I flattened him against a wooden barrier. I picked the gentleman's glasses off the sidewalk and placed them in his hand and returned his briefcase to his other hand. He stared at me through furrowed eyebrows and grunted a dignified, "Humph". "I am very sorry, Mister Secretary," I said politely and hurried off. I just had my sole audience with the venerable Dean Acheson.

Q: What was your basic officers' course, its composition and how did you find it?

JOHNSON: I chose early on to go into USIA*. I had also passed the entrance exam for the CIA but was never really tempted to join the agency. The culture of secrecy did not appeal to me. Our USIA class started a week before our State colleagues arrived.. And then we had the six week A-100 introductory course. The course was largely forgettable and included an unproductive day at the CIA. I volunteered to go to Vietnam, but they weren't sending any USIA JOT's (Junior Officer Trainees) to Vietnam. Had I switched to State, I almost certainly would have been assigned to Vietnam and perhaps my career would have been much different- or shorter.

* Editor's note: During its existence from 1953 to 1999 the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) was known as the United States Information Service (USIS) abroad to reduce the likelihood of confusion with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). However for the sake of simplicity, USIA in used throughout this interview. In some instances I will also refer to USIA as the agency, which should not be confused with CIA.

Q: During your career did you encounter any prejudice by State officers regarding USIA?

JOHNSON: There was always digs about "useless USIS", and occasionally I would hear State officers refer to the Foreign Service and USIA as if they were separate entities and I would remind the person that when I joined the Foreign Service, we all took the same written and oral exam and chose whether to enter State or USIA only after passing the written exam. Sometimes I would include in my response reference to the fact that a higher percentage of USIA officers were language qualified than State officers.

Q: Was there anything particularly memorable about your training in Washington, or was it a total waste of time?

JOHNSON: I would not call my months in Washington a waste of time. The briefings we had by other government departments gave us a useful perspective of many players there were in foreign affairs. I had 20 weeks of intensive Spanish training, which were so grueling that for the only time in my life I suffered from insomnia. At bedtime I couldn't get the dialogues out of my mind. There were only four of us officers in the class: two State, one USAID and me. Every couple weeks we got a new teacher to expose us to different accents and vocabularies. I was not very good at memorizing the dialogues contained in our instruction books but rather skillful at using the material in conversation. On the other hand the students who had great memories were less adept at extemporaneous usage.

Q: Are you a good linguist?

JOHNSON: We all took the language aptitude exam and I scored 48, which was low average. However I worked hard at learning vocabulary and was not afraid to experiment with sentence structure. I doubt I would have been accepted for training for a hard language such as Turkish or Chinese. The most successful students at the Foreign Service Institute were those who scored high, 60s and 70s but did not attain the perfect score of 80. Teachers told us that those got an 80 were often over confident.

Q: Anything else you recall about your training?

JOHNSON: Yes, we spent an evening in the State Department Operations Center and an evening in the USIA op center. I don't recall much about the former but the night I was in the agency operations center coincided with the seizure of the USS Pueblo by the North Koreans. We had a box seat monitoring the cables from the Pentagon and the State Department. One of the most satisfying things about the Foreign Service is that the officer is an eye witness to history. On the other hand, it is frustrating that one can usually do little to influence events.

I will never forget another evening in the USIA operation center. The venerable Pappy Winstead was the senior duty officer. Pappy called everyone under the age of 50, "sonny". This "sonny" (me) was ordered to fetch two quarts of ice cream from the store across the street. I dutifully accomplished my mission and settled down to listen to Pappy's tales of his long and distinguished career in the agency. Sometime during the tellinat about 2:00 a.m., chocolate ice cream soaked the cable summary we had produced for the USIA Director. The secretaries were long gone and none of us could type well. Pappy thought for a moment and after rummaging around in a file cabinet found a hair dryer. We were ordered to carefully blot the pages of the summary with wet towels until all the sugar was absorbed. Pappy then dried each page individually and placed them in the out box. Apparently the director was much pleased with the paper his summary had been typed on and ordered that future summaries be prepared on the same paper. I don't know how Pappy got out of that one, but he did.

Martin Luther King was assassinated during my training and Washington was rocked by riots. All the attorneys in training suddenly were detailed as public defenders. One classmate, Phil Kaplan, told me that he interviewed an elderly black man caught with more than a dozen half pint bottles of whiskey he had stolen from a liquor store. Phil asked the defendant why he had not taken several gallon bottles which he could haveasily discarded when he encountered the police. Phil said that the old man stared at him for a moment and responded, "I ain't never had anything but the half pints." Such was the poor man's lot in life.

During the riots I watched smoke billow from downtown Washington from the roof of Georgetown dental school where I was getting new fillings by students. On the Sunday of the riots I drove out to Annandale to visit Bill Woessner, whom I had known from Berlin. A curfew was in effect in Washington after about 7:00 p.m. When I drove back into DC over the Key Bridge I was stopped by soldiers in battle dress. I showed my drivers license and was told to drive straight home. It was hard not to believe that the fabric our nation was not being subjected to the severest stress.

Q: Why did you choose USIA versus the State Department?

JOHNSON: Well, because my background was in journalism and writing. I was interested in consular affairs because of my friends in the consular section including Berlin Consul General Sophie Kearney, and of course, Bob Blucker and several other people, but I really enjoyed working with universities and with journalists. I did not have a strong background in economics, which excluded that specialty as an option. I doubted the usefulness of much of the political reporting State produced and did not aspire to be a political officer. So I chose USIA. Had I chosen State, I think I would have been a political officer, perhaps with a specialty in political-military issues.

Q: Entering the Foreign Service did you aspire to be an ambassador?

JOHNSON: The job really never appealed to me. However several of my State classmates burned with the ambition and at least a half dozen retired as ambassadors.

Q: How about the USIA group you came in with? What was their composition? What was their background?

JOHNSON: I was 27 and maybe a year older than the average. Our class included men and women with a wide variety of training and backgrounds. A fourth of the group had been Peace Corps. A fourth were women. In my junior officer trainee class there were 24 USIA out of a total of 69 State and USIA. The portion of women among the State JOTs was much smaller. On the whole I thought the women were higher caliber than the men. Several of the wives were clearly sharper than their husbands.

Q: Was Vietnam hovering over most people, not those in USIA, but the rest?

JOHNSON: Six or seven went to Vietnam I wanted to go simply because I had a student loan of $7,000, and two years seemed like a quick way to pay it off. However my personnel officer told me I was going to Paraguay, which had been his first post. "You remind me of myself, when I was your age. You will like Paraguay," he announced. From studying for the Foreign Service exam I knew where Paraguay was on the map and that it was ruled by a general named Stroessner. "Why not," I thought. I was not about to contradict a personnel officer. Later I learned first-hand how powerful a personnel officer could be when I held that post. Asuncion turned out to be a wonderful assignment. I fully expected to be sent to Vietnam as my follow on.

Several of my classmates were not so lucky, which contributed to their leaving the Foreign Service. One classmate went to Costa Rica, a post I coveted. Her boss, the public affairs officer, apparently did not want a trainee and made her feel very unwelcome. She left the Foreign Service after that tour and married one of our FS classmates. I know of a second wedding of our classmates. One classmate resigned while we were still in Washington to work in Senator Robert Kennedy's ill-fated bid for the Democratic nomination for the presidency. Another classmate failed a routine medical check up, resigned and went on to be a successful artist in Tucson. Her paintings grace several ambassadors' residences abroad, so in a way she did have a Foreign Service career.

One hapless young lady, a very attractive red head, endured a year of training in Pakistan. At the end of her training she put in for several posts in Europe and Asia. In its wisdom USIA transferred her to another post in Pakistan. In desperation to get out of the country she recalled an admonition by a security officer that should an employee become in any way romantically involved with an east block diplomat, the employee would be immediately transferred. She invited a young Soviet over to her apartment, put on soft music and donned a dress that revealed her lovely figure. Rather than jumping her bones and thereby getting her a ticket out of the country, the Russian broke down in tears as he told the American how much he missed his wife and family, who were back in Moscow. My classmate resigned from USIA in disgust.

Q: Other than your student debt, were you solvent?

JOHNSON: No. I had to take out a loan of hundreds of dollars from the State Department Credit Union to buy furnishings for my house in Asuncion. I was also told to bring engraved calling cards, a white dinner jacket and a tux, all of which cost money. I still wear the tux, donned the white dinner jacket once and recently tossed the engraved cards.

Q: Sounds like you came in at the end of the old Foreign Service.

JOHNSON: The tail end. Ratings of wives were still included in an officer's efficiency report and the ambassador's wife still ruled the embassy roost.

Q: You were in Paraguay from when to when?

JOHNSON: July 1968 to April 1971.

Q: I assume there are no direct flights to Paraguay. Did you stop on your way to Asuncion?

JOHNSON: I decided to take my time getting to post. I stopped off in Miami, which was in many ways already Latin America. The first store I entered had a sign on the door WE SPEAK ENGLISH My next stop was Bogotï¿½. On the way into the city from the airport I asked the cab driver a question and was treated to a half hour rapid fire monologue which was totally incomprehensible to me I was sure that the Foreign Service had played a cruel joke on me and had not really taught me Spanish. However when I arrived at the hotel, I learned that many cab drivers use a ghetto Spanish which even natives find hard to understand. The next morning, like an idiot, I took a long walk and wandered into a section of town that gringos should avoid. A soldier with a rifle escorted me back to the center of the city. Later that day I took a bus out to some falls outside of Bogotï¿½. It being a nice day, I walked back to the city until I hit a Colombian army check point where an officer informed me that I had ambled through an area contested by leftist guerrillas. I was put on a bus headed for the center of the city. The next day a couple guys tried to scam by pretending to be policemen but I told them to shove off.

I shed blood in Bogotï¿½. I went to the movies in a nice cinema. When I got back to my hotel I realized I was covered with flea bites. Many years later I would be ravaged by fleas hiding in a wicker seat in the Rangoon Airport.

Q: Sounds dangerous and itchy.

JOHNSON: In those days security briefings concerned almost exclusively counter-espionage. Personal safety was not on the agenda. I was lucky.

Q: From Bogotï¿½, then on to Asuncion?

JOHNSON: No, I stopped to visit other junior officer trainees in Lima and Buenos Aires. I really enjoyed both cities, particularly BA where one could get a "baby beef" which was a steak weighing about a kilo, fried potatoes and a bottle of wine for about $7.00.

Q: What was Paraguay like when you arrived there?

JOHNSON: It was rustic and provincial. The country and system were very much under the influence of General Alfredo Stroessner. I got there just before his inauguration, for I believe his third term. The city was very safe and quite clean. Trash pick up was accomplished by a fleet of small trucks. However cows who wandered around town got first crack at the garbage. I have a wonderful photo of a cow eating slop from bucket in front of the national executive mansion.

When I arrived in Asuncion I was put up in the Grand Hotel del Paraguay. It had a lovely garden full of squawking parrots. "Contrabandistas" met in the spacious bar to conspire leisurely over expensive Scotch. On my first Sunday I walked down along the river into the humblest neighborhood of Asuncion and felt no fear at all.

My boss was Gene Karst, who had been spokesman for the St. Louis Cardinals, and I did my best to mask my ignorance of baseball. He and I got along just fine. I did the usual rotation through the various sections of the embassy. I spent several months as commercial officer, a short time in the consular section. It was a great JOT year. Gene Karst was replaced by Dick Wooton, and we had an inspection. In the inspection, the post did very poorly on the cultural side and the CAO (Cultural Affairs Officer) finished her assignment. I had an onward assignment to go to Cuzco as Bi-national Center Director, but I was asked to stay in Asuncion as the Student Affairs Officer, which was a wonderful assignment.

Shortly after I arrived, I suppose I came close to terminating my own assignment through my own ignorance. Stroessner was being inaugurated, and we had a delegation of modest caliber from Washington because President Johnson didn't want to be associated with the man. The Peace Corps Director called me and said, "I've got someone coming over to dinner and I wish you would join us." It turned out that it was Graham Greene. He and I seemed to hit it off, and in my total naivety I said, "Tomorrow we are going out to the Iguazu Falls. We have a plane, and I'm sure there is an extra seat on it. Would you like to join us?" Greene replied, "I'd love to." Well, I did this without calling or consulting anybody. Early in the morning, we showed up at the airfield, and the ambassador looked at me and said, "Who's the hell is that?" I said, "Graham Greene, I hope you don't mind if I bring him along." Well, the ambassador was a very conservative Republican judge from New Mexico, Benigno Carlos Hernandez. There was this long silence (and I realized I could be screwed) and he drawled, "You know, I always wanted to meet the bastard." The two got along famously. I have wonderful pictures of Ben Hernandez and Graham Greene. And that went into my efficiency report as a particularly shrewd move on my part, but of course it was simply a mindless blunder that turned out well.

Q: How was the social life for a bachelor in Asuncion?

JOHNSON: Just adequate. We had a monthly poker game among several junior officers. Paraguay was still a very traditional society. With few exceptions, anytime I invited a Paraguayan woman to dinner I had to take along her sister or aunt. I dated an embassy secretary but we were on different wave lengths. Meanwhile I had been corresponding with Carolyn Fitch, who I had met at the Library of Congress. She had left Washington to spend two years in the Peace Corps in Ghana. I assumed that nearly all of Africa was in the southern hemisphere, so I suggested to her in a letter, "On your home to Oregon, why don't you come by Paraguay?" She did. Carolyn liked Paraguay, took Spanish lessons and found a part-time job teaching English. One thing led to another, and we went home and got married on December 27, 1969. It is a family joke that I married my lovely wife for her money. We used the $3,000 Peace Corps gave her at the end of her tour of duty to help pay student loan. Quite aside from her role as a loving and attentive wife, Carolyn was a great asset to my career.

Q: What was your training year like?

JOHNSON: Gene Karst was a nice guy but he was pretty clueless when it came to planning. I concocted my own program and filled in where there were vacancies in the embassy. For example, I was the commercial officer for two months. During that time I worked under the unofficial supervision of a wonderful local employee, Henry Cuppens, a Belgian immigrant. I regret that I avoided the administrative section. I would have greatly profited from a few weeks of budget and fiscal work. I did a bit of consular work while the head of the section was upcountry saving an American from a lynch mob. Our countryman had been accused of murder but his real transgression was philandering- a very dangerous habit in Paraguay. I also spent a month at USAID during which I wrote a report on a failed attempt to establish a college of liberal arts at the National University.

I spent a month as the ambassador's assistant answering correspondence from Paraguayans and screening visitors. When an American nun asked to make an appointment with the ambassador, I asked her what she wished to talk to him about. She replied, "I need several hundred dollars." "What is the money for?" I asked her. "Oh, I can't tell anyone that!" (No appointment.) A campesino wrote to tell the ambassador that he had heard on the Voice of America that every week hundreds of cars were abandoned on the streets of New York City and would we please send him one, preferably a sturdy jeep. I responded on behalf of the ambassador and explained that the vehicles were in such bad condition that he would not want one.

While still a JOT I prepared the budget for USIA Asuncion. Jim McKernan, the IO (information/press officer), had prepared the last several budgets. Shortly before he was to start on the new budget he was called back to the United States on a family emergency. Gene Karst, who getting ready to leave the country, asked me to do the budget. I pleaded with Mary Frisco, the CAO (cultural affairs officer), to help me. She replied haughtily that she "was too busy", so using the current budget as a model, I produced a new budget. I exacted my revenge on the CAO by shifting most of the resources of the cultural section to the press section. Unfortunately a few months later the cultural officer was sent packing following a bad inspection report and I took over most of her duties. Tom Martin, the new IO, was not always sympathetic to my pleas to shift some of the funds back to the cultural section.

Q: I assume you worked for more than one ambassador while you were in Asuncion. How would you compare them?

JOHNSON: It was a small post, so although I was very junior, I had extensive contact with both Judge Benigno C. Hernandez and Ray Ylitalo. Hernandez was a political appointee. He spoke excellent Spanish and knew everyone who mattered. He seemed to be well respected in the State Department. He was a very reserved, all business. Ray Ylitalo on the other hand was a career FSO (Foreign Service Officer) but well connected on the Hill. He reportedly owned his posting to his friendship with a senator. Ylitalo was a complete extrovert who wandered through the chancellery visiting informally with his American and Paraguayan staff. He was prone to offering lavish praise and to outburst of anger. Ylitalo was a bird hunter and we spent many Saturdays together. He had a special fondness for USIA and held our contact work up as a model to the other sections.

The Ylitalos had two daughters in their 20s who were often at post. I was best man at the wedding of the older sister. Carolyn caught the bridal bouquet and was the next bride.

Q: Did you have much contact with other agencies in the embassy?

JOHNSON: I spent a fair amount of time dealing with USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) on educational programs. I had several friends among the Marines. I socialized with Ltc. Bob Orbello, an officer the military assistance office. Bob's job was to help the Paraguay army improve its medical services both to its soldiers and to civilians. I realize military assistance in Latin America comes in for a lot of criticism but while I was in Paraguay the U.S. Army trained a number of Paraguay soldiers to be paramedics. They were often the only qualified medical personnel in rural areas. This was a very cost-effective program. Bob probably made more money buying and selling antiques than he did as a soldier. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of antique firearms.

I had a friend in the other agency, a delightful little guy who had spent many years in Cuba prior to Castro taking power. On a quiet afternoon, and there were many quiet afternoons at the embassy, I would call him and ask if I could join him for a cup of coffee. He invariably consented and he would regale me with accounts of life in pre-Castro Cuba. He was a great story teller.

Q: Posts like Asuncion must have attracted colorful people, right?

JOHNSON: Yes and no. The embassy was a mixed bag. We had some odd ball staff and of course there were legends about officers who had served there previously. One story concerns a frosty ambassador who discovered his nubile daughter skinny dipping the embassy with several Marines. Another story was of Pappy Winstead, who had been public affairs officer in the 1950s. It seems that Pappy convinced Washington to buy a sort of house boat that he could take up and down the rivers of the land-locked country showing informational films to the inhabitants. When the real purpose of the boafishing - became apparent Pappy was forced to sell the barge. However Pappy had the last laugh. His final overseas assignment was to a Caribbean country. Pappy inquired whether he could design his own packing crates. There being no prohibition in the manual, Pappy was given the go ahead. The crates were odd looking but held his household effects. Upon arriving at his new assignment he unpacked his household effects but left the crates to dry in the sun and then one morning some workmen appeared and by sundown Pappy had a 25 foot sloop. He had ingeniously evaded the regulation against shipping a pleasure craft at government expense.

Dick Wooton, Gene Karst's successor as Public Affairs Officer, was a fine musician. Over a period of about ten years he memorized every piano work by Johan Sebastian Bach. Wooton had a fabulous collection of jazz on reel to reel tapes. I copied many onto reel-to-reel tapes which helped save my sanity during an assignment in Liberia.

Wally Keiderling, the Bi-national Center Director, had a great passion in life: playing the balalaika. He once rented a train for an outing in the name of the bi-national center for his contacts. It was a great party, although I am not sure if it was a prudent expenditure of funds.

We had an eccentric chief of the consular section who built a one-man helicopter. Ed Costello, a USAID economist, collected guns, including a small cannon. We would hoist it on top of his VW station wagon and take it out to a gravel pit to shoot it. The first time we fired it campesinos crowded around, many of them down range. We told them to get back. They didn't. We missed our target and hit a date nut tree scattering nuts everyone. Suddenly the campesinos were gone. On the way back to Asuncion a small bus was tailgating us. I waved a Zippo lighter out the window as if to light the fuse. The bus quickly turned off on a side road.

Our economic officer had a familiar name, Charlie Brown. I sometimes went hunting with him. He had served in Mexico in the early 60s and told me a story that is typical of the nutty things Foreign Service Officers experience. It seems that an American family (father, mother, two teenage children and a grandmother) were vacationing on the coast. It came time to return home. The brother and sister persuaded the parents to fly back to the U.S. with the understanding that the siblings and grandma would follow a week later. Unfortunately a couple days after the parents departed, granny died in her sleep. The kids panicked and rolled her corpse up in a rug, which they tied securely to the roof of the vehicle and headed for the border. Not too far south of the Rio Grande, the kids stopped for gas and apparently both went to the restrooms at the same time. When they returned the car, cum rug and granny, was gone. After the shock wore off, they called the consulate. Charlie was duty officer. He drove up to meet the pair and interviewed them at length. "Their story was so absurd," he told me, "I figured it had to be true." In ensuring weeks a helpful Mexican doctor issued a death certificate so that the grandmother's modest estate could be settled. The car was eventually located abandoned in a remote village. There was no sign of the rug or its contents. Charlie surmised, "After the thief unrolled the rug, I doubt he ever stole another car, at least not from an American teenager."

Q: Was Asuncion a hardship post?

JOHNSON: Yes, in more ways than one. Shortly before I arrived the 15% differential had been abolished. We deserved that 15%. During the summer, November to March it was very hot. Temperatures in the high 90s were common. During the winter a damp cold in low 50s killed many Paraguayans. There was the threat of disease: hepatitis, malaria and rabies. Vampire bats were common, some with a wingspan of two feet. Because of a lack of good refrigeration, food poisoning was always a threat. The wife of a colleague nearly died from eating a deviled egg at a reception at the home of the foreign minister.

Unless you enjoyed the outdoors there was little to do in Asuncion. During my first year, the pouch arrived once a month, thus one would get five news magazines at once.

American Express canceled my credit card because, contrary to my instructions, it sent the bills to my home address and not to the embassy post office box. There are no letter carriers in Paraguay.

Driving was fun. When Paraguayans reached one of the city's traffic circles they often took the shortest route around the circle which kept you on your toes. They slowed down for stop signs and did not go through stop lights, because there were no stop lights anywhere in the country. Travel at night was particularly hazardous. I almost rear-ended an ox cart on the road to the airport. The campesino had only a dim lantern hanging on the back gate of his cart.

Q: It rains pretty hard in Paraguay, doesn't it?

JOHNSON: Sometimes the thunder clouds would be so dense that it would absolutely dark as night before the heavens opened up. One day I took a diplomatic pouch out to the airport and put it on a flight to Buenos Aires. It poured while I was on the tarmac and I was soaked. As soon as the plane departed I drove back into to town in my trusty VW bug. The skies had cleared but the streets were still awash. As I headed down Avenida Espana toward my home, townspeople waved me to use a side street. Well of course I knew the street was flooded and I was driving an unsinkable bug. I knew what I was doing, that is until the car began to rock gentle and fill with water. I had not reckoned with the space around the brake and accelerator. Grabbing an empty Planter's Peanut can I began to bail, which caused great amusement among the onlookers. Finally the car settled on the street in about 18 inches of water. Having had their fun, several boys helped me push it to the curb. A tow truck was called. My VW was dried off in a nearby Shell station and I was a little wiser that evening.

Q: Was it all bad?

JOHNSON: Of course not. Washington left us alone. Moreover we could hop on US Air Force transport flights on a space-available basis and fly all over Latin America. Carolyn and I took flew free of charge from to Lima. The food was wonderful. Beef, chicken and river fish were readily available. Immigrant colonists from Korea and Japan provided lots of great fresh produce. Asuncion had an excellent brewery. German colonists produced an "earthy" red wine. Restaurants in Asuncion were plentiful. You could sit out under the stars and listening to a trio of guitarists and a harpist while leisurely supping on a thick eye of the round with a salad of palm hearts. If you weren't careful, you could spend six or even seven dollars a person. We loved it.

Q: Was there much of a diplomatic life in Asuncion?

JOHNSON: I was a very junior officer so I wasn't invited to many diplomatic receptions except those in our embassy. I knew the German cultural attachï¿½. He would complain to me about the TV series "Hogan's Heroes" which ran to Paraguayan TV. He felt the series made the Germans look dumb and or evil. I never told him that our dog would bark furiously at any TV program that contained snatches of German, such as the World War II series "Combat".

During my first year at post I was befriended by a junior Japanese diplomat, who had a very large expense account. He was supposed to make valuable contacts in the Paraguayan business community, but since he spoke only very halting English and no Spanish, he couldn't do much. He loved to eat well and talk about movies. Every couple weeks he invited me to lunch at the most expensive restaurants. At the conclusion of the meal he would announce that I was Emilio Sanchez de Vega or some other fictitious businessman. Perhaps the embassy caught on, for he was called back to Tokyo.

Q: Was there a lot of gossip in Asuncion? After all, it was a pretty small town.

JOHNSON: I once suggested to my maid that she shop three times a week rather than six times a week. Her horrified response was, "And miss all the gossip?" Gossip was a form of free press. It was like today's internet - unstoppable. For example, the foreign minister was discovered having an affair with the wife of the chief justice. Scandal! Notch one for the foreign minister. The chief justice was banished to Brussels as ambassador. About a year later the foreign minister toured the European countries and called on all the Paraguay's ambassadors. What must have been a very strained dialogue during the tea party in Brussels made for savage commentary back in Asuncion.

Q: Paraguay is famous for its Nazis. Was the country full of Hitler's cronies?

JOHNSON: I once saw a picture of Hitler in a rural general store in the village of Hohenau in southern Paraguay. However there were no Nazi bigwig in Asuncion, at least that I knew of. However Joseph Mengele, the chief doctor of Auschwitz lived in Asuncion under the protection of the Stroessner. I am told the Nazi doctor had Paraguayan citizenship. My wife and I were friends with Israeli ambassador Verone and his wife. I asked the envoy one night over dinner why the Jewish state did not snatch Mengele in an operation similar to its capture in Buenos Aires of Adolf Eichmann. Verone looked at me sadly and replied, "You can only do that once." Actually there were good political reasons for leaving Mengele alone. Paraguay was very supportive of Israel in the United Nations and Israeli needed all the friends it could get in the international body. Mengele enventually died in Brazil. He drowned. I like to think an Israeli held his head under water. I certainly would have done so had I had the opportunity.

I never detected anti-Semitism in Paraguay. Unlike in neighboring Argentina, the Jewish community was small and not at all prominent.

Q: Can you define what a Student Officers Officer did?

JOHNSON: It was a wonderful position. I really had two jobs: one cultural and one political. Too junior to be given the rank of cultural attachï¿½, I was named "chief of the cultural section." I smoozed with artists and writers. Paraguay is full of bad poets. I also handled much of the Fulbright program and international visitor grants. Fulbrights are for an academic year and provide for Americans to study and do research abroad and for foreigners to do the same in the United States. I had a wonderful local staff to assist me.

As Student Affairs Officer I really worked for the embassy's Political Counselor, Dan Arzac, a great guy. He made no secret that he was gay and no one made an issue of it. My primary duty was to try to identify rising political figures among university students and young professional and cultivate them. I probably spent 80% of my time with members of the opposition.

In those days the embassies had real resources. For example, a political contact invited me to attend a two day meeting of the Radical Liberal Party in Conception, a town more than a hundred miles north of Asuncion. However the day before we were to embark on our trip, it rained hard and the road was closed- a common occurrence to protect the dirt roads from being rutted by trucks. No problem. I ordered a small plane and we flew up to Conception. His arriving in a private plane boosted his prestige and cemented our friendship. Later I wrote a detailed telegram to Washington describing the two day gathering. Other than the desk officer probably no one read my priceless prose. I also authored a lengthy analysis of target audiences for the public affairs officer. While declassifying State Department files 40 years, later I found the analysis and released it to the National Archives.

In the autumn of 1969 we had a Student Affairs Officers conference in Quito with about 20 junior officers from all over Latin America. It was a wonderful opportunity to exchange ideas and meet colleagues. We had the resources in those days to organize and attend such conferences. It was wonderful. I used the trip to travel to see several cities in Ecuador, including Cuenca, where I met a very energetic Peace Corps Volunteer who was a real community leader. He was brash but likeable.

Q: You were the new boy on the block, what was our feeling toward Stroessner?

JOHNSON: He was a sort of caudillo. "Big Al", as many of us in the embassy called him, had grown with his job. He was an excellent politician with a common touch. Even the lowliest "campesino" could show up at the "Casa Presidential" and wait patiently. Eventually he would get his interview with Stroessner, who was not himself corrupt. He lived modestly. He attended state functions with his homely wife and spent the nights in a small house our near the airport with his mistress, whose photo was never in the papers. A single jeep with a couple of bodyguards followed him to and from home.

When a subordinates got too greedy he might find himself transferred to the a lonely station in the Chaco or perhaps a meaningless post abroad. There were, however, several figures in the government- including a general who later became president- who were completely above the law. Paraguay was rapidly becoming a major transit point for narcotics.

Meanwhile Stroessner was growing complacent. His figure as a traditional "caudillo" was becoming obsolete, especially as the country was opened up huge hydro electric power projects. As a result of electricity exports, millions of dollars flowed into the land locked nation and as the pie grew bigger, it became too large for one man to managespecially for an individual with only a very modest education. The Paraguayans had never had a democratic election, although there was some political freedom. Opposition political parties operated openly and elected members of the national parliament. Debates in the parliament were often heated. As in most authoritarian states, the limits on political agitation were unwritten but perceptible.

Today Paraguay is democratic, but the average Paraguayan is worse off. Corruption, inflation and crime are all way up. There are car-jackings in Asuncion, something that was unheard of in the late 60s. There has been a huge influx of illegal immigrants. If I were a campesino, I would rather live in an egalitarian society with an authoritarian government than in an authoritarian society with an egalitarian government. You could compare with another Latin American county which might have a democratic government but also racial discrimination against the Indians. In Paraguay anybody can be president. Skin color does not matter. Connections do.

Q: Regarding narcotics, how big a role did Paraguay play in narco-trafficking during your time there?

JOHNSON: First an aside about a little cloud that hung over my position when I arrived. My predecessor and the State Department junior officer trainee were kicked out of post for bringing in marijuana seeds through the diplomatic pouch. They shared a house and for some reason fired their gardener who got back at them by telling the administrative officer, who doubled as the post security officer, that they were growing more than petunias in their garden.

One of my political contacts told me that a general was growing a lot of marijuana on his farm. I was skeptical and asked for proof. A few weeks later when I returned to my office after lunch, my secretary told me that my contact had stopped by and, finding that I was not in, left a bag on my desk. I read the newspaper for a while ignoring the bag. Finally my curiosity got the better of me and I opened it and found about of 100 grams of marijuana. Fortunately the Marines, who had swept my office for unsecured classified material, had not opened the bag. I announced to my secretary that I had forgotten something at home, and with the bag securely tucked under my arm, headed for the airport- a long lonely road. When no cars or pedestrians were visible I dumped the bag into a ditch and returned to the embassy. I asked my political pal not to leave anymore presents on my desk.

As for drug trafficking in and out of Paraguay, until 1971 the embassy was apparently unaware that one of the biggest smugglers on the continent was operating at the edge of Asuncion. Frenchman Auguste Joseph Ricord, a former Nazi collaborator, was smuggling a ton of pure heroin to the USA annually through Paraguay. I don't recall how the embassy found out about him. We did not have a resident DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) agent. Ricord was living in an unassuming home and, as I recall, operated a restaurant as a cover for this operations. He was arrested by Paraguayan authorities in early 1971. The U.S. wanted him extradited to face trial in our country however we had no treaty with Paraguay governing drug trafficking. Record was an embarrassment to the government in Asuncion and the Frenchman's demise probably could have been arranged without too much trouble. "He tried to escape and....." However Washington wanted him alive for interrogation. Ironically the case was assigned to the judge who was the husband of the embassy Spanish teacher. This particular judge happened to be one of the really honest men on the bench in a country were justice was often for sale. Meanwhile, Ambassador Ylitalo was a by-the-book former FBI agent. Thus as far as Ylitalo was concerned everything had to be perfectly legal. Meanwhile Washington was going nuts trying to get its hands on Ricord. I don't know how extradition was arranged because it occurred after I departed for my next assignment. The story had a happy ending: Ricord was sentence to 20 years in prison in 1973. I hope he did every day. [For details on the case, read Evert Clark's and Nicholas Horrock's Contrabandista, Praeger Publishers, 1973.]

Q: You mentioned looking at political people. Here you've got Stroessner, the caudillo. What were the political parties? How did the embassy envision the role of these politicians?

JOHNSON: I think our main role was to foster the economic and political reform. Paraguay played no role in the cold war and it certainly was not necessary to encourage the government to be anti-communist. The people I felt the strongest affinity for were the reformists within the Colorado party, because they had to walk a fine line. If they moved too fast, then they were pushed aside or even got in trouble. If they didn't move fast enough, they risked being shunted aside by other reformers. I think in the long term the reform movement within the Colorado Party had a major effect on Paraguay's development.

I had excellent contacts with student leaders. I worked hard at nurturing these contacts, and young "politicos", both in the Colorado Party and in the opposition, were receptive to dealing with American diplomats. The most satisfying aspect of my assignment was sitting on the low wall in front of our house reasoning with student leaders, many of whom were bitterly opposed to the Stroessner regime and skeptical of US foreign policy.

I remember on one occasion the President of Argentina paid a state visit to Paraguay. A number of students ignored government warnings and demonstrated against the Argentine caudillo. One of them, Jorge Lara Castro, a good friend whose mother was a leader in the opposition Radical Liberal Party was beaten very savagely. His mother, Carmen Lara Castro, visited him in the hospital, which was near the American Embassy. Jorge's face all swollen and he was in great pain. Jorge tried to whisper something to heshe couldn't understand him at first, and she told me - and I take this as a very high compliment more of American foreign policy than of me personally - "Tell Tom. Tell Tom." Soon after leaving the hospital Mrs. Lara Castro called me and described Jorge's condition. I immediately briefed the ambassador, and the embassy made a formal overture to get Jorge released. A few days later I was attending a session of the national parliament and Jorge was released to his mother on the floor of the parliament. Jorge's release triggered a heated debate during which an opposition deputy insulted the Colorado deputy. A fist fight broke out between the opposition and the Colorado deputies, which I reported by cable in very florid terms. I received a commendation for the cable.

To help demonstrate the embassy's continued concern for Jorge's welfare, I drove Jorge to doctor's appointments for several weeks. The police, who had staked out the Lara Castro residence, noted my presence but did not follow me.

About ten years later while I was serving in Mexico City I heard that Jorge was also living there. I tried to contact, but I didn't try very hard. I was afraid if we met one another again we might find we had grown apart.

Q: Did the government always deal so brutally with the leaders of the student opposition?

JOHNSON: No. I think the government preferred to exile its opponents. Jorge Lara Castro had publicly provoked and embarrassed the regime, thus it reacted violently. One of Jorge's associates, a young physician, Diogenes Gallagher was sent into "internal exile". He was ordered to run a rural health clinic in the south central part of the country for two years. Carolyn and I visited him there one weekend. He showed us around the village and gave us a tour of his little clinic. Then we sat down in the shade of a large mango tree and I asked our host, "I bet you miss the excitement of Asuncion."

Diogenes laughed and recalling the folk tale of Brer Rabbit and the Briar Patch, he said, "Stroessner doesn't know it, but he did me a great favor. This is my briar patch. Today I sutchered a deep machete wound on a man's leg. Later I certainly saved the life of a woman who had been bitten by a viper. I have delivered over a one hundred babies and treated countless children for disease. To hell with politics! I am a physician. I don't know if I will ever go back to the "good life."

One student who got into big trouble had no political motives. A young neighbor was cramming for final exams when the family next door acquired a very noisy parrot. The student asked the family to keep the parrot inside so he could in peace however he was rudely rebuffed. Fed up with the screeching, he blasted the bird with his shot gun. Within a couple hours later plain clothes police arrested the student. It seems that the next door neighbors were friends of President Stroessner and the parrot belonged to the general. After several months the student was released

Q: Latin American countries have a cherished tradition of exiling their citizens to neighboring nations. I realize that Paraguay was an authoritarian state, but were there exiles in Paraguay?

JOHNSON: That is an interesting question. I know there were some Argentines who fled the military dictatorship and were allowed to live in Paraguay as long as they refrained from politics. I also knew a couple of young Bolivians who had been living in Asuncion for five or six years. I asked one Bolivian what he thought about Che Guevara. He smiled and remarked, "Only one of those bastards from Buenos Aires could be so arrogant to imagine that he could go to a province whose language he did not speak, whose culture he was ignorant of and whose social system he looked down upon and think he could start a revolution. He got what he deserved."

Salvador Allende came to power in Chile while I was in Paraguay. Many wealthy Chileans, thinking the country would be taken over by Bolsheviks, sold their property and moved abroad. Some came to Paraguay, a bastion of anti-communism. Viva Stroessner!

On a humorous note, I was talking to a Bolivian student who confided in me that he knew for sure that the United States had placed nuclear powered submarines armed with ballistic missiles in Lake Titicaca. I suppressed a laugh and asked what advantage the great imperialist power would derive from having such a sophisticated weapon system in that remote body of water. He glared at me and announced, "Because the Titicaca is so high, the missiles can achieve greater distances more easily." (It is really hard to argue with such profound stupidity.)

Q: You think of Paraguay sitting there and assume it exists on illegal goods going back and forth from Brazil to Argentina and that sort of thing. What was that situation and what sort of role did it play in the country?

JOHNSON: It was still a very rural country. Only about a tenth of the population lived in Asuncion. As I have already noted driving was an adventure. When you came to a traffic circle, Paraguayans often took the shorter way around which was a harrowing experience if you were coming the other way. Most of the action was out at the airport. 707s would arrive from Raleigh-Durham full of cigarettes. They would be taxed about eight cents a pack and offloaded. Lots would be put on smaller aircraft. You'd see these little twin engine planes taking off at dusk destined to Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. As far as the government was concerned these exports were none of their business. It was a win, win for the Paraguayans.

I remember going with Carolyn to a village on the Argentine border. We were visiting Klaus, a German priest, and sitting on the porch of the general store. Shadowy figures materialized from across the little stream, the Rio Pilcomayo, which marked the boarder with Argentina. The men negotiated their business in hushed tones, exchanged goods and money and disappeared. Those who were nosy got hurt and of course, we didn't.

The priest lived a very simple life. His possessions consisted of a horse, a rifle, which he carried a rifle wherever he went, and a bed roll. Most of his meat came from animals he killed. He often invoked the power of the church in defending the rights of campesinos. The local authorities respected him and left him alone. With an important job to do and a minimum of possessions, I have often thought of him as the freest man I ever knew.

Klaus told me a wonderful story about the parsonage he often visited in Asuncion. It seems that the basement was infested with rats. Since the priest never went into the basement, where poisonous spiders also thrived, a parishioner provided the padres with a small rattle snake which soon fattened itself on the rats. The snake was named Freddy. The sun shone particularly brightly in the bathroom and the snake liked to warm itself behind a thin plywood partition which surrounded the base of the flush toilet. Although the rattler could not enter the bathroom, the priests were careful not to disturb its siestas. One day the monsignor came for lunch. After a hearty meal the monsignor asked to use the lavatory. The man of the cloth was wearing heavy boots and apparently while sitting on the toilet he must have kicked the partition, which occasioned an angry rattle from Freddy. The monsignor exited the bathroom his britches around his ankles and without the benefit of opening the door. The story of "el padre volando" (the flying priest) quickly made the rounds in Asuncion.

Carolyn and I knew an American priest in a village about 100 miles north of Asuncion. He ran a school and health clinic in what was a "company town". The lumber mill owned everything, including the store and most of the houses of the workers. One day the priest was taken ill and sought out the doctor at the clinic. The physician immediately diagnosed the problem as appendicitis and invited the clergyman to pull up his shirt, drop his pants and get up on the table. "Don't you want me to take off my boots?" the priest asked.

"No. That's not necessary", responded the doctor pulling on his surgical gloves and readying the anesthesia.

Life was tough in the campo. Infant mortality was very high. And while Carolyn and I could discuss almost any subject with this priest, the one thing about which he was absolutely irrational was birth control. In spite of Paraguay's high infant mortality rate and malnutrition among children, he insisted stubbornly that God would take care of the newborns.

Q: How did you travel in Paraguay?

JOHNSON: On official trips I used an embassy Jeep with four wheel drive. But most trips we made in our VW bug which made it over the worst roads. The government closed the dirt highways when it rained to keep them from being destroyed by trucks, so one had to be careful about the weather. I went on trips with USAID officers into the interior in chartered single engine planes. The aircraft carried sirens under their wings to scare the cattle off the run ways. The government operated a no frills domestic airline TAM (Transporte Aereo Militar). The planes were DC-3s flown by very skilled Paraguayan Air Force pilots. I know of only one fatality on TAM. A contrabandist was transporting a small refrigerator to Pedro Juan Caballero on the Brazilian border. The plane had a bit of a rough landing. Unfortunately the refrigerator was not tied down and the contrabandist was crushed when the refrigerator end up in his lap.

Q: Were there road blocks?

JOHNSON: There were and you had to be careful to stop. A couple years before I arrived at post a US military officer who was assigned to our embassy drove past a road block at night. Perhaps he didn't see it but a soldier stepped into the street and fired a single round from his Mauser. The bullet killed the officer's young daughter who was sitting in the back seat of his car.

One day I was visiting a Peace Corps Volunteer in the campo and we drove past some saw horses and little shack at the side of the road. I thought it might be a road block but continued on. Then I looked in my rear view mirror and a soldier was standing on the road pointing his rifle at us. I hit the brakes and jammed the jeep into reverse. I shot backwards and demolished the saw horses. The PCV and I got out the jeep, apologized and put the soldier's road block back together. The soldier looked at us stoically.

Q: What was the mass media like in Paraguay?

JOHNSON: Radio. Television was limited to Asuncion. As I recall, there was only one channel and it was black and white. Asuncion had two dailies "La Tribune" and "ABC Color". Both were good papers. Neither was a Colorado Party organ, although both journals accepted unwritten limits on press freedom. One of the twl have forgotten whicprinted a harmless joke about the Chaco War, a bloody conflict with Bolivia in the 1930s. Someone high in the government was offended by the irreverent tone of the joke. The reporter of the article suddenly disappeared. We learned that he had been given a month-long tour of the battlefields by two army officers. The journalist was then released after being warned against making light of the nation's sacrifices in future articles.

"ABC Color" was a tabloid which had a major impact on literacy. Paraguayan men and boys are avid sports fans. The daily contained extensive coverage of sports, particularly soccer and basketball. It wasn't uncommon to see men and boys huddled around the latest edition of "ABC Color" slowly reading the articles about their favorite team.

Q: How did USIA interact with the media?

JOHNSON: VOA produced packaged Spanish language programs on reel-to-reel tape which we placed on stations both in the capital and in the provinces. Many of the programs were devoted to rural development, which supported the economic assistance efforts of USAID and the Peace Corps. Most of the tapes were about 20 minutes long.

We also provided film clips to the television station on events such as our successful effort to put a man on the moon in 1969. USIA delivered a steady flow of printed material to the newspapers which usually appeared without attribution to USIA. We never paid for placement.

USIA Asuncion published the only TV guide in the country. In addition to the program schedule we included articles on American culture and international development. The guide was of course in Spanish. In the 60s and 70s the Agency had a very large book program which subsidized the translation into Spanish of hundreds of American titles.

Q: You were Paraguay in the days when 16 mm. film was a major medium for USIA. What was that like?

JOHNSON: Film had a big advantage over its successor, video tape recordings, in that you could reach a large room full of people with a 6' x 8'screen. USIA had a large production and acquisitions budget for film. Most of the films we received were documentaries and were in Spanish. I recall one long weekend Carolyn and I and Dominquez, my audio visual technician, drove deep into the campo to a rural community where we showed films to people who had never seen a motion picture. Some of the campesinos had a hard time understanding how the image was projected on the screen. They clearly enjoyed the evening and presented us, particularly Carolyn, "la senora alta" (the tall woman) with fresh eggs and produce.

Carolyn and I endeared ourselves to many Peace Corps volunteers by showing films in their villages. I am not sure if the films had much of an impact on rural audiences, since many spoke on their native Guarani.

Q: Describe briefly the nation's economy.

JOHNSON: The large majority of Paraguayans were involved in agriculture, mostly subsistence farming. The campesinos had chickens and pigs and raised a few crops on small plots of land. Yucca was the main source of starch but it contained few vitamins. Hundreds of farm laborers worked as cowboys on large ranches. Particularly in the Chaco, the western half of the country, estancias were huge. Rainfall was limited and unpredictable thus five acres were needed to raise a single beef cow. Total annual exports in 1970 were only about $64 million, primarily beef and lumber. Today the annual value of Paraguay's exports exceeds $3 billion.

Incidentally in 1970s according to our statistics on exports, Paraguayans smoked more American cigarettes per capita than any populace in the world. Of course the vast majority of the cigarettes were re-exported as contraband to neighboring countries.

Q: How about U.S. investment in Paraguay?

JOHNSON: The total value of U.S. investment was a few million dollars. Americans owned several ranches and a slaughter house. In the mid-60s about 25 families bought land in northeastern Paraguay near the Brazilian border. Their goal was to produce coffee for the U.S. market. Paraguay incidentally was the only country in the world that sold more coffee than it grew. (Since it couldn't fill its own quota, it smuggled coffee in from Brazil, repackaged it and sold it as its own in the U.S.) Unfortunately frost wiped out the coffee plants of the Americans three out of the five years. Nearly all gave up and went home. Clarence Johnson, the leader of the colony, stayed in Paraguay and is probably buried on his failed coffee farm.

Q: How did Paraguayans view the U.S.?

JOHNSON: Most Paraguayans had a favorable opinion of the United States. No other country in the world has a state named after a US president. Rutherford B. Hayes arbitrated a border dispute between Paraguay and Argentina, in which Paraguay got most of the land in question. Of course some Paraguayans thought the CIA controlled the world and Peace Corps Volunteers were sometimes asked what they were up to. One PCV we knew in the southern part of the country finally responded to persistent queries from the village police chief with the confession that he was sending parcels of chicken feathers to NASA.

"What does NASA need our chicken feathers for?"

"Well, chief, you have probably noticed that the Russian space craft come down to earth on solid land while the US capsules have to be retrieved out of the ocean. We have determined that the softest chicken feathers in the world come from chickens here in the southern part of Paraguay. For the last two years I have been sending back quantities of feathers which will be made into a big pillow which some day our astronauts will land on in the Arizona desert."

"That's very logical. This will be our secret." The police chief never bothered the volunteer again.

Q: What was the role of the Catholic Church in fostering reform in Paraguay?

JOHNSON: By the late 1960s, the church was a major actor in the reform movement. About 95% of Paraguayans are Roman Catholic. Jesuit priests were particularly active in the Catholic University. We sent one Jesuit, father Oliva, to the United States on a 30 day International Visitor Grant. When he returned Ambassador Ylitalo went to the airport to receive him and make sure the government let Oliva ofthe plane. Eventually the authorities revoked Padre Oliva's residence permit and expelled him from the country. I later visited him in Chile.

The police imprudently beat up a priest and the officers responsible, including the chief of police, for the act were barred from entering churches. This was particularly painful for the police chief who could not attend the wedding of his daughter.

Q: Back to smuggling. Did smuggling play any role in the political situation? Were there pro-smugglers and anti-smugglers?

JOHNSON: Sure. The opposition was constantly harping on the corruption in the government but it was so institutionalized both Colorados and opposition benefit. My wife, who was a teacher at the international school, noticed on a registration card of one the students under and father's occupation that one little boy put down "contrabandista." It was a thoroughly honorable profession. The taxes were so low on liquor and so forth that we didn't bother to carry much in the commissary. You could go down to the port. I remember entering a wholesale liquor store at the port. A Uruguayan naval ship was in post. An naval officer said stood at the counter and said, " I'll take twelve of this, ten of that, and eight of that and so forth." He was not talking about bottles but rather cases of Johnny Walker, Beefeaters and Old Granddad. At the conclusion of the order, an ensign handed a think pile of bills, thousands of dollars, across the counter. It was kind of Hong Kong free spirit in a way. I'm not so sure contraband was terribly pernicious to the society.

Q: I was Consul General in Naples and they used to have smuggling boats came in. There was a game they would play. Ships would be offshore, and motorboats, all painted alike. They would have dummy packages and the Guardia de Finance would come out and try to stop them. I remember members of the authority were having a dinner party, and after dinner in those days we all picked up a cigarette to smoke and they were talking about this. I asked how many of you have a tax stamp on your cigarettes and not one of them did.

JOHNSON: At least the Paraguayans had tax stamps. As far as the government was concerned, it was the other country's problem for having too high taxes.

Q: You can't ask for a South American country more remote, but this was a time of great protests about our involvement in Vietnam. Did this cause a ripple in Paraguay?

JOHNSON: It did. In fact, not long after news got out about the My Lai massacre, one of my employees quit. He said to me, "I love my work but I can't be associated with a country that committed My Lai." Human rights played a key role in our foreign policy toward Paraguay. We were the number one aid donor to Paraguay. We tied the release of political prisoners to continued aid. We persuaded the government to permit exiles to return to Paraguay and we cajoled the regime to release political prisoners and allow them to leave the republic. When I arrived in Paraguay in 1968 there were an estimated 200 to 250 political prisoners behind bars. Three years later the number was down to less than eighty. Of those eighty, some may not have even been genuine political prisoners.

We had one terrorist attack while we were there. It was against the Israeli embassy. PLO assassins killed one Israeli and wounded several more, including my neighbor, a second secretary. The three gunmen were reportedly quickly captured and interrogated for a few hours and then shot.

My main security concern was not terrorists but rabies which was rampant in the country and spread by vampire bats. Sometimes vaccinated animals got rabies because corrupt importers of medicines sold outdated or diluted vaccine. One evening we learned that a neighbor's dog had been diagnosed as rabid. During the next several hours I counted more than 50 shots. Any dog running free was cut down. The following morning the streets around our house were littered with the bullet-ridden corpses of dogs and cats. Paraguayans have an admirable sense of community activism.

Q: I'm told that you had to be careful at night because of packs of dogs.

JOHNSON: One night my wife and I were out walking. I usually carried a gun for that reason. We came over a hill and there were about ten dogs coming right at us. I stuck my hand in my pocket and no gun. It was a nightmare. Fortunately there was a rock at my feet. I threw it. My aim was perfect. I hit the lead dog. The pack swerved and was gone. Then I realized that the pack was not coming at us, but was composed of a couple of bitches in heat and their suitors coming behind them. If I had reached in my pocket and pulled out my 25 caliber pistol and shot a few of these dogs, the life insurance policy on my own dog would have been canceled that night. I'm glad I didn't have a gun. Except in rare instances, I don't believe diplomats should be armed.

Q: Was there any spillover from world terrorism other than the PLO? I'm not sure of my time, but in Uruguay the Tupamaros, were doing their thing? Was there any reflection of this?

JOHNSON: No, Uruguay was very distant. Carolyn and I transited Montevideo shortly after Don Mitrione, an AID officer, was killed. The streets were empty. We registered at the hotel as "Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Smith." No one asked to see our passports and we ate in the hotel.

About a year later we were in Santa Cruz in eastern Bolivia, when we were told that there was a rumor that someone was going to kill a gringo that evening and that we should leave our hotel for the relative safety of the consul's residence. Our colleague had a revolver in one hand and a glass of booze in the other. He assured us in slurred speech that we were quite safe. Carolyn and I retired unusually early that evening. The next morning the Bolivian government provided us with a very professional bodyguard who stayed with us until our plane departed for Asuncion.

Q: Did anyone ever try to seek political refuge in the embassy while you were there?

JOHNSON: Late one night a Paraguayan employee arrived at our house and awakened us. She told me that a cousin was apparently being sought by the "piribui" (those who walk on hair) e.g. secret police. She wanted to know if I could help him. I agreed to talk to her cousin who was waiting outside. I don't recall what his problem was but I suggested that he remain in my living room while I consulted with the embassy political counselor, Dan Arzac. I drove over to Dan's house and related what had happened. Dan agreed that while the man's concerns were credible, it was probably not necessary for him to try to flee the country. Early the next morning, Dan made called some contacts in the ministry of interior and arranged for an official to interview my employee's cousin. No American attended the meeting, but the matter was quietly settled and the man was not arrested.

Q: Did attacks on American diplomats elsewhere in the world have any effect on your life in Asuncion?

JOHNSON: Ambassador Gordon Mein was shot to death in Guatemala in 1968, but that was regarded as too far away to change our tranquil lives in Paraguay. However the kidnapping of our ambassador in Brazil changed things. That evening Carolyn and I had a gathering at our house for student leaders and a number of young Americans, including the two daughters of Ambassador Ylitalo, who showed up with two burly Paraguayan escorts. One of the student leaders promptly asked me why I allowed members of the hated secret police in my home. I pleaded ignorance and asked one of the sisters what was up. She explained that Ambassador Elbrick in Brazil had been kidnapped and that they had been assigned bodyguards. I had to act quickly to prevent my guests, most of whom were members of the opposition, from leaving, so I ordered the bodyguards to wait outside. At first the cops refused to leave, but then I invoked diplomatic immunity for my household and gave each a glass of Scotch. They sat on the low wall in front of our house and enjoyed their drinks.

A few weeks later Ed Costello and I were bird hunting with Ambassador Ylitalo on a large ranch. Ylitalo had refused police protection. Suddenly four horsemen approached us. Perhaps foolishly, I had secretly appointed myself the ambassador's bodyguard. I reached in my game bag and dropped off the safety of my 9 mm pistol. Ylitalo heard the click and asked me what I was doing. I smiled dumbly as the horsemen drew closer. The Paraguayans rode up to the other side of a fence and stared down at us from a distance of about ten yards. Apparently their curiosity satisfied, they nodded silently and rode away. The muzzle of my gun followed their departure. Perhaps my actions that day were ill advised. On the other hand, I figured that in a hostage taking situation, junior officers are expendable.

Q: So was security at the embassy tight?

JOHNSON: I recall being called in at 3:00 a.m. to handle an urgent message. I put on my bathrobe and drove up to the chancellery. The gate to the compound was open. The door to the chancellery was open. The Marine guard handed me the urgent cable which of course was not so urgent. I noted "no action required" and was back in bed ten minutes.

Q: Did Henry Kissinger or anyone else make trips down there?

JOHNSON: Dr. Kissinger never showed much interest in Latin America. I believe he once referred to South America as, "a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica."

However I was in Asuncion for the not so famous Rockefeller Mission. Nixon sent his former GOP rival to survey the economic needs of Latin America. The whole thing was a joke. Americans studying the needs of others while awakening unfulfillable expectations.

I was in charge of the youth portion of the governor's visit. I set up a dinner at my home for youth leaders with the mission's youth advisor. Young political leaders came to meet with the big gringo. At a time when we were cutting back on economic assistance, yet Washington sent a delegation around Latin America asking how it might provide more assistance. A lot of us in the embassy were ashamed of the costly charade. The Paraguayans presented Rockefeller with a wish list that was absurd. They wanted among other things, a new railroad.

When Rockefeller arrived at the airport, two things amusing things happened. When Rockefeller got off the airplane, he saw lots of people waving red flags. He was visibly taken back, but was assured that in Paraguay red is the color of the ruling Colorado party and that he was perfectly safe. So Rockefeller almost sprinted down the stairs to glad-hand the reception committee. Perhaps being a man of diminutive stature, Rockefeller appeared to be happy to be among other vertically challenged people.

Meanwhile his press plane missed the warm reception because it was late getting off the ground in Brazil due to a problem with a reporter's passport. When the press plane arrived I was sent up to check the mood of the journalists. I peeked in door and was welcomed with applause. The carrier had opened the bar and these guys were totally schnockered. On the way into town I had to restrain them from leaning out the window shouting at girls. The trip was a meaningless boondoggle and they knew it.

Q: Speaking of the press, how did Stroessner get along with foreign correspondents? I gather there was not much of an international press corps in Asuncion.

JOHNSON: To respond to the second part of your question first, there were zero correspondents in the Paraguayan capital. As for "Big Al" and the foreign reporters, he handled them shrewdly. He would agree to see a journalist and then would let him hang loose for a couple of days. The journalist would enjoy the great food and Argentine wine and modest strip shows. Then the phone would ring about three a.m., and an aide would inform the groggy newsman that the President will see him in 45 minutes. Well guess who had the initiative for the first half hour of the interview which usually didn't last more than 45 minutes? Stroessner was no fool.

Q: What did you do for fun in Paraguay?

JOHNSON: The embassy was divided between the tennis players and the fishermen/hunters. There were lots of excellent tennis courts and plenty of time to play. I did some fishing in the rivers but what I really loved was bird hunting. Two USAID officers, Ed Costello and Tony Kranaskas, spent many Saturdays hunting. Rising before dawn we headed out into the countryside, stopping briefly in a village to buy fresh "cicha", a native bread baked with cheese. It was delicious when it was hot and useful as an anchor when it was cold. Ambassador Ylitalo sometimes joined us. He was an excellent shot.

We also spent many weekends on ranches riding horseback and hunting. I proposed to Carolyn on a starlit night on an estancia of more than a quarter million acres.

Carolyn and I spend many weekends visiting Peace Corps volunteers. We always took along some item from the embassy commissary, such as chocolate chips, and a bottle of bourbon. We often invited volunteers to parties at our home. One weekend we were driving through a German colony when I heard the unmistakable sound of a Bavarian band. Rounding a curve we saw nestled among the palm trees a "Turnverein" e.g. (gymnastics club/recreation center. Then it dawned on me that farmers were celebrating Fasching (carnival). I spoke to an organizer in German and we were invited to have as much lager, sausages, sauerkraut and pig shanks as we could hold. The evening came to a bleary conclusion at the Kegelbahn (nine pins).

Q: Did you visit the border areas with Argentina and Brazil?

JOHNSON: I have already related our foray into the Chaco along the Pilcomayo River which separates Paraguay and Argentina. That area of the Grand Chaco, by the way, is named after President Rutherford B. Hayes, who arbitrated the demarcation of the border between the two nations. We saw a copy of the agreement on the wall of a frontier city hall. We also traveled up Salto de Guaira, which is now the site of the largest hydroelectric power dam complex in South America. When we were there the border was literally a board fence in the rain forest. We crossed the river on a wooden ferry. On the Brazilian side the local "commadante" received us warmly and hosted us for lunch. He had received academic training in Kansas. Later in the day we ran across a colony of sixth generation Hessians, whose ancestors had fled to Brazil to avoid military conscription. They spoke a dialect of fossilized German which was long extinct in the fatherland. I could barely understand them. I wish I had had a tape recorder.

Carolyn and I spent a long weekend in a colony of American coffee farmers outside Pedro Juan Caballero on the frontier with Brazil. The Americans had gone to Paraguay with the promise of cheap land and a good income from coffee. The land was cheap but their crops were destroyed by frost three out of five years. Nearly all had gone home and Clarence Johnson, the founder of the venture, died a broken man. The border between the two countries ran down the main street that separated Pedro Juan Caballero in Paraguay and Ponta Pora in Brazil. The area was notorious for contraband and drug smuggling. Disputes were settled "out of court." Bodies were regularly dumped in the middle of the main street making it inconvenient for either police force to investigate. On our way back to Asuncion, I asked a priest sitting across the aisle from us in the DC-3 if it were true that on an typical weekend, there were a half dozen "accidentados" in the twin cities. He thought for a moment and shaking his head responded, "No, senior, we have not had a weekend that quiet in a long time."

Q: Then in '71, whither?

JOHNSON: In late 1970 I learned that the position of Student Affairs Officer would be eliminated under the BALPA program which was intended to reduce Foreign Service staff and improve our nation's balance of payments. What a stupid idea. A few diplomats abroad had no discernable impact on our balance of payments. However I was ready to leave Asuncion, but did not have my onward assignment. Eventually Don Besom, my Career Counselor, sent me an apologetic cable noting that my paperwork had surfaced and that he had good news for me. I was to depart Asuncion in April for home leave and consultations Washington before proceeding to Heidelberg to be the Information Center Director. My immediate reaction was negative. I did not really want to serve in a city with such a strong American presence.

Carolyn and I arrived in the university city in July with a new Volkswagen which we had picked up from the factory in Wolfsburg. I had introduced her to Germany by taking her to first to Berlin. Carolyn was pregnant. I was in charge of imposing three story Amerika Haus with a library and meeting rooms. I had 12 employees and an ample budget. Carolyn found for us one of the nicest homes in Heidelberg, the ground floor of a sandstone villa at the corner of Bergstrasse and the Philosophen Weg. We had two bedrooms, a den, a huge living room and an extensive garden, plus the usual bath and kitchen. The garden had been the site of a temple during the years the Romans ruled Heidelberg. The rent was 1,000 DM per month, about $300, which was at the high end of the scale at the time. As was the custom, the previous tenants took most of the light fixtures with them. Shortly after we moved in she noticed a couple of bare wires sticking out of the wall above a sink and being more tidy than technical, she rapped the ends together. The shock knocked her backwards. A few days later Patrick, our first child was born. He has always had straight hair. Coincidence? I don't think so.

I was full of energy and idealism but did not have a clue how to run my own post. No one in Washington had briefed me on conditions I was to encounter. I had a short meeting in Stuttgart with the Branch Public Affairs Officer, but he was not very helpful nor were most of my colleagues at our embassy in Bonn. Everyone seemed very busy. I am not complaining. That is just the way USIA operated, at least in Germany: sink or swim. In its wisdom USIA assigned an officer to be Amerika Haus director in Saarbruecken. The poor guy had just lost his wife to cancer and as the only official American in the city, had no one to turn to for support. He lapsed into alcoholism which ended his career.

The Amerika Haus in Heidelberg was the target of numerous protests against the Vietnam War. My predecessor, a sensitive and cultured old gentleman, retired upon leaving Heidelberg, having aged far beyond his years. His mentally unstable wife remained in Heidelberg. I was given authority to have her committed to the local military hospital should I deem it necessary. The noisy anti-Americanism had contributed to his wife having an apparent nervous break down and the dissolution of their marriage. Fortunately I had Carolyn whom I could turn to when I had had a hard day and there were many to come, particularly in Heidelberg.

Heidelberg, Frankfurt and Berlin were the main centers of the anti-war/anti-U.S. movement. Marxism was very much in vogue at the Heidelberg University. I spent many Saturday mornings in the Amerika Haus with a dozen German riot police. The students sometimes threw a few stones at the building but they never attacked it. Perhaps they knew that there were restless policemen inside itching for action.

The police were concerned about my safety and advised me not to go the university, at least in any official capacity. I kept a low profile, but never felt that I was personally in danger. The main threat to Americans was the Red Army Faction (RAF) or Bader-Meinhof terrorist group, which had carried out a series of well publicized acts of terrorism. I reasoned I was too unimportant to merit their attention. However on May 24, 1972 the German police informed me that they had a credible but unspecific threat again American interests in the city. Theo Sommer, the editor of the nation's leading weekly Die Zeit, was scheduled to speak that evening at the Amerika Haus. The police advised me to move the event to another venue, which I did. My German staff searched the Haus from top to bottom and informed me that they could find no evidence of a bomb being placed on the premises. As a precautionary measure I closed the Haus early and sent my staff home. I was at my desk at 5:30 p.m. when I heard two booms in the distance. I quickly learned that the detonations were from car bombs that had been smuggled into USAREUR headquarters in automobiles. The bombs killed a captain and two enlisted men. The perpetrators, members of the Bader-Meinhof organization, who were later caught and served 20 years in prison. The program with Theo Sommer went off without a hitch. However the evening has always haunted me. I thought about calling a colonel at USAREUR headquarters when I learned of the bomb threat, I didn't. I left that call to the German police and the German police apparently never alerted headquarters. I still have a sense of guilt that had I called my army contact, security at headquarters might have been increased and either the bombers might have been scared off or they might have been caught. I can't tell you how much I wish I had made that phone call.

Q: Each of us has a closet somewhere with a ghost. You are not alone. Was the bombing the only threat you had in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: We had several of bomb threats called in but, as I recall, none caused the evacuation of the Haus. However a few weeks after the bombing of headquarters, we received a parcel from Beirut. It was wrapped in brown paper stained with oil, tied up with heavy twine and covered in an irregular pattern with stamps, all the characteristics of a possible bomb. I called the German police who carefully removed the parcel for examination. The next day the head of the bomb squad called me to ask me if I wanted the remains of several copies of the USIA publication Problems of Communism.Apparently the USIA Regional Service Center in Beirut sent advanced copies of the magazine to several posts and the parcels were packed between some well lubricated automobile parts. The German official said that his unit was more than willing to deal with any suspicious parcel we might receive.

Q: How was attendance at programs at the Haus when you arrived?

Lectures in the Amerika Haus in the early 70s drew only a relatively small number of students and were subject to interruptions. The first event I attended concerned American animated films, a soft topic. Shortly after the speaker began his illustrated presentation, a well aimed rock hit me in the back of the head. I winced and did not move. I was not going to give in to the provocation. There were no further attempts to disrupt the program and I was never subject to assault again. In an effort to draw more young professionals and professors, I made some events "by invitation only", which helped draw a more select audience and saved postage. I also held programs in the spacious living room of my apartment. I would have liked to have had many programs at my home but my representation allowance was only a couple hundred dollars a year.

Q: So did you spend much of your own money for entertaining in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: Cumulatively quite a bit, but we enjoyed it and were not paying rent or utilities. Sometimes we combined the official with the unofficial. For example, we had quite a garden party after Patrick's baptism which my father performed in a medieval church in the old city. The Germans, to my disgust, mixed orange juice with the fine French champagne I served.

Q: Moving from Asuncion to Heidelberg must have been quite a cultural adjustment.

JOHNSON: We had to get used to German punctuality. Shortly after we moved into our new digs, we invited some academics and their wives to dinner at 7:00 p.m. At seven I was still in my skivvies fixing the bar and Carolyn was in the shower and the doorbell rang. "Who the hell's that," I wondered. Our guests were lined up outside the door.

Q: How was the Fulbright program faring in Heidelberg in 1971?

JOHNSON: The Fulbright program in Heidelberg was in shambles. During the Vietnam War it was not "in" to study in the United States. I sat on the selection panel for the scholarships. In 1972 the panel turned down all the candidates as unqualified. A re-announcement brought better candidates.

Q: Did the Amerika Haus serve only Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: Fortunately my geographic area of responsibility, which was the northern part of the state of Baden-Wurttemberg, included Mannheim, which was about 20 miles west of Heidelberg. The University of Mannheim had departments of American-English Studies and Economics. Mannheim was a conservative city and the university was tranquil compared to Heidelberg. I spent a lot of time there.

Q: Tell me about your German staff.

JOHNSON: The German staff at the Amerika Haus was demoralized. My secretary, a thoroughly pernicious woman, dedicated herself to office politics, and when I did not seek her advice, she started sniping at me. I was eventually able to fire her and to retire my graphic artist, who did no discernable work. My most senior assistant, my program director, was a Sudeten German. Rudi Tshipula was devoted to the Amerika Haus and completely loyal to me. Unfortunately he was addicted to nicotine and alcohol and died in 1973. I will never forget his funeral. When we arrived at the cemetery, Rudi's estranged wife and her family stood on one side of the open grave. His mistress and my staff stood on the other side. Carolyn and I diplomatically placed ourselves at the foot of the grave. German custom called for each of us to drop a scoop of dirt on the casket. When the little shovel was handed to me, my hand shook noticeably. I was in mortal fear that I would drop the shovel into the yawning abyss.

Tshipula was replaced as program manager by a former employee who had taken a few years off work to start a family. Although she was not able to put in 40 hours a week, she was a wonderful advisor and colleague. The staff gradually coalesced into a team and morale improved greatly.

A: What was the physical plant of the Amerika Haus like?

JOHNSON: It was four storey villa at the edge of the old part of the city. I am sure it had 5,000 square feet of floor space. My spacious office overlooked a park. Shortly before I arrived the pop artist Christo showed up in Heidelberg. He asked the Lord Mayor Zundel if he could wrap the castle in plastic. No, the OB told him, the castle was partial ruin and it was hard to maintain. Next Christo asked if he could wrap the Rathaus in plastic. Zundel patiently explained that he presided over a coalitioan imposing sandstone villa around the corner of the main post office. Zundel called my long suffering predecessor and told him that the Amerika Haus was about to be famous, at least for a day or two.

Christo wrapped the Haus in plastic and was very pleased with himself. A passing student demonstration added anti-US and anti-war graffiti to his work of art. The solid burgher of Heidelberg were apparently not impressed.

Q: Did Bonn provide you with a car?

JOHNSON: Each Amerika Haus was supplied with a van or sedan. Heidelberg had a big black Chevy van. We parked it in a garage just down the street from the Haus. Unfortunately the vehicle was a little too high for the exit so we kept the tires slightly under inflated. Because of the black flat top, the van was hot on sunny days in the summer. Since the van had no resale value, I crawled up on its roof and gave it a good coat of white enamel. The van was easy to spot in a parking lot.

Q: You and your wife had one child while you were in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: We had three. Patrick was born on Fasching (Carnival) Tuesday, February 15, 1972. I announced his birth at a reception at city hall. I think the Germans were amused when I gave them the traditional cigar. "Next time how about a nice big American steak?" asked one.

Erik was born on Watergate Wednesday, August 8, 1974 a few hours before Nixon resigned. During her brief labor Carolyn had to contend with excited updates from AFN. We had a third son, Mark, who was born premature and died after three days.

Q: Heidelberg is such a lovely city. It must have been a great privilege to be assigned there.

JOHNSON: It was hard not to be enthralled with Heidelberg. I walked to work every morning across a bridge over the Neckar. I never tired of glancing up at the castle. There were wonderful outdoor markets and restaurants. We took many trips to Alsace to enjoy its cuisine and mountains. We were invited to a Grosse Zapfenstreich (a torch light parade) put on by the German Army on the terrace of the castle. Dating back to medieval times, the ceremony formally closed the taps on the beer and wine kegs. Over the years it incorporated a battalion of infantry to carry torches and a marching band. It is quite a show. One evening we attended a candle light dinner in the King's Hall of the Heidelberg castle. When we left the dinner we found the courtyard covered with new fallen snow. It was a magical evening which we will never forget.

Q: Did you get back to Berlin while you were in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: A couple times a year. Bob Blucker, an old friend from my student days, was serving at the Mission, the second of a record four tours in Berlin. On one memorable trip we arrived at the American Army check point at Helmstedt where we replaced the consular plates with US military plates so we would be under Soviet and not East German control. The NCO told me that there was a British officer who needed to be escorted to Berlin and had been waiting for some one to drive along behind him. I did not ask what the gentleman's rank or position was, for it was clear that he was important and occupied a very sensitive post. I was warned not to ever lose sight of him- no matter what. The sergeant also reminded me that I was not to exceed the 100 km per hour speed limit and that the minimum transit time was two hours and the maximum was four hours. I nodded politely to the mysterious Englishman and off we went. I quickly surmised that the Brit was in a big hurry. The speedometer of my VW station wagon climbed past 100 kmph to 120 and to 140. As we shot past trucks and other cars, I was sure the Vopos would take notice and chase us. I kept the Englishman in my crosshairs as we skimmed over the rutted highway. Carolyn smiled grimly and Patrick rattled his car seat happily.

Upon arriving at Drei Linden, the check point out of East Germany, a burly Soviet sergeant quickly processed the Brit who then disappeared down the autobahn toward the British, French and American check point. I drove slowly up to the guard house. The Russian saluted me and I handed him my papers. After a moment his eyes fixed on the stamp of the time I entered East Germany. He shook his head and announced solemnly, "Sir, you are much too early here." I grinned sheepishly and then motioned to the carton of cigarettes lying on the back seat. His face brightened and he erased the entry time and wrote in an earlier time. "Mistakes. Always mistakes," he muttered for my benefit. We were invited into the Soviet guard house "to use the facilities". When we returned, the cigarettes were gone. I wondered what it would cost to get a Russian to change Patrick's ripe diaper.

Q: You were in Heidelberg. Where was your boss?

JOHNSON: Good question. I had many supervisors, both American and German. In the USIA scheme of things I worked for Nelson Stephens, the Branch Public Affairs Officer in Stuttgart, my first two years. He was supportive but not overly interested in my efforts. He had his own problems. In 1973 USIA was reorganized. I reported to Bruce Koch in Bonn. Bruce had been Amerika Haus Director in Tuebingen. We had a very productive relationship.

The last two years of my tour of duty, 1973-75 was a time of great turmoil within USIA Germany. The CPAO (Country Public Affairs Officer) was McKinney Russell, marvelous linguist and a fine human being. However he and our common boss, Jay Gildner, the European Area Director, decided to reorganize USIA Germany along the lines of USIA Japan. They called the reorganization the "new design". Most of us in the field promptly termed it the "new disaster." Staff and resources were stripped from the posts in the field and centralized at the embassy in Bonn. No one asked the German employees what they thought of the reorganization. Hundreds of thousands of dollars of our scarce resources were wasted on useless renovations and "super graphics" in the libraries. Meanwhile and the quality of programming declined. As a taxpayer I was furious. As a public affairs professional I was disgusted.

Since the Amerika Haus Heidelberg was also a German-American Institute and received considerable support from the Germans, my operation was not greatly impacted by the shift in personnel and resources. I got half or probably three quarters of my budget from Germans. The USIA provided me with my salary, apartment, vehicle, program support, and books for the library. Meanwhile the Germans provided the Amerika Haus, utilities and funds to pay my German staff. I had a budget of over a quarter of a million dollars and for a second tour officer it was quite a responsibility

Q: Were you required to submit many reports to USIA Bonn?

JOHNSON: I sent reports on what I was doing on an ad hoc basis. During the last two years of my tour of duty I was appalled by the exaggerated reporting going to Washington from Bonn. I refused to contribute to the monthly cables. Finally Alvin Cohen, the Deputy Country Public Affairs Officer, called me on the carpet but I stood my ground.

Q: So dissent was tolerated?

JOHNSON: I had a good working relationship with McKinney Russell, who respected constructive dissent. His deputy, Alvin Cohen, and I had a less cordial relationship. McKinney visited me every few months and enjoyed meeting my contacts. He spoke excellent German and had a phenomenal memory. He impressed journalists and academics by reminding them what they had been talking about during his last visit and then picking up the dialogue exactly where they had left off. I was promoted when I left Heidelberg. When I returned to Washington, McKinney asked me to work for him. We have remained friends.

Q: Who controlled your budget?

JOHNSON: Because the Heidelberg Amerika Haus was a bi-national institution, it received most of its funding from the German federal, state and city governments. USIA paid my salary and housing. USIA also provided me with a mini-van and many of my programs. Because I was beholden to the Germans, I also answered to a board of directors, which included the Lord Mayor of Heidelberg, his deputy, the director the American/English studies program at the University of Heidelberg, a senior official from the labor unions, the president of the chamber of commerce, a mid-level bureaucrat from the cultural ministry Baden-Wurttemberg in Stuttgart, the Political Advisor to the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Army in Europe, a dean of the overseas program of the University of Maryland and my USIA boss.

The board met quarterly. I reported to the board on programs and administrative issues. My secretary had ingratiated herself to several German members of the board, which made it difficult to get their permission to fire her. On the other hand, the board was also a wonderful resource for advice. When I was having problems with the Social Democrats, I sought out the wise counsel of the labor union official. The president of the chamber of commerce provided me many good contacts to the business community. I worked closely with the University of Maryland dean on several major seminars. Hal Ekern, the USAREUR political advisor (POLAD), and I became close friends. We collaborated on numerous civil-military events. However my most satisfying relationship was with the Deputy Mayor, Hans-Georg Gerken. When the Haus was under attack by leftist students and budget-cutting bureaucrats, he always stood by me. I remember after one particularly bleak assessment, we retreated to a Gasthaus for wine. He turned to me and said, "We are friends. Call me Georg." In a culture where distance accompanies rank, I accepted his offer gratefully and took it as a real compliment.

Q: Did you have funding problems?

JOHNSON: USIA Bonn was continually looking for ways to cut costs and the German-Americans Institutes were always under the gun. The Germans, on the other hand, never wavered in their commitment to the GAIs. In the late 1980s USIA-Germany pulled out the American officers who were directors of the GAIs and cut off all funding. I am not certain how the other GAIs have faired, but the German board of directors of the Heidelberg house hired a very able German director and was very successful in raising millions of DM. Today the Heidelberg GAI, renamed the Schurmann Gesellshaft, is a very important cultural and educational organization. In fact, the building is more attractive than ever.

Q: Getting back to the student protests, was there a driving force behind these protests or did this just sort of rise up?

JOHNSON: There were several forces, including genuine indignation about U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Many of the ideas and tactics of the student protesters were copied from Berkeley and the protest movement in the United States. I think it's fair to say the Gaullist movement from France influenced the protests inspiring anti-US sentiments. The French gained a certain favor among the German students without, perhaps, their even knowing it. There was a long history of pacifism in Germany in the post-war period. It was not the first anti-war movement. There had been a major anti-war movement when Germany rearmed and joined NATO. Marxism and German romanticism were factors in the protest movement. Someone once said that the French armies control the continent, the British navy dominates the sea, and the Germans command the clouds. German university towns were full of fuzzy-minded Marxist philosophers, some of whom were eventually victimized by hard-liners. In the 1970s Herbert Marcuse was treated very rudely in Germany.

There was one more factor motivating the protesters which is often overlooked. The leadership of the protest movement was from my generation, children of parents who were soldiers and civil servants during the Third Reich. Unlike Japan and Austria, during the 1950s and 1960s, Germany underwent a successful reeducation process during which it confronted Nazi crimes. The U.S. had been the foremost finger-wagger. During the Vietnam War young Germans, who were tired of feeling guilty for the crimes of their parents, saw Americans mistreating innocent civilians and backing a corrupt authoritarian regime. Young Germans washed their hands of their parents' deeds. It was payback time.

By the 70s most of the original leaders of the student revolt had burned out. Not long after we arrived in Heidelberg, I received a call from Hannelore, a secretary I had worked with in RIAS when I was a student at the Free University. She told me that she was studying sociology at the FU and would like to visit me. Would it be okay if she brought her friend, Eckert, former student revolutionary, she asked. I responded that I looked forward to seeing her and meeting her friend. By the end of the weekend, Hannelore and I were no longer speaking to one another. She spouted one Marxist clichï¿½ after another and was full of self-righteousness. Eckert, on the other hand, told me he liked his job at IBM and thought that the student revolt had become self-destructive. He and I got along famously. Eckert and Hannelore, who has shed her former radicalism, are still in contact with Carolyn and me.

Q: Did the protesters ever take you by surprise?

JOHNSON: Just once. It was the first day of the spring semester in 1973. I had left the Amerika Haus to visit a sick employee. After I left his home I decided to have lunch with my family. I drove by the Amerika Haus at about noon and I saw the Viet Cong flag hanging for the balcony of the Amerika Haus. Being a very perceptive person, I surveyed the situation and thought that it was odd, so I went to the nearby police station. The police told me that students had quietly and quickly taken over the Haus. It was a brilliant commando operation. About 50 students had come down in small groups down the Hauptstrasse. My near sighted cloak room attendant thought they had come to see to an exhibit. One employee however had barricaded herself in my office on the third floor and had called the police.

A German police unit, called a "Hundertschaft," a 100 policemen in riot gear, had been mobilized. The Deputy Mayor and I joined the police across the street from the Amerika Haus. For about an hour we let the students weigh the consequences in case they were thinking about sacking the Haus. Time was on our side. The Deputy Mayor, Chief of Police and I agreed to allow the students to return to the university provided they caused no damage to the Haus. Meanwhile the policemen rattled their clubs against their shields. In good German fashion, the leaders of the action stationed themselves at the door and confiscated any books or other property the youngsters attempted to liberate. My staff and I were impressed with the thoughtful selection of books the students had wanted to pilfer. The Amerika Haus had the last laugh: The occupation of the Haus had clearly been a publicity stunt. Ironically, for the first time since the war, the newspapers went on strike that day. Thus by the time dailies resumed publication later in the week the occupation of the Amerika Haus was no longer newsworthy.

Q: I assume the German police were very supportive of our official presence.

JOHNSON: I had wonderful relations with the local and state police. They were middle class people who detested student radicalism and who appreciated the guarantee against Soviet expansionism which American forces provided their country. Once to show my gratitude I invited a group of uniformed police to the American Rod and Gun Club. I also invited an equal number of U.S. Army MPs from USAREUR headquarters. I asked both the Americans and the Germans to bring their side arms. I owned a pistol, although I never carried it for self-protection. I placed the Germans on one side of a long table and the Americans on the other side. I said "Put your guns down on the table, now walk around the other side of the table and take the other guy's gun and go out and shoot." The Germans had never fired a big 45. Kaboom, kaboom, kaboom, although they were not hitting anything they were having wonderful time firing big pistols. The MPs on the other hand had never fired a Walther, a much smaller weapon than the Colt 45. Pop, pop, pop the German pistol kicked less and made much smaller holes in the target but was more accurate than the Colt. After the shooting I provided lots of beer and sausages. We had a lot of fun that afternoon.

Q: Did you do any consular work in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: Very little. I had not taken the consular course in Washington and was not authorized to act as a consular officer. I did verify the identity of a number of US citizens submitting absentee ballots during the 1972 election and facilitate the replacement of lost passports. One Saturday morning I received a call from the police informing me that an American woman had been killed the previous evening by a bus. It seems thal have forgotten her namwas living with a couple of Germans at the edge of town and that she had gotten off a bus in the dark and walked into the path of a car. She was dead on arrival at the local hospital. The authorities could not find any identification on her and her German companions could not provide the address of her next of kin. Later that morning our mystery was solved when a Turkish taxi cab driver turned in her purse which he had seen at the edge of the road. In addition to her US drivers license, the purse contained several hundred dollars in American and German currency. Her remains were repatriated a few days later.

Q: Speaking of Americans, did you encounter any "ugly Americans" in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: The city had its share of noisy GIs, but they were a minor nuisance. The only time I had a confrontation with one of our countrymen was in Ecuador in 1969. After attending a Student Affairs Officers' conference in Quito, I was on my way to Guayaquil by train-tram. It was a beautiful trip on narrow gage railroad from the nation's political capital to its commercial capital. On one particularly steep decline we rounded a curve and in front of us on the track was a campesino on a mule with pack horse. Instead of bailing out and rolling into the ravine, the farmer tried to outdistance the tram, which in spite of squealing brakes, quickly overtook him, killing his horse and slamming him into stone wall along the tracks. Crew and passengers got out to help the poor fellow. A policeman put his mule out of its misery. As several men gently placed the campesino on a blanket and lifted him onto the tram, an American tourist began to take pictures. The Ecuadorians looked at the gringo in angry disbelief. I ordered him to immediately put away his camera. For some reason, he threatened "to report me to the embassy." I told him I was the embassy. Had he persisted in taking pictures, the Ecuadorians might well have attacked him.

Q: Back to the Vietnam War, how did you feel personally about that conflict?

JOHNSON: Not wise enough, not soon enough. I was never a hawk, but I guess I just didn't know enough about it to realize how un-winnable it was until it was too late. But it certainly affected my staff, and limited our programming. As I mentioned earlier, my staff and I had very limited access to the University of Heidelberg. I opened the House to skeptical youth. I was told I was doing so at a risk. For example, at a time when sit-ins were popular, I advertised a "play-in"- a jam session. Turn out was excellent, as was press coverage. I found that I could reach small groups of students with carefully targeted programs on programs on culture and the humanities.

If I may skip ahead a couple years, I will relate how I finally got onto the University of Heidelberg campus officially. A student contact asked me to give a talk on American voting patterns at a club. I prepared a provocative presentation. The morning of the event, I turned on American Forces Network and heard President Nixon announce that American forces had just mined the harbors of Hanoi and Haiphong. I phoned my contact and offered to cancel my program. He urged me to come anyway. He thought that the students were as weary of protesting the war as the U.S. was of fighting it. I arrived exactly on time, ordered a stiff drink and read a short press release from the White House describing the military action the president had just ordered. Silence. The students looked at one another and shrugged. Most had not heard the news. Most did not read a newspaper. I gave my talk and engaged in lively discussion with my audience. Afterwards I joined some students at the bar when one very large fellow approached me a bit menacingly. "Do you know what I am?" he slurred.

No I responded but I suspect you will tell me," I replied.

"I am a Communist. (Pause) Do you know why I am a Communist?" he belched."Okay, why are you a Communist?" I asked.

"Because my father is a big deal in the Christian Democratic Union." (a conservative political party).

I am not sure what I responded but Otto became "my Red". He accepted invitations to events at the Amerika Haus and greeted me warmly when we ran into one another on the street. Like most radicals of his generation, I assume today that Otto belongs to the Rotary Club and drives a Mercedes at environmentally-degrading speeds on the autobahn.

Q: Were you able to put on any purely cultural events at the University of Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: Of course we arranged for poets and writers to speak on campus. One evening the head of culture for the city of Mannheim and I offered a John Cage concert in the prestigious great hall of the university. The program drew a fairly large audience. I am not sure if we impressed or confused our listeners. The music was pretty strange. A few days later my secretary came hurrying into my office with a very worried expression on her face. It seems at Dr. Dr. von something or another demanded to speak to me and he was furious. I listened to about a half hour of a you-Americans-have-no-culture tirade, before I got in a word and then an apology. It seems that the piano we used for the concert and had retuned for the Cage music belonged not to the university but to the Bach Society and that the tuner had failed to retune the instrument as promised. Thus when the staid members of the Bach Society had their Thursday evening rehearsal, the great Steinway produced some very unexpected sounds.

Q: That was headquarters of our forces in Europe?

JOHNSON: The overall headquarters, EUCOM, European Command, was in Stuttgart. In Heidelberg we had the U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) and 7th Army headquarters. The commanding general was a four star, Michael Davidson, who had led our incursion into Cambodia. He was a fine officer and an inspiring leader. Carolyn and I were friends with Davidson's deputy, Art Collins, a three star, and his wife. Collins, a gifted organizer and a strong motivator, worked tirelessly to raise morale and restore professionalism in USAREUR. The Collins occupied a modest house just outside the fence from headquarters. When terrorists struck the compound in 1973 the blast blew in the picture window of their dining room while the couple was enjoying an early supper. Both dived under the table when they saw the flash. The drop leaf of the oak table was down which protected them from a lethal barrage of glass. When we sat at the table I could see the spot where one of the bombs went off, which was probably less than 50 yards away.

Davidson and Collins faced a real up hill battle rebuilding USAREUR., which was starved for material and human resources during the Vietnam War. The U.S. Army was at its low point. Many of the soldiers assigned to Germany had served in Vietnam and brought their drug addiction with them. We had particularly severe problems in the cities with soldiers trafficking and consuming drugs and sometimes victimizing German civilians. Robberies of taxi drivers were an all too common occurrence. To combat drug abuse, the army introduced random drug testing. One unit that showed a particularly high rate of abuse was a helicopter maintenance unit, something I thought of every time I rode in an army chopper.

Q: How were the enlisted men faring in Germany in the early 70s.

JOHNSON: Because particularly the Army had put nearly all its resources into the Vietnam War, USAREUR had been starved for funds. Much of our equipment was in terrible shape. For example, I took some German journalists to a firing exercise. When a cobra helicopter hovered overhead fired its Gatling gun, one round escaped the muzzle before the weapon jammed. A tank took up the fire support mission but it broke down and had to be hauled away. Our men were living in barracks that had housed the Hessians before they departed for the New World to fight George Washington and his men. One evening Carolyn and I were watching the film "The French Connection" at a barracks movie theater. During one of the final scenes the good guys are chasing the bad guys through an abandoned warehouse in which plaster is peeling from the walls and filthy water is leaking from the ceiling. One GI brought down the house when he shouted, "Hey, that's my barracks."

During the four years I was in Heidelberg the value of the dollar kept dropping which was really hard on the enlisted men who had brought their families over at their own expense and were paying rent which got more expensive from month to month.

Q: So were you involved in civil-military affairs as director the of Amerika Haus?

JOHNSON: Perhaps more by chance than design. USIA Germany was very loosely administered out of our embassy in Bonn. Those of us in the field (Cologne, Hamburg, Hanover, Berlin, Nuremberg, Munich, Tuebingen, Stuttgart, Freiburg, Saarbrucken and Heidelberg) had precious little input into the annual country plan, which was USIA Germany's contract with USIA Washington. USIA Bonn allowed the bi-national center directors (Cologne, Hanover, Nuremberg, Tuebingen, Freiburg, Saarbrucken and Heidelberg) to program independently. The Branch Public Affairs Officers in Berlin, Munich, Hamburg and Stuttgart were subject to greater control by the Country Public Affairs Officer and his deputy. The lack of communication was in part due to poor management by our bosses in Bonn and in part a tradition of letting the officers in the field act on their own initiative.

Several of us in posts near large military units worked closely with American Army and Air Force personnel to develop civil-military programs. USAREUR established a youth group called KONTAKT for enlisted men. (There still were not many women in uniform.) KONTAKT brought together young Germans and GIs for social gatherings and civic projects. I helped establish the Heidelberg chapter of KONTAKT, but given my agI was in my early 30and my ranUSAREUR treated me as a colonel, although my equivalent grade was only that of a majol did not participate in KONTAKT events, many of which took place in the Amerika Haus. While KONTACT probably never had a total of more than a few hundred members, it was significant in that after a hiatus caused by the Vietnam War, the organization helped get GIs out of the barracks and back into touch with German civilians.

Once I got to know my way around headquarters USAREUR, I decided to fostered ties between German and American professionals in law, education and medicine. In law, I brought together the law school of the University of Heidelberg and the Max Plank Institute for Comparative Law with the USAREUR Adjutant General office. My chief allies were the director the Max Plank Institute, whose name I have forgotten, and Brigadier General Will Pearson, the USAREUR Adjutant General. German professors and American military attorneys conversed about legal issues at gatherings at the Max Plank Institute and at the Amerika Haus. One speaker was a young captain who had helped defend Lieutenant Calley at his war crimes trial. Following a luncheon program at the American officers' club we visited an U.S. Army stockade in Mannheim. One of German law students had long hair and a beard. The stockade guards wondered if he might be dangerous. I told them that Hartmut was a co-president of the local chapter of the American Field Service and was quite friendly. Today he is a senior judge in Hannover.

In the area of education, I fostered ties between the American Studies programs of the universities of Heidelberg and Mannheim with the University of Maryland extension program at USAREUR. I set up numerous programs at the Amerika Haus and invited visiting American professors to dinners at my home with their German counterparts. I also established a series of weekend seminars at a retreat house in the rustic village of St. Martin on the Weinstrasse about 50 miles west of Heidelberg. The themes of the seminars focused on American Jewish and Black authors as well as current trends in American writing. About 50 professors and students participated in each seminar which started with a wine tasting Friday evening and concluded at noon on Sunday. Each evening there was fierce competition between Bacchus and Minerva. Accordingly I asked that Saturday evening everyone walk, and not drive, into and back from nearby St. Martin.

In the area of medicine, the Germans were much better equipped than the Americans. The only U.S. medical facility in the area was a modest hospital. George Patton died there following a car accident in1945 outside Mannheim. However the hospital had a number of excellent American doctors and a strong administrative staff, including Ltc. Bill Orbello, whom I served with in Asuncion. I arranged visits by the Germans and Americans to one another's facilities. The Germans were in the process of building a multi-billion DM polyclinic at the University of Heidelberg, which had facilities that made the cash-strapped Americans roll their eyes with envy.

During my four years in Heidelberg I worked with two State Department political advisors (POLADs) to USAREUR, Hal Ekern and Jim Moffett. Hal, a veteran of the Italian campaign in World War II, was the best POLAD I ever knew. He had a drawer full of commendations and a head full of knowledge regarding military issues that encompassed grand strategy and small unit tactics. He also knew Germany and its political system. Most POLADS are treated with deference by the military, but Hal Ekern was accorded the honor of being an insider. I had Hal speak to political scientists and invited him and his gracious wife Marge to many dinners at my home. He sat on the board of directors of the Amerika Haus and was a source of much cautious counsel. If I needed a contact in USAREUR, Hal and his efficient secretary Ingrid put me in touch with the right person. Hal died in March 2006 and was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

USIA Bonn recognized the importance of civil-military affairs and encouraged officers in the cities with a U.S. military presence to cooperate fully with their American and German counterparts. We had several conferences at EUCOM Stuttgart hosted by "Doc" Larson, a senior Department of Defense civil servant, and the EUCOM PAO Navy Captain Picket Lumpkin, a very able public affairs professional. Larson's specialty was civil-military affairs. He was a best civil-military affairs officer I ever worked with. Lumpkin was a first-class press officer. Both were completely fluent in German.

Prior to a conference at EUCOM Lumpkin warned us that we might be disturbed by a lunatic brigadier general, who was prone to shouting and taking over conference rooms. He said we should ignore him. Lumpkin confided to me after the meeting that the officer in question was George Patton Jr.

Q: How would you rate the quality of the US military public affairs officers you worked with?

JOHNSON: Public affairs was not a prestigious assignment in our armed forces. Most PAOs in the military did it as a secondary specialty. An officer got promoted for commanding troops or moving material, not cultivating journalists who, particularly in the Vietnam War era, were often viewed as the enemy. Neither the Army nor Air Force devoted much effort to training officers in foreign languages. For example, the night USAREUR Headquarters was bombed none of the public affairs officers was able to read a statement in German to the waiting media. Military officers were reluctant to deal with political issues. They were deathly afraid of embarrassing their command by making a misstatement. One public screw up could end an officer's career. Soldiers tend to think in quantitative terms, e.g. so many rounds of such and such a caliber shell on X amount of terrain and the enemy will be neutralized. In the Foreign Service we were much better prepared to deal with issues that were inherently ambiguous. I couldn't always convince my counterparts in uniform that although we were confronting no-win situations, we needed to simply persevere.

Sometimes the most sincere military public affairs officer made a mess of things. The worst press the local command received in Heidelberg concerned a youthful indiscretion one the part of one of our soldiers. One Sunday afternoon a couple young GIs and their German girlfriends were picnicking on the banks of the Neckar. Apparently no one was feeling any pain when one of the girls said she wanted to pet one of the swans swimming nearby. No problem. The gallant soldier waded into the river and swam out to the birds. Apparently feeling threatened, one of the swans pecked fiercely at the soldier who panicked and broke its neck. The mortal combat was witnessed by a number of animal-loving Germans. The MPs were summoned and the GI was arrested.

The officer in charge of community relations at the local barracks had a swan brought down from somewhere near the US base at Bremerhaven. With great fanfare and abject apologies to the community, the bird was released onto the Neckar. Unfortunately the local swans vigorously rejected the newcomer. The German press had a field day at our expense.

Q: Were you consulted by your military colleagues regarding this matter?

JOHNSON: Fortunately I was out of town or I might have shared in the fiasco.Speaking of fiascos, while on home leave in Portland, I noticed that a local firm called itself the Heidelberg Brewery. I phoned the marketing director and explained that I was the director of the American center in Heidelberg and that I would much appreciate it if he would send me some promotional material. Upon my return to Heidelberg I found a large box of coasters, mugs, ash trays and T-shirts. I distributed the items to German contacts, including to the director the local brewery. I ran into the executive on the street a few days later and asked cheerfully, "Dr. Weber, I hope you received the Heidelberg Beer mug and ash tray I sent you last week."

"Oh, thank you so much, Herr Johnson, we are suing them," he declared.

"You are what?!" I asked in disbelief.

"We are suing them," he continued, "an Oregon brewery has nothing to do with Heidelberg!"

"Herr Dr. Weber," I responded wearily, "I trust you realize that you will need a favorable verdict in an American court. Lots of luck."

Q: Did you cooperate with German military civil affairs officers?

JOHNSON: My counterpart in Heidelberg was a Captain Gieseke, a former U-boat officer who said his first view of the United States was through a periscope. "Jacksonville looked so peaceful." He was the spokesman for the Territorial Command South HQ, which coordinated the activities of the very excellent ready reserves in the southern half of the FRG. I went on several maneuvers with Gieseke. We had a great time hiking through the forest behind the troops. Once he played a very cruel joke on me. As we were headed up a long hill, he told me to go ahead and that he would catch up. As I was innocently walking past a patch of dense underbrush a machine gun firing blanks opened up on me. I must have jumped two feet in the air. Gieseke and the ambushers reveled in their "Schadenfreude" (mirth caused by pain).

I also befriended the French liaison officer, a lieutenant colonel, at USAREUR. I regret that I don't recall his name. He told me that he had been in Indo-china during the post-war years and had fought at Dien-Bien-Phu. Prior to being transferred to Heidelberg he had been at Fort Benning where he taught counter-insurgency warfare. He was convinced of the futility of our involvement in Vietnam and said it would tear his heart out when he saw the shiny sedans with the two officers drive slowly through the streets of the housing area at Fort Benning on their way to break the awful news to a spouse that she was a now a widow.

Q: What was the reaction of your contacts in USAREUR when Saigon fell?

JOHNSON: That was a night to remember. Carolyn and I were invited to the home of a colonel for a dinner. We were the only civilians. Our host and the other colonels had all served several tours in Vietnam. They had lost a lot of comrades in the war. Carolyn and I thought the dinner would be a real downer. Actually there was a feeling of relief in the room. The war had certainly not ended as the officers had wanted it to, but at least it was over. There was a feeling of closure.

Q: What were your relations with the media?

JOHNSON: Heidelberg had two dailies and Mannheim had one. There was no local radio station nor TV station in the city. Although I developed excellent relations with three newspapers, opportunities to place material with the German media were very limited. The German edition of the German language edition of the now defunct magazine "Psychology Today" was edited in Heidelberg. I got to know the editor. One day he dropped by my office and asked for my comments regarding an article he planned to include in the next edition. I don't recall the nationality of the author, but the writer argued that Americans had become a war mongering people. I asked the editor if he would make use of material refuting the article. He responded that he always tried to be fair and that if the text I provided were credible, he would print both pieces in the same issue. I explained my problem to USIA Bonn. My colleagues in Bonn sent an urgent request to USIA Washington which produced a most rational refutation of the war mongering piece. The war mongering piece was never printed in "Psychology Today."

One institution which I inherited from my predecessor and carried on with some success was the German-American Press Lunches, which met quarterly at a local Gasthaus. The Amerika Haus provided speakers on timely issues. German reporters, public affairs officers from USAREUR, and community leaders attended the round tables.

I cultivated several top journalists, including the editor of a Heidelberg daily. We spent a lot of time together. One Sunday he and I set off to an air show at the American air base at Ramstein. Traffic on the Autobahn slowed to a crawl 50 kilometers from the turn off. We assumed that there had been a serious accident. To our amazement nearly all the cars were headed to the air show. Thus at the height of American involvement in Vietnam, the Ramstein air show attracted over 300,000 Germans. These were mostly middle clasfamilies. The Germans love American ice cream and of course hot dogs and hamburgers, but particularly ice cream. Mounds of ice cream wrappers six feet high covered garbage cans. I am sure they also enjoyed the static exhibits and stunts by our fliers. Our outing generated a feature story noting that grass roots German-American relations were really pretty solid.

I organized field trips for journalists to attend joint military field exercises and tours of the iron curtain along the German-Czech border. USAREUR provided air and ground transportation and knowledgeable guides. I recall one dismal evening I was driving a group of newsmen to a briefing at a well concealed command center. As I rounded a curve on a back road I sighted a small red reflector in my path. I skidded to a halt only a few feet behind an American armored personnel carrier. I jumped out and banged on the side of the APC with a tire iron. I soldier opened a hatch. "You are parked in the middle of a farm road, "I roared, still shaking from fright.

"No, I am not," he retorted, "This a field... isn't it?"

I hit the thin layer of asphalt with the tire iron. "Does this sound like a field," I shouted.

"Damn, I am sorry, Sir," the soldier replied. The hatch banged shut and the APC lumbered off in a cloud of smelly exhaust toward some nearby woods. We continued on to our briefing and then enjoyed a hearty dinner in a Gasthaus. Accidents between civilian and military vehicles were common during maneuvers. The results were predictable. Sedans are no match for tanks.

Q: How serious was drug abuse among GIs in the early 70s?

JOHNSON: I never saw any statistics but I know from talking with USAREUR officers I know that it was regarded a serious impediment to the readiness of our forces. Some of the soldiers brought their addiction to Europe from assignments to Vietnam. Others were already abusing drugs when they entered the service and still others turned to drugs out of boredom while on duty in Germany. After the introduction of spot check tests using urine analysis, one disheartening report listed a helicopter maintenance unit near the top of list of units with the highest rate of drug abuse. I suspect that alcohol however remained the number one drug of choice throughout this period. Sometimes the military was its own worst enemy. For example, service clubs routinely provided happy hours with ten cent drinks. A simple DUI conviction ended the careers of many officers and NCOs.

Q: How did drug abuse in the US forces play in the German media?

JOHNSON: There were not many stories in the Heidelberg and Mannheim press. However the public and particularly the city governments were well aware of the problem and I certain there was a good deal of apprehension in the German public. Journalists realized that the US Army had a much worse problem than the Air Force and that the closer the Army units were to the Czech and East German borders, the greater their level of readiness.

Incidentally during the cold war East Germany not only gave safe haven to terrorists of the Bader-Meinhof gang but it also facilitated the flow of narcotics to the Federal Republic. In the 1970s a very large portion of the drugs, particularly heroin, being consumed in Germany was coming from Turkey, which was still growing a lot of opium poppies. Turkish couriers would fly into Schoenefeld Airport in East Berlin and take the subway into West Berlin and then continue their trips by land to West Germany.

Q: Weren't there border controls coming into West Berlin from East Berlin?

JOHNSON: No. The US, UK, France and the West Germans maintained that Berlin was one city and that the border (wall) had been built illegally by the East Germans, therefore the western authorities did not subject people coming out of East Berlin to customs control. Another reason why there was no customs control by the west is that S-Bahn and U-Bahn trains ran under East Berlin on their way from one West Berlin destination to another, i.e. a portion of East Berlin bulged into West Berlin in the center of the city.

Q: There must have been some negative coverage of race problems in our military.

JOHNSON: There was and again the number of race related incidents was far higher in the Army than in the Air Force and worse around training areas and in garrison cities. Many German bars discriminated against black soldiers, in part because they didn't want fights between whites and black GIs on their premises. It was against the law in Germany to refuse someone entry to a public establishment because of the color of their skin. I remember stories in the local press about black soldiers being turned away from bars. On several occasions a black two star general in charge of personnel at USAREUR put on an afro wig to test the entry policy of Heidelberg bars. If he was turned away, he called the lord mayor and complained.

One more point on the subject before we leave it. There was a lot of prejudice on the part of Germans toward non-whites. We endured plenty of very hypocritical finger wagging by our hosts regarding racial tensions in our military and in the United States. Offspring of black GIs and Germans endured insults by their German classmates.

Q: You were in Germany during the summer Olympics of 1972. Did you attend the games in Munich?

JOHNSON: No I dislike crowds, but I spent a lot of time at the Paraplegic Olympics which were held in Heidelberg about a month before the Munich games. The US fielded a large contingent of very determined athletes. A number of the athletes were Vietnam vets. The ambassador and many of the USAREUR generals attended events. I tried unsuccessfully to get the wives of the officers to join the appreciative audiences, but few responded to my invitations. Perhaps the human vestiges of the Vietnam War were too painful for them to witness.

Q: Were journalists suspicious of you?

JOHNSON: I had to confront suspicion everywhere. In fact, academics were generally more difficult to approach than reporters. But sometimes journalists could be rather blatant in their mistrust. I recall one instance during a garden party at my home when a reporter asked to use my phone. I directed her to the phone in the den. In a few minutes she returned to the garden and said, "You are still out here." I responded, "Does that surprise you?"

"Well," she replied, "I heard a click on the phone and thought you were listening to my conversation." Germans can be so tactful.

Q: You mentioned earlier in the interview that Germans listened to the American Forces Network. Did AFN have a large audience in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: Many Germans tuned in AFN for the music. Journalists told me they also monitored the news which they judged to be factual. I personally was very impressed with the quantity and quality of coverage of the Watergate scandal on AFN. For me it was AFN's finest hour. I encouraged my German contacts to listen to the Watergate hearings on AFN.

Q: Were you much involved with student exchanges at the secondary school level?

JOHNSON: I had very good relations with the American Field Service. We did a lot of events with AFS at the Amerika Haus. The chapter president and his wife are the god parents of our older son. We remain close friends. For reasons I never understood, Youth for Understanding, which also runs a student exchange program, kept its distance from the Heidelberg Amerika Haus. Later when I served in Frankfurt, YFU refused my overtures to host joint events.

I tried unsuccessfully to implement contacts between Heidelberg secondary schools and the local U.S. Army high school. The Germans wanted American pupils to attend classes and participate in weekend seminars but the American youngsters would not come out of their ghetto. It was a shame, because we could have developed some very useful programs at that grassroots level.

Because the German secondary schools were plagued with a lot of drug abuse, I brought teachers together with experts from USAREUR. One American expert was a chaplain who spoke fairly good German. The Germans referred to pot as "shit", which was the accepted German slang, but it took a while for the man of the cloth to realize what they were talking about. Finally it dawned on him and he used the American word several times with great emphasis.

Incidentally I organized a series of lectures on German-American relations for the PTA of the American school in Heidelberg. Response was tepid. Anti-U.S. demonstrations and a radical devaluation of the dollar caused the American military families to stay in their ghettos and many were not interested in hearing about the host country. I spoke to the PTA on problems in German-American relations both domestically and internationally. My carefully crafted presentation elicited no questions. Finally a woman strode up to me purposefully and asked if I could respond to something that had been bothering her all evening. I was delighted. I had reached some one after all. Her question was, "Why do you wear your wedding ring on your right hand?" Completely deflated, I responded that I had courted my wife in Paraguay where wedding bands are worn on the right hand and after leaving that country I had not switched the ring to my right hand.

Q: Did you do much public speaking to German audiences while you were in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: The U.S. Army had helped build a conference center in St. Martin, a lovely village in the Pfalz. I spoke to seminars for military personnel on a regular basis on the American political process. I also addressed an audience of German officers in Heidelberg. In retrospect I don't think my presentations were very good, but at least I became a better public speaker. Incidentally one of the differences I noticed between State and USIA officers was that while the former are more adept at report writing, the latter are better at public speaking.

In 1974 I tried to give a course in writing at the University of Heidelberg but student radicals warned the director of the institute that they would disrupt my classes, so the course was canceled.

Q: When you were running the Institute, what were the students, not just the students but other people, what sorts of things were they interested in about the United States? What did they like, didn't like?

JOHNSON: I think the one thing that always stood up was the quality of our higher education. I counseled many German students about studying in the United States. Most students wanted to go to Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley. My job was to persuade students to look at other options, such as the University of Indiana for music, the University of Tennessee for geology and Washington University in St. Louis for journalism. Everyone wanted scholarships and I was able to find quite a bit of money. In spite of the Vietnam War, a university master's degree from an American university, an MA or Ph.D. was very highly regarded in Germany.

Q: Did you get any impression - you had the very famous University of Heidelberg there - about German education at the university level at that time? That is, how it worked, how the professors operated?

JOHNSON: As I mentioned earlier, I did my master's degree at the Free University in Berlin so I had some first-hand knowledge of higher education in Germany. The university system when I entered the FU in 1962 was still quite elite and small. When the Social Democratic (SPD) government came to power in 1972, it opened admissions to the universities. Within in a few years, university enrollment quadrupled and, in spite of a massive building program, the universities were not prepared for huge increase in the number of students. So I think the quality of education dropped in many disciplines. Medicine, dentistry, architecture and a few other subjects were protected from the onslaught by rigorous entrance exams, but many colleges of social sciences and humanities were overwhelmed.

Students were frustrated because they could not get the courses they needed. There were too few professors and lecture halls were overcrowded. Too few dorm rooms were available, forcing students to compete for scarce apartments and private rooms which became increasingly expensive. The failure to implement a well planned increase in the size and diversity of the universities drove some students into the arms of the radical Left.

It was time for the university professors to be de-deified. Unfortunately, and it happened more in Berlin which was far more radical than Heidelberg, there was a lot of intimidation and even physical threats. A wonderful professor of mine, Richard Loewenthal, was a victim of the self-righteous purges by the radical Left. Loewenthal, a Jew, escaped Germany in 1934 and spent the war in the United States. He was a leading authority on the Soviet Union. During the time I was at the FU, one had to get to the lecture hall early to find a seat. In the late 1960s he was harassed and forced to leave the building through a window, which was deeply humiliating. Kurt Sontheimer, another famous political scientist, quit the FU for quieter surroundings at the University of Munich. I can't name all the professors who were persecuted by the bigots. The University of Heidelberg was less radical than the FU.

Q: Was there a corresponding increase in activities by right-wing students in reaction to the leftist radicalism?

JOHNSON: No. In the minds of post-war Germans the radical right was associated with Nazism. There was no discernable neo-Nazi movement at German universities. The neo-Nazi groups in the Federal Republic were blue collar, based in southern Germany and very small. Most of their propaganda came from Nazi groups in the United States. The Germans would have liked for the US Government to have cracked down on the tiny but noisy American Nazi movement, but Uncle Sam was constrained from doing so by our constitution.

The "schlagende Verbindungen", (dueling fraternities), ala "The Student Prince", still existed in Heidelberg and other universities, but although politically conservative, thedevoted themselves to drinking and professional advancement, not politics.

When I was a student at the Free University it was revealed that Eberhard Diepgen, the president of the student body, an important position in a university founded on co-determination among students, faculty and administrators, was a member of dueling fraternity. Opponents of the dueling fraternities organized an "Urabstimmung", a recall vote, and Diepgen, was voted out of office. Unfortunately the action occurred just before JFK spoke at the FU, thus there was no student body president to be part of the welcoming delegation. Diepgen however had the last laugh. He eventually became Lord Mayor of Berlin on the Christian Democratic (CDU) ticket.

Q: While you were in Germany in the early 70s the radical right did make a sort of comeback politically, didn't it?

JOHNSON: There was the German National Party and the Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann but neither amounted to anything. The Federal Republic learned from the Weimar Republic that lots of little parties lead to instability which in turn opens the door to radicalism, thus to be represented in a state or in the federal parliament, a party needs to garner 5% of the vote. And if you look back at the history of Nazism, you will note that it was full of factions and that one man who held the party together and made it a national movement was Adolf Hitler. In the post-war years the radical right was hamstrung by petty infighting and by the lack of a charismatic leader. Moreover the German government came down hard on anti-democratic organizations. I am reminded of the satirical column by Art Buchwald in which the American Communist Party elected an FBI agent as its leader because the FBI has so many men in the organization that it formed the strongest faction. The same was true of the radical right in Germany, only it was the Bundesverfassungsschutz (Federal Constitutional Protection Agency) that kept a very active surveillance of neo-Nazi activity and of course also on the radical Left.

Q: Did you have any contacts with the dueling fraternities in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: The dueling fraternities were conservative but never radical, much less Nazi. In fact, they were banned during the Third Reich, because the Nazis had an absolute monopoly on power. I never attended a duel but participated in a couple of "Herrnabende" (gentlemen's evenings) with students and well heeled alumni. We drank a lot of beer and talked. I could not identify with these institutions which were clearly relics of a bygone era. I preferred to devote my time and energy to trying to reach members of the center and the moderate Left.

But one final reference to the fraternities, every time I visited one of the villas that housed a fraternity I was drawn to old photos of the students in their regalia, which included special hats, colored sashes and sabers. Once I turned over photos from 1913 and 1914. There were crosses after most of the names-mute evidence of the very high toll World War I took among the graduates. Since, as already noted, the Nazis banned the fraternities, there were no similar photos from the years leading up to World War II.

Q: Did you do a lot of official entertaining in your home and garden?

JOHNSON: We had many dinner and garden parties. I received a miserably small allowance from USIA Bonn thus I paid most of the costs myself, which was very unjust. Our home was one of the few places in Heidelberg where university professors, labor leaders, business executives, journalists and military officers could meet as equals. We had some wonderful parties. Carolyn and I enjoyed watching the Germans from different social classes interact. In Heidelberg and later when we served in Frankfurt our home seemed to be one of very few places where high level corporate executives would break bread with labor union organizers.

My father baptized our older son in the Peter's Church in the old city. Although it was a warm spring day, it was cold inside the medieval church. Patrick, clad only in a light baptismal gown lent to us by his German God mother, was not a happy camper. Afterwards we hosted a reception in our garden. One of the guests was one of Werner Von Braun's V-2 team at Peenemuende. To my horror many German guests mixed orange juice with the fine French champagne I had purchased from the French commissary in nearby Speyer. The French, by the way sold Wonder Bread in their commissary. Perhaps they used it to fatten their geese.

Q: Did Germans imbibe much at your parties?

JOHNSON: Their real vice was American ice cream which they put away by the gallon. Meanwhile they had not lost their fondness for liquor and so a lot of Scotch and gin was consumed. However Germans are responsible drinkers and they were aware of stiff penalties for drunk driving. No driver's license. No car. Cars and dogs- certainly not children- are at the center of German society.

Early in my tenure in Heidelberg I discovered that the Class VI Agency had its headquarters near the PX. The Class VI provided the U.S. military with liquor. It was a separate agency from the PX. As a Foreign Service Officer I was exempted from the monthly ration of five quarts of liquor. Any time I needed liquor, I presented a cashier's check with a long and thoroughly meaningless obligation number printed on its face. The brand name gin cost 95 cents a liter, bourbon $1.50 and Scotch $1.75. Sometimes I supplied colleagues in Bonn with liquor. One shipment, destined for McKinney Russell, the Country Public Affairs Officer, was intercepted by the embassy and he was forced to pay the full retail price by the embassy commissary.

I did use my source of inexpensive Bourbon to foster US exports. I learned as much as I could about the whiskey, purchased a wide selection of Bourbons, and conducted tastings at the Amerika Haus and at professional organizations. I doubt my efforts had much of impact on our trade gap with the Federal Republic but the tastings were a lot of fun and allowed me to address other issues, such as US-Soviet relations.

Q: One would wonder how you stayed sober with liquor that cheap.

JOHNSON: Although the almighty gave me a fondness for wine, beer and liquor he also gave me a propensity for getting terrible hangovers, thus I have never had a drinking problem.

Q: Did you know alcoholics in the Foreign Service?

JOHNSON: Yes. I worked for three. I suspect alcoholism still is a major problem, and not just with officers but also with spouses. The work exposes one continually to drinking. Then there is the stress, loneliness and, in many posts, a lack of social support. I had one colleague who lost his wife to cancer and then was assigned to a one person post where he began to drink heavily. He got smashed just before an interview for an onward assignment to a very desirable job at a post in Scandinavia and of course did not get the job. The last time I saw him, he was sitting in a windowless office at USIA three sheets to the wind at 10:00 a.m.

Q: Did you travel officially outside your consular district?

JOHNSON. I took six political science professors o NATO Headquarters in Brussels for two days of briefing. We traveled in the Chevy van which USIA provided me as my "Dienstwagon" - office car. USIA at NATO organized substantive briefings by knowledgeable officers from several countries. We spent our evenings enjoying Belgium's tasty beers. It was a terrific program. On the way back to Frankfurt, we stopped in Luxembourg and I showed the professors the American military cemetery with its more than 5,000 white marble crosses and Stars of David. One grave at the front of the cemetery was set apart from the others: General Patton's. One academic said to me, "I had no idea the Americans had lost so many men." I reminded him that the Battle of the Bulge, or the Ardennes Offensive as the Germans called it, was the US's most costly battle during World War II.

Q: How about unofficial travel?

JOHNSON: I won't bore you with the great vacations we enjoyed, but we traveled widely. One trip that is perhaps worth relating was to Budweis to visit my Czech friend Rudi and his family. Rudi had informed the authorities that I was coming and soon after we crossed the border a rather dirty Skoda began tailing us. State security service kept us under observation for three days we were in the area, which in fairness included a major Warsaw Pact airbase. Once I made an unexpected U-turn which almost caused the Czech security officer to have an accident. I immediately stopped and indicated that I had meant no harm.

I also spent a week in the GDR in early 1975. I think I received one of the first diplomatic visas issued to an American after Washington established formal diplomatic relations with East Germany. (There had been a lot of informal contact between State Department officers and the Communist regime but we kept the dialogue very low key.) I drove to Leipzig via Erfurt and Weimar. In Erfurt I met two university students who were delighted to have a long talk with a US diplomat. I warned them that they could get in trouble if they were seen in my company. They were well informed about conditions in the FRG but had lots of questions about the United States, particularly our economy and political system. That evening I was turned away from a student club because I could not prove I had a university degree. I asked the student doorman how the club's exclusivity jibed with the classless society which the communist regime espoused. He responded with an embarrassed shrug.

Weimar embodies the best and the worst of the German character. It is the city of Goethe and Schiller and birth place of an ill fated democracy. Just outside the city is the concentration camp Buchenwald. Built and used by the Nazis it was also used by the communists after 1945. I met a former inmate who gave me a very personalized tour of the camp. "Hans" was in his early 70s. The Nazis imprisoned him in Buchenwald because he was a Communist. He was liberated by the US Army and although he was a staunch communist, had never forgotten the kindness the GIs showed him. Afterwards Hans invited me for coffee at the train station's cafï¿½. The waiter ignored Hans's calls for service. Finally Hans confronted the man and announced, "I am an old party member and a survivor of Buchenwald. How dare you embarrass me in front of my American friend!" The waiter took our order with studied indifference. As we parted, Hans said to me sadly, "It wasn't supposed to turn out this way."

In Leipzig I had to turn my windshield wipers on although it was not raining, at least not water. There was fine hail of lignite (brown coal) dust falling from smoke stacks all over the city. Lignite was East Germany's only indigenous fuel supply, and although it was high in sulfur, it was burned with abandon, much to the detriment of the health of the people and their forests.

Q: Did you belong to any civic organizations in Heidelberg or Mannheim, such as Rotary?

JOHNSON: Ah, you touch a raw nerve with that question. A friend of mine invited me to attend a lunch at Rotary so the members could size me up as a possible member. I agreed to speak on "Problems of US-German Relations". I dealt with several rather sensitive issues in my talk, I did not clear the text of my presentation with the embassy. I asked that my remarks be regarded as "off the record." I don't remember what I said but I was candid and provocative. Very pleased with myself, I offered to respond to questions. The silence was deafening. Afterwards I asked my sponsor what I had done wrong. He replied, "You didn't address the subject they wanted to hear about."

"What subject was that?" I asked.

"The roll back of Communism in Europe," he replied.

"But containment, not roll back has been US policy since the late 40s," I sputtered.

"I know. I know. But that does not matter to these guys," he responded wearily.

I was a little hurt by the rejection. However Carolyn told me sweetly that I did not belong in Rotary. She was right.

Later I joined Toastmasters International which met monthly in a gasthaus on the Neckar to help members improve their public speaking skills. There were about 30 Germans and Americans in our club. Most of the Americans worked at USAREUR. The Germans were primarily business executives who were fluent in English. Although we tried to keep criticism of one another's presentations constructive, a bit of "Schadenfreude" was often present. While the Americans had a better command of English, the Germans were more experienced public speakers and better debaters. Germans appreciate rhetorical flourishes.

Q: Was Marxism a solid force at Heidelberg University?

JOHNSON: At certain institutes, yes. In economics and sociology departments Marxism was quite prevalent. Heidelberg has a very fine school of theology, but the radical left never made inroads there. My father, who was a university professor, spoke to professors and advanced students of theology on religious cults in the United States. I held the very successful program in the garden of our apartment. His thoughtful presentation opened doors for me at the theology school.

Q: Were there any famous authors living in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: No novelists or poets. But Heidelberg was the ancestral home of Albert Speer who, after a stint as Hitler's favorite architect, was promoted to be the minister of armaments during much of World War II. He was a native Heidelberger, and I drove by his house many times, which was on the road behind the castle. One day I just called him up, told him who I was, and said, "May I visit you?" Speer responded, "By all means. Are you married? I said yes and he said bring your wife and we'll have sherry. I asked Speer some questions about his experiences as "Reichsminister" and he signed my copy of his memoirs. We had him to dinner a couple of times at our home and maintained a discreet relationship. I had coffee with him on the last day of my tour of duty in Heidelberg. He was clearly a remarkable intellect. As a young architect he made a pact with the devil and spent 20 years in Spandau Prison.

Q: Did any famous American authors come to Heidelberg while you were there?

JOHNSON: I hosted the Pulitzer Prize winning poet W.D. Snodgrass, but his appeal was limited. James Baldwin and Langston Hughes spoke before a large a large audience in Stuttgart. I don't remember who invited them, but perhaps because they were critics of the administration, USIA did not sponsor the program. I attended the event which consisted mainly of give and take with the audience. Hughes was very frail and left most of the talking to Baldwin, who was at the height of his popularity and was living in Paris. I wanted to ask Baldwin why he didn't return to the United States and participate in the civil rights struggle, but several black GIs were sitting behind me and I remembered that my car was parked a distance from the auditorium.

Q: What about university exchanges? You were mentioning that you were having trouble with the Fulbright. This has always been a very important element in the German/American relationship.

JOHNSON: Apart from the Fulbright program, there were a number of university-to-university exchanges, which were adversely affected by anti-Americanism during the Vietnam War. Another area of exchange concerned purely scientific ties between German and American institutes. For example the Max Plank Institute for Geophysics was located at the edge of Heidelberg. The institute worked closely with NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), analyzing moon rocks. I served as a go-between, a glorified courier. Lunar mineral samples were sent by secure means to USAREUR headquarters. My job was to retrieve the rocks from a vault and deliver them to the Max Plank Institute. One of my shipments contained a small quantity of pink lunar dust which looked like women's make-up mixed with ashes.

Q: What about books? Were there problems with books? There certainly were in my days when we had to deal with those clowns from McCarthy's staff. There are books and books. Who chose the books and were there problems in choosing them?

JOHNSON: We received lists of books available from USIA Washington and my librarians choose which books to order. I frequented the "Stars and Stripes" newsstand at the PX and purchased books off the rack, particularly paperbacks. I was criticized by USIA Bonn for buying works that contained material hostile to President Nixon. I responded that the books lent credibility to the library and moreover that I had used funds provided by the Germans to purchase the books. I put Playboy in my library, not because the students were interested in the pictures, and I suppose they were, but because there were excellent interviews in those days.

I made friends with the PX newsstand supplier in Darmstadt, which is half way between Heidelberg and Frankfurt. The supplier provided text books to the universities training Army and Air Force personnel. I worked out an agreement with the supplier whereby I could have surplus text books and professional books free of charge provided I guaranteed that I would only give them to Germans. During my tenure in Frankfurt I distributed hundreds of these books to contacts at the universities of Heidelberg and Mannheim.

Q: How did German-American bilateral relations change during your four years in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: The big change was that we exited Vietnam, which removed a major irritant in our relations with the Germans. Nixon was replaced by Ford who was defeated by Carter. Of the three presidents Ford was probably best liked by the Germans. Ford was quiet and steady. Watergate wrecked Nixon's standing and Carter came off as sanctimonious to many Germans. Particularly educated Germans admired the way our political system handled Watergate. They praised the process for its transparency. During the four years I was in Heidelberg the image of the United States as a nation with a rich culture improved, not that I had very much to do with that change. However vestiges of "Eurosnobism" still lingered.

Q: I think one of the things that always impressed me has been that at our high school level we don't do such a good job in education, but when you get to the university, then there's this tremendous leap compared to the education that most students get in European universities.

JOHNSON: I think that with few exceptions the German gymnasiums are much superior to all best the very best American high schools. At the university level I would like to note a tremendously important U.S. export to Germany after the war which was open stack libraries. The library is the heart of the American university. Nearly all libraries aGerman universities close at five or six p.m.. They are rarely open on weekends and access to the stacks is heavily restricted. There's nothing like wandering around the stacks, and you find stuff you never dreamed you would be interested in. In fact, my first federal job I was a desk attendant at the Library of Congress and having that library card and taking stuff out of the Library of Congress was a thrill I'll never have again. And the openness of professors to give and take, the accessibility of professors and their encouragement of the students were far more prevalent in the US than in Germany. I think the German system offers greater academic initiative to undergraduates. When I went to the Free University, I didn't let my studies get in the way of my education. As an undergraduate in United States, I just studied my butt off to pass exams, which provided me with a good basic education. At Free University I read all the books I wanted to read. I didn't have that pleasure again until I retired.

Q: Did you have any connection with the American diplomatic establishment in Germany while you were there in Heidelberg?

JOHNSON: No diplomatic establishment. The only other diplomat, other than Hal Ekern at USAREUR, was my French colleague, the Director of the Institut Franï¿½ais. attended some of his programs and we socialized. I had a bigger operation than he did. French influence in Germany has been waning steadily. When the Germans and the French established a fast reaction military unit, they found their common language was not German or French, but English. And if I may jump ahead a few years, while I was in Frankfurt an Assistant Minister of Education and Culture in France called on me. I didn't know the purpose of his visit. But I think it was basically to lament, "You know the last gymnasium in the state of Hessen that required French has dropped it." I felt sorry for the poor man. English was absolutely on the ascendancy. I wish someone would write a Ph.D. on the role of American Forces Network as a English teacher in post-war Germany. It was just tremendously important because the students all listened to AFN. Young people tuned in AFN for its music. They found German radio overly instructive

Q: Were you aware that English was the preferred second language of Germany, at least from your perspective?

JOHNSON: Yes, absolutely, and there was a little competition, sort of under the surface between English learned and spoken in England and American English, and it would go like this; the Germans who spoke proper British English said "We're cultured," and the ones who spoke American English would respond, "Yes, but you are obsolete."

Q: I assume that over the intervening years you have been back to Heidelberg. Is there a Tom Johnson legacy?

JOHNSON: In public diplomacy it is very hard to judge effectiveness. Carolyn and I made many friends and I believe we overcame a lot of hostility among students and professors. However every time I return to Heidelberg, the current director the German-American Institute, a German, reminds me that what I am really remembered for is a project that had nothing to do with the cold war: the "Schlossspiele," the castle festival. In February 1973 the Lord Mayor of Heidelberg asked Nils Koersen, the City Director of Tourism, and me to resurrect summer theater in the Heidelberg castle. We didn't know what the Lord Mayor's rationale was but our deadline was clear: July and August that year. We had no idea what we were doing, and we proceeded to prove it. However we arranged for a production of Man of La Mancha to put on ten performances. The lead roles and the orchestra were professional, while the chorus was made up of amateurs. Performances were in the King's Hall in the castle. Some nights we sold out. At the end of the season, we had run a deficit of about 10,000 DM. Koersen and I were the co-producers and stage hands. We did absolutely everything. I cut my home leave short, which to this day I regret. That autumn we turned the project over to professionals. The new director-producer shrewdly put on a production of "Student Prince" anas I recala Mozart Opera. The Schlossspiele have continued and have attracted audiences totaling well over 300,000.

Q: By1975, what happened to you?

JOHNSON: I would've loved to have stayed in Heidelberg, but I was sure I was headed for Ecuador, and I would be Branch Public Affairs Officer in Guayaquil, a bustling city I had visited after attending a student affairs officers' conference in Quito in 1969. Carolyn however thought we were going to Africa. As I mentioned earlier we had two children by then.

Q: In the 97th General? I have a daughter who is an alum of the 97th General in Frankfurt.

JOHNSON: In the same building where General Patton died. In fact, I have to tell the story about Patton in Heidelberg. He was on his final day on duty and decided to do some grouse shooting. His sedan hit the side of a truck near Mannheim and he was thrown forward - he was asleep, I think - and he snapped his neck on the roll bar inside the sedan. He was taken to the hospital where shortly before Christmas 1945 he expired of a heart attack. There was an army magazine that I subscribe to, and I pulled out the article, sent it to the Lord Mayor, and thinking he was a busy man I would never hear from him. It turned out the Lord Mayor, at the end of the war, couldn't go to school because they had closed the school. He was fourteen years old. A GI asked Zundel if he would like a job in the Bad Homburg which is just north of Frankfurt, and he said, "Sure." The young Reinhard Zundel was Patton's private elevator operator. Zundel accompanied Patton to his car that morning. He was very grateful for the article.

Back to my onward assignment, I received orders to go to the Monrovia as cultural affairs officer. Carolyn was right again. After leaving the Heidelberg Amerika Haus in the tender care of my successor, we went on home leave. Following two weeks of consultation in Washington, I joined Carolyn and the boys in Portland, Oregon, her home.

Q: Did you participate in the Department's public speaking program while you on home leave between Heidelberg and Monrovia?

JOHNSON: I gave talks at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and at the Air Force Academy outside Colorado Springs. When I arrived in Denver I needed to rent a car to drive to the academy. I noticed that my New York State license had expired so I presented my German license. The man behind the counter asked, "What's this?"

"A German driver's license," I replied.

After studying the alien document, he finally responded, "If you are good enough for the Autobahn, you are good enough for our highways. Have a nice trip."

Q: How did you like Monrovia?

JOHNSON: Liberia was not a happy assignment for me. The embassy, including USIA, was over-staffed. By the time I got to Liberia my position had been changed from Cultural Affairs Officer to Assistant Public Affairs Officer/Information Officer. I knew Lynne Martin, the USIA Junior Officer Trainee, from graduate school in Berlin. She was as restless as she was able. Soon a fourth officer arrived to be Cultural Affairs Officer, an affable woman intent upon finishing her career as soon and as comfortably as possible. Supporting us three officers was an American secretary who specialized in office intrigue. There was only enough work for one officer. There was also a lot of tension between me and both Public Affairs Officers Howell Teeple and Charlie McGee, particularly Charlie McGee, who was an alcoholic and smoked six packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day. He died of cancer in 1980.

Howell Teeple told me that my first order of business was to do whatever necessary to unburden USIA from the largest Fulbright Program in Africa. The director of the program, an American, departed for the United States soon after I arrived in country. During World War II the US had loaned Liberia $19 million to build a port in Monrovia. By the early 60s the Liberians were hopelessly late in their repayments. Then Assistant Secretary for Africa under JFK, Soapy Williams, got the Liberian government to agree to repay the loan into a fund which would then be used to pay for a generous Fulbright program. However with increasingly leaner budgets in Washington the Liberian payments were far exceeding what USIA could afford to spend on the Fulbright program in Liberia.

Since the US Government could not renege on its agreement with the Government of Liberia, I advocated forgiving the loan as the only honorable solution. I did the necessary research and drafted an agreement, which after many edits in the embassy and in USIA Washington, was sent to Capitol Hill, where for reasons I never understood, my illustrious proposal was quashed. A few years later the outbreak of civil war in Liberia wiped out the Fulbright program and virtually everything else of educational value in the war torn country.

After a few weeks at post I committed an unforgivable breach of etiquette. I wrote a candid cable regarding the post programming. My boss accused me of trying to give the post a bad name. I suggested that in the future he do the reporting.

Soon after I arrived in Monrovia, Beverly Carter was assigned as ambassador. Carter, a former USIA officer, has plenty of previous service in Africa. He was an outstanding chief of mission. He had been ambassador to Dar es-Salaam when several Americans were taken hostage by guerrillas. Carter was ordered by the State Department to negotiate their release. However the media got wind of the negotiations and Kissinger, then Secretary of State, evidently stated that the talks to free our countrymen had taken place contrary to State Department policy and Carter was recalled. I don't know what happened to the hostages. Carter, in any case, was on the shelf for several years until he was named as ambassador to Monrovia. At his swearing in ceremony Carter turned to Kissinger and quipped, "Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for coming to my swearing in. You were certainly present for my swearing out."

Although the embassy was overstaffed with officers, it was short on wives. I think only three of us in the mission had non-working wives. Carter's wife was a high level official in the Government of the District of Columbia. As a result there were no sit down dinners at the residence. Carolyn and I and the economic officer Jim Ashida and his wife entertained regularly, but we were the exception.

In all fairness, some of my colleagues in the embassy enjoyed their tours of duty. However the more you worked with the government the more discouraging it was. We had an acronym WAWA: West Africa Wins Again, which we often used when we were frustrated and that was often.

Q: How race conscious were the Liberians?

JOHNSON: As I recall, according to the constitution, only blacks could be citizens. One day I was walking past a small group of Liberians standing in front of our embassy when one thrust an infant which was clearly of mixed race at me and said, "Take it." I thought for a second the hurried into the compound. I immediately realized that if an American diplomat had accepted a child, more Liberians would try to unburden themselves of offspring at our embassy the next day. Moreover, had I accepted the child, I am sure the group in front of the embassy would have promptly disappeared and I would have had no way to establish the parentage of the youngster and without the legal consent of the parents, I would have had a great deal of difficulty adopting and getting a visa for it. I have often wondered what happened to the baby.

Q: Were Liberians hostile to foreigners?

JOHNSON: No. They were very hospital to visitors from abroad. My two years in Monrovia coincided with the civil war in Lebanon. One night a plane load of Lebanese children arrived at the airport. Their escorts asked for asylum for themselves and the youngsters. After much "palaver" at the airport, President Tolbert was awakened. He ordered that everyone be admitted and went back to sleep. Tolbert was a very kind man. As was William Tubman, his predecessor, who was once the target of an assassination attempt. The would-be assassin emptied his gun at Tubman and missed all six shorts. Tubman ordered that the man be brought before him and denounced the fellow for his poor marksmanship. The story goes that Tubman ordered him released with ten dollars to buy ammunition to practice. Another version of the story states that following their confrontation, the attacker was taken out and shot.

Q: Did Liberians treat black Americans differently than white Americans?

JOHNSON: For the average Liberian, all foreigners were "Kwis", gringos. Maury Bean, our DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) told me that Cecil Dennis, the Foreign Minister, had once addressed him as his "soul brother" and announced that therefore they needed to get along particularly well. Maury said that he responded by informing the Foreign Minister that he was first an American, second a Foreign Service Officer and third a black man. He said Dennis never raised the issue of race again. By the way following the coup in 1980 Dennis sought refuge in the home of our DCM and only left with assurances by Doe that he would not be persecuted. A few weeks later Dennis and eleven other high ranking officials of the Tolbert regime were butchered by an inept firing squad on the beach behind the executive mansion. "Life" magazine carried a photo essay on the massacre. The whole thing was a travesty of justice. The principle transgression of the condemned men was that they were sophisticated Americo-Liberians and Doe was rural tribal full of envy.

During my tenure in Liberia Alex Haley published his best seller "Roots" about the African man who was enslaved and ended up on a plantation in US. A number of affluent black Americans traveled to West Africa to look for their roots. The Liberians treated them with utmost courtesy. Ambassador Carter hosted a reception for a group of the pilgrims that had been to Nigeria where they complained of the most callous treatment. One gentleman told me that he had innocently called a Nigerian his "soul brother". The Nigerian allegedly replied, "You are not my soul brother, or any kind of brother. Your ancestors came from weakest of the tribes, otherwise they would not have allowed themselves to be captured. My ancestors helped enslave your ancestors and sold them to the dealers on the coast. It was a very good business." The naï¿½ve American was crushed by the man's cruel remarks.

Q: Was Monrovia a hardship post?

JOHNSON: I received 20% hardship allowance, which provided the down payment on our house in Virginia.

Q: What is the climate like?

JOHNSON: Monrovia is six degrees above the equator so it is hot and humid. On the other hand, we often got a nice breeze off the ocean.

Q: How widely was English spoken in Liberia?

JOHNSON: The educated elite- perhaps 2% of the society- spoke American English perfectly. Back in the bush, far from the few paved roads, only the tribal languages were used. In Monrovia and in the towns the natives used a "patois" which included tribal words and was heavily accented. Particularly at first, I had a very hard time understanding. For example the word for detergent was "tieso" (Tide soap), completely logical once you figured it out. Our son Patrick, who was four, quickly picked up Liberian English from our servant Annie. He became my interpreter. Thus during a dinner party, I would ask Patrick to please tell Annie to bring more rice and he would scamper into the kitchen and rattle off something I did not understand. A few moments later a bowl of steaming rice would appear on the table. More than 30 years later Carolyn and I can sometimes still detect a faint Liberian tonality in his speech.

Q: How was the food?

JOHNSON: Great sea food. Lobster tails cost two dollars each. Lots of fish dishes. Rice is the staple. Liberians make terrific stews. It is best not to ask what the meat is. Cane rat, goat, monkey, snake all cook up just fine. Liberians love peppers- hot peppers. In fact, Liberia used to be called the Pepper Coast.

Allow me a pepper story. Shortly before Christmas 1973 Mal Whitfield, the sports advisor for USIA, and Roberta Jones, the Liberia USIA desk officer, visited the post. I took them to Roslyn's, my favorite Liberian restaurant, before they headed to the airport to catch a flight back to the US. Roslyn waited on us personally and give Mal and Roberta each a jar of her house peppers with a warning that they were hot. I remember clearly that muscular Mal tightened the top to his jar. Roberta apparently did not. Evidently Roberta's jar tipped over on the way to the airport and some of the juices seeped out into the carpet of the USIA sedan. After dropping them at the airport, the driver left in the sedan in the front yard of the Howell Teeple's house where it sat in the tropical sun for a three day weekend. The following Monday morning he jumped in the car to drive it to the office. After a few seconds the Howell stumbled out of the car howling. The juice of the peppers had eaten away part of the carpet and the fumes had etched the poor man's eye balls. His wife Jane charged out of their house thinking Howell had been bitten by a snake. A prompt spay ocool water from the garden hose alleviated most the poor man's suffering.

Q: Did you get sick in Liberia?

JOHNSON: I developed a small ulcer but that was from tension between me and the two men I worked for. I picked up dysentery while on a trip to Sierra Leone, which was very painful. While we were up country one weekend our older son Patrick came down with a high fever. We took him to a rural clinic. The doctor had no drugs so he put the four year-old in a tub of very cool water. Patrick protested vigorously but his temperature dropped quickly.

We were required by the embassy to take a malaria suppressant. Our sons would gross us out by chewing the bitter tablets.

Our younger son Erik was medically evacuated to the US because the State Department physician was concerned that given the large size of his head, he might have hydrocephalus. After thousands of dollars in tests, it was determined he had a big head. Some years later when he was in the Marine Corps he probably had the largest helmet on Parris Island.

Q: What did you hear about native medicine?

JOHNSON: The John F. Kennedy Hospital in Monrovia employed at least one "bone man", native medicine men who were trained in their villages to expertly set broken bones by manipulating the fractures with their hands. These "bone men" were highly regarded in Liberian society. We were warned against using native medicine, however the herb doctors who specialized in treating snake bites were highly regarded, particularly since the alternative was often death.

I once invited an American who was married to a Liberian to dinner. He did not show up. I saw him in the port a few days later and he apologized. It seems that one of his brother-in-law had died after being treated for an illness by a juju doctor and the family had met as to what to do about the malpractice case. I didn't ask. I didn't want to know.

Incidentally, one of my employees asked me if the embassy's heath insurance plan covered tribal medicine men. I called the personnel officer and learned that employees were free to go wherever they pleased for medical care. Liberia was a very tribal society and in many ways very secretive. In the oral tradition of Africa learning was passed down from one generation to another by the tribal elders, including the medicine men.

Q: What was America's interest in Liberia?

JOHNSON: Liberia never colonized. However following the end of the US Civil War, there was a half-hearted effort to return the former slaves to Africa and hundreds were voluntarily "repatriated" to Liberia, although God knows where their ancestors came from. The name of the country is obviously is derived from the word "liberty". Over the decades the United States poured many millions of dollars of economic assistance into Liberia. At one time Liberia had received more aid per capita than any country in the world.

During World War II US Army engineers built two air fields in Liberia for the US Army Air Force to ferry aircraft to Europe via Brazil. Uncle Sam also built a modern port which could have been used by our Navy, for example for anti-submarine patrols, had the need arisen. Firestone and B.F. Goodrich had major rubber plantations in Liberia, which provided an alternate source of the material. There were close cultural ties between African Americans and Liberians. We had major VOA relay facilities outside of Monrovia as well as an important diplomatic communications center. The US Coast Guard operated an Omega station outside of Monrovia. The Omega network provided an important navigational aide to ships and even trucks. The VOA receiver-transmitters, diplomatic communication facilities and the Omega station no longer exist, victims of the civil war and improved technology.

Incidentally the village at the edge of Roberts Field, Monrovia's international airport, is called Smell-No-Taste because it had been the bivouac for the black engineer battalion that built the airfield. The Liberians were intrigued by the aromas coming from the mess hall and since it was not possible for the soldiers to invite them to dine they could only smell the delicious food and thus the name of the village.

Our overall goal in Liberia during the cold war was to keep it in our camp. It was a useful ally in Africa. In retrospect when I think of the billions of dollars that were spent in Africa countering the Soviets, I wish we had retreated from much of Africa and let Moscow get more and more deeply involved in the continent. They would have wasted billions in hard currency which might well have hastened their downfall.

Q: The advantage of hindsight, but an interesting thought. Was there major investment in Liberia by other countries?

JOHNSON: I believe the Germans had a major interest in the Bong iron ore mine which produced very high grade ore. There were a number of non-US banks in Monrovia. The Canadians had a dynamite factory near the airport. The explosives were sold almost exclusively to the mines. However some Liberian fishermen fished with dynamite, which was not only environmentally damaging, but also dangerous. One fisherman was seen blowing on the fuse to a stick of dynamite. The fuse then burned faster than he expected- one less fisherman.

Q: Were the Liberians proud of their history and culture?

JOHNSON: The Americo-Liberians considered their US ancestors "pilgrims." There was a small museum on the island in a river in Monrovia devoted to the settlers. On the wall was a framed copy of a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. The draft was in pencil and signed A. Lincoln. Later the museum was demolished to make way for a new bridge. I have often wondered what became of that document.

As for culture, the Liberians were master wood carvers. I once asked the Deputy Minister of Culture Bai T. Moore if he regretted that many of the best masks were being taken out of the country by foreign collectors. He replied, "Not at all. If the masks are in Europe or the US, I know they will be well cared for. If they stay here, the bug-a-bugs (termites) will destroy them."

Q: What did you think of the Liberian Government?

JOHNSON: President William Tolbert stuck me as decent man. He was not, as far as I know, personally corrupt. He fathered a lot of illegitimate children but that was a perk of many affluent Africans. Tolbert tolerated corruption among some of the top officials in the government. Tolbert's son, AB Tolbert, was mentally unbalanced. He once gave a speech in the Liberian Senate that was so bizarre, the daddy had all copies withdrawn. For some reason the Soviets thought the speech was important and had the TASS correspondent arrange to get a copy from a contact in the Information Ministry. The authorities were alerted and the reporter was kicked out of the country.

But in reference to the government, I dealt with senior officials who were well educated and competent. The problem was that they lacked able assistants to carry out their plans. The level of talent in the government was very thin. For example one day I was talking with the Deputy Minister of Agriculture in his office when the phone rang. The Deputy Minister spent the next ten minutes handling a minor issue which clearly should have been taken care of by a competent aide. When he hung up the receiver, he turned to me sadly and said, "I have to do everything myself."

I should also mention that the large majority of Liberians had little contact with the national government. In the bush the villages were pretty much autonomous and rather democratic. In the center of every village was an open sided thatched "palava (talking) hut". The tribal elder ran the village and served as a grass roots judiciary in daily meetings which were open to all. For example, if a man were caught having sex with a neighbor's wife, the parties would be brought before the elders, who after hearing both sides of the case, would probably impose a fine, i.e. the cheated husband was compensated with a goat. Serious crimes, such as murder, were supposedly referred to the government in Monrovia, but I gather that few crimes committed "off the paved roads" made it the capital. Villagers had their own swift penal system and it wasn't subject to a long series of appeals

Q: Didn't President Tolbert once address a joint session of the US Congress?

JOHNSON: He did. Perhaps Tolbert's greatest failing was his ego. He reportedly paid an American PR firm a hundreds of thousands of dollars to facilitate his being awarded a humanitarian prize in the US. As a part of his trip to Washington he spoke before both houses of congress. His speech was well received. Unfortunately while congress was waiting for Tolbert to make his grand entrance, Vice President Rockefeller and House Speaker Carl Albert discussed Liberia and an open mike picked up their conversation.

I don't recall exactly what was said but the gist was that Rockefeller told Albert that the Americo-Liberian still practiced some customs that were American anti-bellum. The exchange lasted just a couple of minutes but was broadcast by VOA to Africa. Sitting in my office I listened to their dialogue and of course there was nothing I could do. The Vice President's and Speaker's remarks made more news than Tolbert's speech. Albert issued an apology. As far as I know, Rockefeller did not.

Q: Were there any significant political events in Liberia while you were there?

JOHNSON: Tolbert was inaugurated for a second term during my tenure in Monrovia. Some street urchins crashed the party and tackled a waiter carrying a large platter of hors d'oeuvres at a dignified reception on the lawn of the executive mansion. The next waiter was escorted by soldiers with fixed bayonets and the kids removed from the grounds. Most of the foreign guests thought the whole scene was hilarious. President Tolbert and his countrymen were not amused.

The inauguration ceremony was simple and dignified, except for one glitch. President Tolbert was upstaged by the guest of honor, the Chairman of the Organization of African UnitHis Excellency Idi Amin. Amin arrived 20 minutes late, which of course delayed the ceremony. Half way through the program he whispered something to Tolbert who looked back at Amin with total consternation. Tolbert then announced, "The Chairman of the Organization of African Unity Idi Amin would like to say a address the audience." Amin was not on the program. With enough medals on his chest to put Patton, Goering and Zhukov to shame, Amin heaved his bulk out of his chair and strode to the lectern. Looking out at us foreigners, he announced with a big smile," It is not true that I am against whites." There was a moment of silence, then everyone, including Amin, laughed heartily. Amin then went on to give his stump speech. Afterwards he basked in the adulation of the kids and young men who ran excitedly after his limo.

Tolbert liked his perks, including a motorcade that was nothing short of imperial. When the lead car appeared, clearly marked PILOT, we lesser mortals had to pull off the road and wait until the president and his entourage of hanger-ons and security passed. Sometimes the PILOT would get miles ahead of the other vehicles, leading one to wonder if the Tolbert would ever appear. One of our embassy communicators tired of this game and pulled back on the road only to be confronted by a truck full of angry soldiers, who were part of the chief executive's security detachment. The American made it to the German Embassy where he thought he would be safe. The Liberians followed him on the chancellery grounds and were about to arrest the poor fellow when indignant Germans officials intervened. The soldiers retreated and after the motorcade passed, the communicator made his escape. The following day the Germans lodged a formal protest with the foreign ministry and the communicator got chewed out by our Deputy Chief of Mission.

Q: Wasn't Tolbert Chairman of the Organization of African Unity at some time?

JOHNSON: He was indeed. To host the conference(s) he built an elaborate complex, complete with guest houses outside of Monrovia. It was an extravagance that the country could not afford and may have hastened his downfall.

Q: Was there a large USAID and Peace Corps presence in Liberia?

JOHNSON: The USAID mission had perhaps a dozen officers. Except for the John F. Kennedy Hospital, which USAID built and continued to support, I don't remember what that agency was doing to provide assistance. However, in part because Carolyn had been a volunteer in Ghana, we made friends with many Peace Corps volunteers and visited as many as we could up country. There were over 100 volunteers in country. It was one of the biggest programs in Africa.

Shortly after I arrived in country I wrote an overview of American assistance to Liberia, which included USAID and Peace Corps programs. USIA planned to publish my report. The DCM decided to clear the overview with the Foreign Ministry which vetoed its distribution. I regret the embassy accepted the ministry's edict.

Incidentally the Peace Corps helped democratize Liberian society. Apparently before the volunteers arrived young Americo-Liberians dressed more formally than the tribals in their age group. The Americans wore jeans and T-shirts, which made casual attire socially acceptable even for the elite.

While we are on the subject of Peace Corps, while I was a student in Berlin a college classmate visited me on his way home after two years as a PCV in Ethiopia. I asked what he thought he might have accomplished during his assignment to a high school. He blinked and responded, "I helped speed the revolution."

I looked my friend in consternation and replied, "I thought you were in the Peace Corps.""I was," he responded, "but in a sea of ignorance education will inevitably undermine the government of Haile Selassie"

Q: What was the dress code in the embassy?

JOHNSON: Tolbert- thank God- set an example for everyone. Most Americans would call the attire a safari suit. In Liberia the comfortable matching pants and short sleeve jacket was known as the "swear suit." Tolbert's predecessor was William Tubman, who was very old fashioned and wore formal dress at every possible occasion. However when Tubman died suddenly and Tolbert allegedly did not have time to go to don his swallow tails and high silk hat before being sworn in. Instead he was sworn in wearing a safari suit. Thereafter in Liberia safari suits were known as swear suits. I still wear several I had made in Monrovia. I understand the Taylor regime reverted to coat and ties in the late 1980s. I don't know what the current regime requires.

Women wore loose fitting dresses which were both comfortable and attractive. Liberians are masters in the art of tie dying. Both men's and women's clothing also incorporate elaborate stitching patterns. There were lots of excellent tailors all over the country. Pictures of the president and vice president were printed on cloth which Liberian women had made into dresses. It seems more often than not the faces of the politicians were on the lower back part of the dresses so when the matrons sat down, they rested their ample posteriors on the likeness of their national leader.

One story about former president Tubman and his fondness for formality: every embassy had its legends and in Monrovia one of the standard sagas concerned Richard Nixon, who visited Liberia while he was Vice President. Apparently Nixon was on a tight schedule thus he arrived on Air Force Two wearing a morning coat and high silk hat. He was whisked into the city, a journey of more than 30 miles, in Tubman's limo. The air conditioning in the big sedan apparently gave up the ghost shortly after the vehicle departed the airport. It was a typical day in the 90s with 100 % humidity. Perhaps to impress the Vice President, Tubman, who was fond of air conditioning, had the room temperature lowered to near arctic conditions. Enter a heavily perspiring Nixon and well, the Liberian president almost spared us Watergate.

Q: So could you tell a person's status by his/her attire.

JOHSON: Not necessarily as I once learned. Shortly after arriving in country I set off to the Ministry of Information and Culture to offer Johnny McClain, the Assistant Minister, a 30 day VIP trip to the US. His secretary pointed to the door to his office. I had never met McClain. Upon entering the office I found two men having a conversation. After standing there awkwardly for a few minutes, I nodded politely to the man wearing a sweat shirt and jeans and addressed myself to the nattily dressed gentleman. I don't why I was in a hurry but without further formalities I invited him to the US as a guest of USIA. Both men looked at me coldly. Then the man in the sweat shirt said quietly, "I am the Assistant Minister." I apologized, redirected my invitation and beat a hasty retreat.

Johnny McClain later graciously responded that he would be honored to travel to the US guest of USIA. We later worked together closely. Today (2006) he is Minister of Information and Culture.

Q: Was membership in a civic organization a source of status?

JOHNSON: The elite belonged to Masons and its women's auxiliary the Eastern Star. The Masons had a huge marble temple on Mamba Point near our embassy. I assume that Rotary was also present, but it did not have a high profile. A white American organizer for Kiwanis started a chapter in Monrovia. I was asked to join as founding member. I consented. I was the only non-Liberian member. We held our first meetings in the USIA conference room. As I recall, there were about a dozen members in all. Unfortunately Liberians did not understand what volunteerism was and thus the club did little other than hold meetings. I suspect most Liberians joined Kiwanis because they could not get into Masons. They probably also hoped that the organization would provide them with business contacts.

Q: What was the best book you read about Liberia?

JOHNSON: John Gay's Red Dust on Green Leaves. InterCulture Associates is the publisher. The little tome tells the story of twin brothers. One brother leaves the village and adopts the ways of the city dweller while his brother remains in village opting for a traditional life as a subsistence farmer. The book is full of insights about Liberia, although the civil war has changed the country. The tribal girl who assisted Gay in his research reportedly died mysteriously. I was told she was murdered by members of her tribe for revealing cultural secrets. The tribes and clans guarded their secrets zealously. I don't remember the circumstances, but USIA sponsored an exhibit of Liberian tribal art. One of my employees took me aside and told me calmly but forcefully that if one of the artifacts were displayed, his tribe would be severely offended. Apparently the object was regarded as both sacred and secret. He demanded that I remove it from the exhibit. Not knowing the consequences of offending the employee or his tribe, I complied. I knew that normally placid Liberians could turn violent if offended.

Q: You were Information Officer. What was the media like?

JOHNSON: The dailies were pathetically primitive both technically and in content.I remember two "newspapers," and both used lead type set by hand. The printing presses were literally museum pieces. Sometimes the headlines were unintentionally humorous. For example when the bumbling president of the National University was forced to resign, the headline ran" "I HAVE NO REGRETS," HE LAMENTS.

There was one television station but its signal was pretty much limited to Monrovia. Programming consisted of canned American and British comedy and adventure programs. Our first evening in country we watched a Jack Benny Show. The studios were hopelessly antiquated. During the live broadcast of an interview with an American visitor, a camera fell over breaking off the lens. A technician reached inside the camera, which was still plugged in, unscrewed the stub of the lens and inserted a replacement. The camera was back on the air in less than a minute.

As in nearly all developing countries, radio was the most important medium. I devoted the greater part of my resources to radio. I provided them with tapes of educational programs and news features. I also had cordial relations with ELWA, an American missionary station. ELWA stood for Eternal Loving Winning Africa. ELWA also ran a hospital which was an important public health facility. I had great admiration for the ELWA staff. When the head of the Indian Hindu community died, the government refused the Indians permission to cremate his body on government land. ELWA, on the other hand, welcomed the Hindus and the patriarch's body was burned on the ELWA and the ashes pushed into the sea.

There were also two resident foreign correspondents, AFP and TASS. The AFP reporter had a Russian name and always struck me as a bit sinister. The TASS correspondent was affable and always happy to accept social invitations. My suspicions were confirmed that he worked for more than TASS when he was expelled for "unjournalistic conduct" in conjunction with the T.B. Tolbert's nutty speech before the senate.

Q: While you were in country did the embassy host any VIPs?

JOHNSON: I recall four: Andy Young, James Farmer, Peal Bailey and Henry Kissinger.

Young was our ambassador to the UN. He held a couple days of talks with Liberian officials regarding South Africa. What really impressed me about Andy Young was that he worked with us spear carriers in the embassy. Often Washington VIPs treat FSOs as if they were furniture. I asked him something about east Africa and he responded with a story which I thought was telling about American culture. He said that he was in a meeting with some very tough looking former insurgents of a leftist government and one of them drew him aside and whispered, "How the raiders doing?"

Young said at first he assumed that the man might be referring to a covert CIA operation that he was unaware of, so he stammered, "Which raiders?"

The African stared at him for a moment and snarled, "Man, there's only one raiders in this world, the Oakland Raiders!"

It seems the soldier turned statesman had studied at Berkley and was a great fan of the Oakland football team. "Another triumph for US education," our envoy to the UN surmised.

I don't remember why Farmer, the civil rights leader, came to Liberia, but I arranged for him to preach at the local Methodist church. My heart sank when we entered the church. Almost no one was there. But as the service progressed parishioners filed in and by the time Farmer gave his sermon the church was full.

Pearl Bailey visited the country on a goodwill trip. She made it clear that she would not perform. "Ms Bailey" simply wanted to meet Liberians of all walks of life. I was in charge of her visit and escorted her everywhere she went, including to the John F. Kennedy Hospital where she was appalled that three or four children were sleeping in a single bed. The staff explained that these children had never had their own bed and would be terrified if they were alone, and that made sense to her. A nurse also mentioned that the hospital took care to provide the young patients only with basic necessities during their stays because if children were too well provided for, then the parents would conclude their offspring were better off in care of the hospital and not return to pick them up.

I arranged for Bailey to be interviewed on radio and television. It was during her interview, as I have already noted, that the camera fell over and breaking off the lens. Carolyn and I offered a dinner party in her honor. She begged off at the last moment, which was perhaps just as well since the elevators broke down in our building and we lived on the sixth floor. She asked to visit a jewelry store to buy some things for her friends back home. I took her to what I thought was a Lebanese shop. We soon learned that the owner was Armenian. Bailey spoke Armenian and soon his prices dropped by 30%. I admired a ring of woven gold but didn't buy it. The next day as we were saying goodbye at the airport, she slipped a small box into my hand with the admonition to give it to Carolyn. It was the ring of woven gold.

Kissinger was supposed to simply overnight in Liberia on his way to Ghana and, I believe, Nigeria. However fate intervened and Rawlings, who was president in Ghana, canceled the visit at the very last moment. At first we only knew that Rawlings was "unable to receive the Secretary." Later we learned that the air force officer turned politician had a large boil on his backside and could not sit down. Our envoy in Accra was Shirley Temple Black and she was not to be denied her meeting with Dr. K. I met her at the airport and escorted her to a reception Kissinger was attending.

The Liberians were delighted to have Kissinger for longer than expected. President Tolbert offered an elaborate dinner in his honor at the government mansion. I sat next to the physician who accompanying the Secretary. The MD was a specialist in tropical diseases and was most disappointed that not only was I not suffering from an exotic ailment but that everyone in the embassy was apparently healthy. Nor did any of the Peace Corps Volunteers provide challenges for his skills.

Although Kissinger and his staff had plenty of time to rest, we persuaded the secretary to attend a performance of the national dance troupe. The nubile dancers were bouncing around in front of him topless. Kissinger turned to his Press Secretary, Bob Funseth, and whispered, "Robert, I am beginning to appreciate Liberian culture."

Q: Did USIA send any important speakers to Liberia?

JOHNSON: None that I recall. The daughter of Washington DC's mayor spent a week in Monrovia where she was supposed to give a series of talks on Afro-American culture. Instead she used the time to do research and made a general nuisance of herself. I sent USIA a cable severely critical of her visit. Washington responded with a warning that I could be sued for using such blunt language, because under the new Freedom of Information Act, all speakers could access their files. While the new law made government more transparent it diminished candor in reporting. Years later I referred to Joyce Carol Oats as "owlish" in a cable. A CYA bureaucrat called me and asked if she could delete that offensive term from the file of Miss Oats. I responded that the noted author looked owlish to me but if the desk officer in Washington was going to lose sleep unless he censored my work, to make the edit. The longer I spent abroad, the less respect I had for certain overstaffed offices in Washington.

One cultural program we did have that packed the university was a series of feature films about black Americans. A professor of film from UCLA, whom I was to meet again a couple years later in Stockholm, gave informative introductions to the films and stayed for hours afterwards to respond to questions. A few weeks later the German Embassy sponsored an evening of classical music in the city auditorium. No Liberians attended the performance. The German DCM remarked to me after the concert, "'Buck and the Preacher' certainly outdraws Bach."

Q: Were the Liberians very concerned with the liberation movements in South Africa and the boycott against the apartheid regime?

JOHNSON: The average Liberian was primarily worried about his or her survival and had no idea where South Africa was, nor any understanding of the plight of its black majority. The Tolbert regime on the other hand was quite vocal in its support for the boycott and sanctions against the Pretoria government. A small band of African National Congress, the anti-apartheid revolutionaries, lived in Monrovia. I became friends with one, a professor at the university. He was moderate who rejected Marxism but not violence. When I told him that I had applied for a post in Pretoria as my onward assignment, he asked me to withdraw the request. I assured him that I was totally against the current government in South Africa. He responded, "Yes, I know you are for democratic change, but I would hate for you to be hurt by one of our bombs." I thanked him for his concern. A few days later the agency informed me that I would be returning to Washington.

Q: Was there a large American community in Liberia?

JOHNSON: I am sure there were several hundred US citizens, some of them dual nationals, scattered around the country. (The best way to find out how many dual nationals there are in a country is to have a coup or a natural disaster and then they come out of the woodwork.) Firestone and B.F. Goodrich had small contingents of Americans on their rubber plantations and the US banks employed about a dozen executives in Monrovia. The biggest concentration of Americans was the US Embassy.

We helped the number of "Amcits" decrease by four by assisting an American woman leave the country with her three children. She had married a Liberian in the US, then they moved to Monrovia. He reverted to his African ways and had a several "country wives". He was also physically abusive of his American wife. When she could not take it any more, she came to the embassy and asked for help. Working through the State Department in Washington, the embassy secured airline tickets for the woman and her three children from Freetown to New York. Since the husband held their passports, the consular officer issued them replacements. Using money she received from her parents through the embassy, the wife hired a taxi to drive her and her offspring to the border with Sierra Leone, bought "green" exit stamps from the Liberian border guards, Sierra Leone visas and hired another taxi to Freetown. It was a two day trip over terrible roads. The husband was furious when he found out what had happened, but by that time his American family was across the border and his visa to the United States had been cancelled.

Q: Did the consular section have a high refusal rate for Liberian visa applicants?

JOHNSON: The rate was probably not that high since so few people could afford the airfare. Whenever the consular officer refused an applicant he marked the passport on a given page, thus if the applicant went around the corner to the British Embassy to request a visa for Canada, the UK consular officer would know if the applicant had already been turned down add his rejection to ours.

Q: Was Carolyn bored in Liberia?

She held up better than I did. I used to wake up in the middle of the night, and say, "I have to get the hell out of here." I was wasting my time.

One day a Soviet diplomat asked me if Carolyn were available to teach English in the Soviet Embassy. They knew that Carolyn had taught English as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Before she could commit herself, I cleared the offer with the deputy chief of mission and the "appropriate authorities". She gave lessons twice a week at their embassy. The Russians paid her in dollars and she enjoyed teaching. She also directed a choir which had its rehearsals at USIA.

Q: How did your sons adapt to West Africa?

JOHNSON: There were no play grounds in Monrovia so Carolyn took them to the embassy compound to swim in the pool. We had to keep the boys away from the rocks and bushes because both green and black mambas were common. The boys enjoyed weekend forays to the ambassador's beach house. However I will never forget one day seeing our nanny with our three year-old son Erik sitting on his tricycle at the front door of our building watching the people go by. I felt terrible. I thought I was depriving the little boy of a normal childhood. I think many Foreign Service Officers have had similar pangs of conscience. Years later I actually apologized to Patrick and Erik for dragging them around the world as kids. They responded almost in unison, "We wouldn't have had it any other way." Their younger sister, Suzanne, once complained to Carolyn and me that she had been born too late and had missed many of the experiences that her brothers had enjoyed. She made up for lost time, spending her junior years in high school and college in Germany and two years in Mozambique as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Currently she is working for an NGO in Johannesburg.

Q: What did you do on weekends?

JOHNSON: The Liberians retreated to their families in the countryside on weekends so the expatriate community had to entertain itself. We mixed with the Germans, Poles, Romanians, Brits and Russians whom we met on the beach. The embassy had a beach house where we could cook meals in the open and enjoy gentle waves. There were a number of nice public beaches with lagoons on one side and surf on the other. Shortly before we arrived a USAID officer died of a broken neck when he was hurled against the bottom by a breaker. I suffered a shoulder injury in a surfing accident.

Q: Was there a rip tide?

JOHNSON: Not long before we got to Monrovia a State Department officer was swept out to sea. It was assumed that he had drowned or had been eaten by hammerheads. Actually I never heard of a shark attack while we were in Liberia. In any case the guy kept his cool while being pulled ten or twelve miles westward down the coast. After many hours he was able to swim to a sand bar just off Mamba Point not far from the embassy. He hailed a passing fishing boat and was brought into town where he got a cab to the embassy. The Liberian guard thought he was seeing a ghost when the man limped out of the cab and up the gate.

Q: What was your housing like in Monrovia?

JOHNSON: We had a beautiful apartment on the sixth floor of the Chase Manhattan Bank building. There was a view of the harbor from the living room. We also had a view of the street that led to the cemetery. Liberians seemed to favor Sundays for their funerals which often included marching bands ala New Orleans. The standard marching song was "Onward Christian Soldiers." The quality of musicianship varied greatly from band to band. My young sons must have watched dozens of funerals entourages climb the steep hill. During our tour of duty Carolyn's father became very ill. She and the boys flew home to be with him during his last days. At a quiet moment during the funeral Patrick, who was five and bored, asked his mother in a rather loud voice, "When is the parade?"

Q: Did you have a reliable source of electricity in Monrovia?

JOHNSON: The source was reliable but the delivery system left something to be desired. Outages were common. Looking out of our apartment window we watched many a transformer explode blacking out several blocks. When we lost power we sometimes tuned in BBC to listen to a radio drama. It was great sitting using your imagination to fill out the plot.

Q: What was the USIA facility like in Monrovia.

JOHNSON: It was on the second floor of the Chase Manhattan Bank Building, thus I walked downstairs to my office. We had a nice library, small auditorium and ample office space. Since I lived in the same building I was the permanent USIA duty officer, not that that was a particularly onerous task.

Q: What were the Soviets diplomats like and were they in Liberia in force?

JOHNSON: There was a changing of the guard while we were in Monrovia. The Bolsheviks with stainless steel teeth were replaced by a more refined and worldly generation. They had a large embassy and their main function was to watch us Americans. The mutual indifference between the Soviets and the Liberians was clear to all. In fact, if I may tell a racial story about the Soviets, their DCM who was leaving. I looked around the room during his farewell reception and duly noted that the Soviets were enjoying the good life. They had Paper Mate pens in their pockets, were drinking Johnnie Walker, out of a Coca-Cola cooler, and driving Ford Mustangs, and I asked a Russian innocently, "Where are the Liberians?"

A Soviet turned to me and sniffed, "If we'd wanted the niggers, we would've invited them."

Q: Did you get to know any of the Soviets?

JOHNSON: Not personally. I was always wary of their motives as they were of mine. However we socialized with several of the younger diplomats. One evening we invited three officers and their wives to our apartment to see the 1966 Hollywood film "The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!" They loved every minute of the film and insisted that I show, rewind and show again and again the opening credits which printed on an montage of Soviet and US flags accompanied by the national anthems. In true Russian fashion, our Ruski guests showed they felt at home with us by consuming two liters of vodka, a liter of gin and a half bottle of Old Grand Dad.

On another occasion, the Soviets came to my office to ask to borrow films. "Oh, you want films about American ballet or orchestras?" I inquired.

"Nyet."

"Literary films?"

"Nyet."

"Okay, what sort of films do you want?"

"Cowboy movies!"

I was able to borrow several westerns from USIA Washington, which greatly pleased both my Liberian audience as well as the Russians.

Perhaps to show their appreciation, the Soviets invited Carolyn and me to a screening in their embassy of a "Russian western". Shot in the rolling hills of Moldova with a cast if gypsy cattle farmers, the high point of the ponderous horse opera was a torrid love scene in which an actress pulls open her blouse exposing her pendulous breasts. "See! We have no censorship in the Soviet Union!" whispered a Russian to me hoarsely.

We got to know Anatoly, a young Russian FSO. He owed his appointment to the Soviet Foreign Service to a chance meeting with a senior Russian diplomat who had served in the Red army with his father. Anatoly's first post was at the UN in New York City. He was a one man tourism bureau for the Big Apple, which he considered the most fascinating city on earth. Shortly before we departed Monrovia for Washington he asked me if he could buy my .30 .30 rifle. Since I had not shot the gun in years, I readily consented. I told him that I had not realized he was a hunter. "I am no hunter," he responded.

"Then you are a collector?" he asked

"I am not a collector," he replied

"Why do you want the Winchester?" I responded.

"Do you think I want to spend the rest of my career in Africa?" Anatoly announced.Apparently personnel officers in the foreign ministry were open to bribery.

One day a senior Soviet diplomat sought me out at a reception and asked in a conspiratorial tone if we could meet for lunch. I thought he wanted to "turn me." However the matter was almost as delicate. It seems that on the eve of their great national day the hospitable embassy had completely depleted its supply of vodka. No vodka. No national day. Perhaps I failed to understand the strength of my bargaining position when I agreed to provide eight cases of American Smirnoff vodka for cash. Actually the embassy commissary had purchased too much vodka and was glad to get rid of it. At the national day celebrations I noted that no Smirnoff bottles were in sight. My host tapped a Russian bottle with his finger and smiled slyly.

Perhaps my gesture spread oil on troubled waters regarding an ongoing problem between the Soviet ambassador and our army attachï¿½ who lived next door. Every morning the colonel's pet chimp climbed up on the wall separating the properties and turning his rear end toward the flag with the hammer and cycle emptied his bowels onto Soviet territory.

Q: How did the Russians you knew deal with life in the capitalist world?

JOHNSON: That is a hard question to answer because none of my Soviet contacts ever really told me what he thought about Communism. I sensed that my Soviet counterparts were patriotic Russians, not doctrinaire Communists. However the TASS correspondent was a definitely a true believer. He returned to Monrovia from home leave full of genuine enthusiasm about declarations at a party congress regarding the "new Soviet man." The Soviet FSOs must have been deeply troubled by the contradictions between their indoctrination and what they experienced outside of the USSR. They were masters of "double speak", i.e. they mouthed doctrines which they clearly knew were fallacious and kept their own opinions to themselves. I doubt they confided to one another. It was fun to watch their reaction to irreverent banter among Americans about the Carter administration. We told one another "Jimmy jokes" in their presence and they joined in the laughter. I never heard a Soviet diplomat make a critical remark about Moscow. They got their Brezhnev jokes from us and the British.

And while East Block diplomats were not officially targets of USIA Monrovia's public affairs strategy, my embassy colleagues and I went out of our way to be conciliatory toward them. The Soviet Deputy Chief of Mission asked me to get him a subscription to National Geographic, which of course I did. He even reimbursed me for the cost. He simply liked the magazine.

In 1976 Time carried a feature article on discoveries of large petroleum reserves in China. The cover of that issue showed Mao in an Arab head dress. The Soviets thought the depiction of the Chinese dictator was the funniest thing they had ever seen and begged us for our copies of that issue of the magazine. Perhaps the covers were selling on the black market in Moscow.

Q: Did you ever talk to the Russians about Germany?

JOHNSON: One of the older officers in their embassy had been badly wounded during World War II. He showed me his scars and was not averse to talking about Germany. He did not trust Germans period. One evening I was talking with another Russian and I asked him, "Isn't it true that you Russians do not really want the western powers to leave Berlin? It seems it is in your interest that any time Berlin comes up during our discussions with Pankow (the East Germany regime), we tell the East Germans that our counterpart for that issue is Moscow. We still consider the Four Power Agreement on Berlin to be in force."

The Russian smiled and responded cryptically, "There may be truth in what you say." He then quickly changed the subject.

Q: Sounds like fun. What were the other diplomats like?

JOHNSON: The Pole was an aristocrat and was very friendly. When he learned I was going on R&R to the US he asked me to bring back for him two intercoms from Radio Shack. He explained that he and his wife slept upstairs but their baby's room was on the ground floor and if they had an intercom set to send in the infant's room while the intercom in his and his wife's room was set on receive, they could hear when the baby cried. I complied and we agreed not to term the arrangement "bugging."

The Romanians sometimes did intelligence work for the Soviets. One night I was at a reception at their embassy and asked one of our hosts where he hailed from in Romania. "Ploiesti" was the response.

"Were you there during the war?" I asked.

"Yes, as a child I saw your bombers blast the refineries supplying the Nazi war machine,"he replied.

"Were you frightened?" I inquired.

"Not really. We were amazed," he responded

"What was amazing about the destruction?" I asked in wonder.

"As my father explained to me, the B-17s are made by Boeing. The bombs are made by Dupont and the refineries belong to Standard Oil. They are blowing up their own property and they are making lots of money doing it." He concluded, "Confidentially I have always wondered how we can compete with a system that makes a profit on what is obviously a loss."

In a conversation with another Romanian, I said, "At the conclusion of the war, the Soviets adjusted your eastern border westward."

"Adjusted," he snarled, "the dirty bastards stole many thousands of square kilometers." The Romanian was transferred soon after making that outburst. I wondered if a Soviet overheard him.

The Argentine charge was a colorful guy. He loathed the regime in Buenos Aires which was then headed by Peron's second wife, Isabella. At one reception he jestingly toasted his President, "Una puta! Una cornuda! Que gobierno tan macanuda!" (A whore. A thief. What a fantastic government!) He was transferred to Tunis a few months later, clearly a promotion.

We struck up close ties with colleagues in the Germany embassy and attended many of their Sunday morning gatherings which were the social focal point of the small German community. We became friends with the first secretary who was married to a lively French woman who remained very French. We used to kid them about the Rhine flowing across their living room. The very agreeable German ambassador offered a dinner party in our honor when we completed our tour of duty in Monrovia.

Q: So was there much diplomatic life in Monrovia?

JOHNSON: Because Liberians had so many family obligations, it was very hard to develop real friendship with Liberians. Being invited into a Liberian home occurred only rarely, thus the foreigners partied among themselves. Businessmen and diplomats mixed freely with us. Once a week we had a diplomatic lunch always at a different restaurant. One day PRC diplomats joined us but didn't talk to anyone. (Liberia had just broken relations with Taiwan and established full relations with Beijing.) The next month the Chinese talked with the Soviets but not with the Americans. Policy change: the following month the Chinese mixed with the Americans but not with the Russians. I think it was the Soviets who circulated the rumor that when the Chinese arrived in Monrovia they chose a building next to a villa sporting a red light because they assumed that the occupants were Communists. I don't know if the story is true but it enjoyed wide acceptance and got a lot of laughs.

Shortly after Soviet pilot Victor Belenko defected to Japan with his Soviet interceptor, one of the Russians leaned across the table and said to the American naval attachï¿½, "Why don't we even the score by you flying an F-14 to Russia?" The Russian seemed so earnest, we were not sure if he was serious.

Once we used a luncheon to demonstrate our support for a fellow diplomat: Dale Schaffer. Dale, who was the chief of the consular section in our embassy, told a visa applicant that the letter she had presented him from the foreign ministry endorsing her application for a visa was worthless. The applicant returned to the foreign ministry to complain. Dale was declared persona non grata, which delighted him since he was due for direct transfer to the Dominican Republic and by leaving Liberia weeks early, he would have home leave. Unfortunately when Reggie Townsend, the Chief of Cabinet heard of the expulsion order, he announced that he liked Dale and that the order for him to leave was rescinded. Dale pleaded with Townsend to reinstate the order to leave. To save face Townsend convinced Dale to stay for a week or two and then depart. In the meantime we organized a lugubrious "Solidarity with Dale Schaffer Lunch" during which there were many toasts to Dale and digs at the government. Many of us envied Dale Schaffer's early departure.

Q: Tell me something about Liberia when you got there in 1975. What was the government? How did things run?

JOHNSON: By African standards Liberia was a success story. Land was plentiful. The soil was reasonably fertile. The climate was hot but afforded plenty of rain. Huge rubber plantations offered jobs and earned exports. Liberia had natural resources, particularly very high quality iron ore and diamond mines. There were two very credible universities. Some basic medical care existed and the public school system was expanding. The US Dollar was the national currency, although Liberian coins were circulated. The government, which had been dominated by Americo-Liberians, was making an honest effort to broaden its base to include more tribals. In spite of a lot of corruption, Liberia was relatively democratic.

Q: Tell me more about the split between Americo-Liberians and tribals.

JOHNSON: As I think I noted earlier, Liberia was not colonized by the Europeans. Prior to the British and American abolition of the slave trade the little nation carried on a brave if ineffectual effort to combat trafficking in slaves. After the end of our Civil War, Americans help resettle a number of freed blacks in Liberia and it was the descendents of these freed slaves that provided the Americo-Liberian upper class. However the Americo-Liberians of course intermarried with tribals, by the middle of the 20th century, the main vestige of the Americo-Liberians was their names: Cooper, Campbell, Tubman, Tolbert, etc. The Tolbert regime, which was in power while we were there, was making a very concerted effort to fully integrate the tribals into government. One of my former contacts, Amos Sawyer, was a university professor of political science, ancestry was mostly tribal. Some Americo-Liberians tried to go native by taking tribal names. One Americo-Liberian university professor whose real name I have forgotten announced that henceforth he would be Toga Nah Tipoteh, which probably occasioned more mirth than admiration among the tribals. Some believe that Tolbert's downfall was caused because he and the reformers were not able to satisfy the demands of tribals for power. I suspect however that Sergeant Doe, who overthrew him, acted primarily out of envy.

Q: Who controlled the Liberian economy?

JOHNSON: The most important decisions were made by a rather small group of top government officials and foreign businessmen who represented the interests of the mines and rubber plantations. However most of the nation's economy was in the hands of subsistence farmers, who grew rice, sugar cane other basic crops. The larger stores were almost exclusively in the hands of Mandingo and Lebanese traders. The Mandingos, who were Muslims, controlled the lucrative textile and diamond trade, while the Lebanese ran the larger grocery stores. It was not uncommon to see a Mandingo deposit tens of thousands of dollars in cash in the Chase Manhattan Bank. The large grocery stores catered to the most affluent Liberians and to the expatriate community. For example, you could purchase Howard Johnson's ice cream at Abu Jahadi's Supermarket for six dollars a quart.

There was also big money to be made in cloth and diamonds. The commercial officer and I visited several cloth merchants. After gaining their confidence we learned that they were making extraordinary sums importing bolts of cloth and selling it by the yard. For example, one store which was perhaps no more than 15 feet wide and 50 feet deep grossed $250,000 annually. Since the owner, a Moslem, paid little or no taxes, he was living pretty well.

Although Liberia produced some diamonds, most raw stones were smuggled into the country from Sierra Leone which had rich deposits. The diamond trade was later exploited ruthlessly by the dictator Charles Taylor and, according to very credible reports, helped finance international terrorism. While on our way to Freetown, my family and I overnighted in the town of Bo in Sierra Leone. I struck up a conversation with a well dressed Mandingo in the bar of our hotel. I asked him what he did for a living. He smiled and responded, "Auto sandwiches.'I stared at him for a moment and asked, "I am not sure what you mean."

"Look in my attachï¿½ case," he said quietly.

I could barely lift the satchel. I lifted the flap. The case contained about 50 Sierra Leonean license plates.

"That's the bread," he remarked slyly.

I thought for several minutes and then it dawned on me. The car, probably a brand new VW, was the meat. Somewhere on his person or on the person of an accomplice was a bag of raw diamonds. The Mandingo was clearly headed to Monrovia where he would sell his diamonds to a clansman for dollars and then buy automobiles in the free port of Monrovia. Associates would drive the cars to Sierra Leonean border, pay off customs officers, and deliver them to waiting customers in Freetown. Smuggling was a lucrative but potentially hazardous business.

Meanwhile the average Liberian, excluding the Mandingo, could not successfully run a grocery store because members of his extended family would take from the storwhatever they needed without paying. If the owner tried to stop them, he was denounced as a betrayer of the family, the ultimate put down for any member of a tribal society.

The average Liberian was a subsistence farmer or fisherman who wanted simply to be left alone by bureaucrats from Monrovia who wore swear suits. Perhaps the best economic assistance program we could offer the Africans is to come up with a way to get their meddling government officials off the backs of these hard working people.

Q: You mentioned corruption. Who are you referring to?

JOHNSON: Top government officials demanded hefty bribes to facilitate business deals, including foreign investments. In so many developing countries, the "kleptocrats" represent a serious drain on the economy. Meanwhile policemen and petty bureaucrats supplemented their salaries with petty theft and bribes.

Q: How resentful were you of the corruption in Liberia?

JOHNSON: I think there are two kinds of corruption: petty and grand. I have never begrudged the policeman in the Third World who accepted a couple bucks to let some one off for a minor traffic violation or the customs officer who accepted a carton of cigarettes to allow a petty trader into the country with his items of hardware. Given the paltry salaries these people are paid, the bribed allow them to feed their families.

On the other hand, the police chiefs and government ministers who are involved in massive theft, kick backs, drug smuggling and other egregious conduct should be locked up for life. Liberia was small potatoes as far as corruption was concerned. But when I was in Nigeria on an inspection I asked a British petroleum executive how much of the nation's oil revenues were being stolen by officials, he responded, "At least a quarter and perhaps a third." Billions of dollars! How can the kleptocrats launder and spend that much money? Meanwhile thousands of their countrymen die because of a lack basic medical care. Countless children who should have been educated in schools built with those billions and taught by teachers paid with the loot remain illiterate and condemned to grinding poverty. How do American, European and Asian bankers sleep at night knowing they are fattening their annual bonuses derived from mass misery? Pardon my stump speech but I think these bastards ought to taken out and shot.

Q: How about crime in Liberia?

There was a lot of property crime, robberies and burglaries, but little personal crime. President Tolbert instituted public floggings of petty thieves. Culprits were tired to goal posts and flogged with rubber hoses and automobile fan belts. The events were broadcast live on television but the floggings were discontinued after pick pockets found that the stadiums to be happy hunting grounds.

One Peace Corps Volunteer was a victim of a rape-murder but such instances were rare. Liberians were as a whole not- at least before the civil war of 1980s and 1990s- a violent people.

There was some sensational ritualistic murder and cannibalism while we were in Liberia. It was a major scandal. President Tolbert called for a week of prayer. Finally the culprits were arrested, tried and hanged. Police discovered irrefutable proof in a freezer of an Americo-Liberian who earned a master's degree from Boston University. I sent the newspaper article of the trial to a friend on the staff of Boston University. I said this probably won't make it in your alumni magazine. He was not amused.

Q: Did the coup take the embassy by surprise?

JOHNSON: I don't know because we were long since gone. However, quite apart from Doe's motives, tribal Liberians were genuinely restless. The government did not and perhaps could not move fast enough to satisfy their demands for power. Perhaps it was a revolution of unfulfilled expectations. In the embassy we discussed scenarios which could lead to unrest or even an overthrow of the Tolbert regime, but I am sure no one imagined that an army NCO and a small group of soldiers could depose the government violently. By the way, I learned from files on the subject which I have declassified, Doe's action was no cake walk. The fire fight lasted about two hours. Why the police and the rest of the military stood by and allowed Doe and his men to succeed in their bloody endeavor, I don't know

Q: When did that happen?

JOHNSON: 1980. Here, I have to tell an off color story. Apparently Doe called his cabinet together and ordered each minister write a report on his area of responsibility. Doe read the reports. At a cabinet meeting he patted the stack of reports solemnly and announced, "Gentlemens, (that's plural for gentleman) we's fucked." How's that for a state of the union speech?!

While I was at post we were inspected. I don't know how well the post did, but I got along with the inspectors much better than the PAO, and they asked me if I wanted to join them as my next post. I told them that I didn't know where I was going to be, I was going back to Washington. In the summer of '77 we returned.

Q: What was a high point in your tour of duty in Monrovia?

JOHNSON: There was but it did not occur in Liberia. I took my family to Ghana to visit the village where Carolyn had served in the Peace Corps. I combined the trip with a tour of USIA Accra and the branch post at Kumasi. Upon departing Kumasi for Assin Manso, Carolyn's village, we ran out of daylight and decided to overnight in a gold mining town. I checked us into what was the nicest hotel available, but soon realized it was a cat house. Since it was a comfortable establishment and the madam was friendly we decided to stay the night. However during a walk to the edge of town we encountered a couple of British subjects who worked at the local gold mine. They insisted that we lodge at their guest house. As fellow Anglos we treated royally, and dined on roast beef and Yorkshire Pudding with the a bottle of claret. Awakened at dawn, we were served a full English breakfast. A "lorry" took us to our bus.

Arriving in Assin Manso the villagers welcomed us most graciously. The post master presented his daughter whom he had named Carolyn. The paramount chief invited us to his residence for a formal audience. Although he addressed us, we responded through his spokesman. I think pageantry of the occasion which included formal robes and carved stools was intended to honor us, really Carolyn. The boys were very proud of their distinguished mother.

Our older son Patrick, a little blond-haired boy of four, quickly sensed his power and exploited it fully. He held court every morning surrounded by village children. Patrick would say, "Bring me my stool," and they would bring him his stool. Bring me my monkey," and they would bring his monkey. His little brother Erik would follow along the entourage smiling. It was Lord of the Flies-a total power grab. The village adults and we thought it was tremendously amusing. The boys did not want to leave. Neither did Carolyn and I.

After we departed Assin Manso we spent a couple days at the paramount chief's guest house at Cape Coast. One day we toured the slave castle at Elmina. Part of the castle was still being used for a jail, however the main portion was kept as memorial to the slave trade. We entered the huge dungeon where the captives were kept just prior to the departure for the New World. This holding area was big enough for hundreds of people. A two inch thick carpet of refuse and human hair and probably body parts covered the floor. The exit to the slave ships was a narrow doorway. I had toured concentration camps but nothing I experienced in Germany or even the railhead at Auschwitz was as depressing as that dungeon with its thick carpet of human refuse and its door of no return.

Q: Do you know what happened to your staff during the civil war of 1990s.

JOHNSON: No. I have often wondered, but except for my senior assistant, a Ghanaian, I did not have much affection for my Liberian colleagues. I would love to go back to Monrovia and see what it is like but it is not worth the risk or the expense.

Q: It looks like by 1977 you were due for Washington?

JOHNSON: In 1977 we had two sons and we purchased a house backing onto woods in Annandale. We have kept the house which is in a friendly neighborhood. Carolyn loves our modest abode. The sale price was three times my salary, but of course it has been a great investment. Today junior Foreign Service Officers returning to Washington after a couple of tours abroad either have to settle for a small condo or a house in the sticks.

In August 1977 I was assigned to the USIA Office of Inspections as an Inspector. I analyzed operations at more than twenty posts over the next two years.

However before we could get settled we needed out household effects. Some of our belongings were in storage. Unfortunately the longshoremen were on strike and although we moved into our house in September we did not get our household effects until the strike was settled just before Christmas. Our wait was short compared to a communicator we served with in Monrovia. His shipment vanished. Finally he received a cable from our embassy in Vienna asking what he wanted done with his household effects. The communicator lived in nearby Vienna, Virginia.

Q: Being asked to be an inspector means you did something right in Monrovia.

JOHNSON: The post was inspected in the spring of 1977 and the inspectors seemed to like what they saw in my portion of the operation.

Q: So you were Foreign Service Inspector from 1977 to 1979?

JOHNSON: Correct. The best thing about being an inspector was that you deal with other people's problems. It is a constructive process. A really bad inspection report can lead to transfers with prejudice and, in rare instances, dismissals from the Foreign Service. Every inspection begins with two lies. The inspectors say to the post, "We hope we didn't put you to too much trouble." And the post responds, "We're glad to see you." Once you get that farcical exchange out of the way, you get down to business.

Q: Did you write efficiency reports on officers at the posts?

JOHNSON: No. That was the old inspection system. As I recall we did have access to OERs (Officer Evaluation Reports) prior to leaving on the inspections. Of course every officer, particularly PAOs, contended that he or she had "inherited chaos" and did wonderful things to improve the post. I once asked a senior PAO who had made that famous claim if he thought he would leave chaos for his successor to miraculously transform into order. He looked a me for a moment and said, "Just a little chaos."

Q: Did USIA inspectors work in conjunction with State Department inspectors?

JOHNSON: Not often. Inspectors take a lot of post's time, and unlike USIA, the State Department often authorized wives to travel with its inspectors, which is an additional burden. USIA inspection teams frequently included auditors and sometimes USIA audited posts jointly with State. State inspectors always interviewed USIA officers at post and we always met with the ambassador, DCM and chiefs of the political, economic, consular and administrative section. Our objective was to learn how the other sections viewed the USIA operation.

Q: How big were your inspection teams?

JOHNSON: As many as eight for a really big post, such as India and as few as two for a small post such as Port Moresby.

Q: How long did you stay out?

JOHNSON: About five or six weeks at a time. Usually we did more than one post on a trip. I recall one trip which included Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Korea with a two day stop in Tokyo. I was gone almost two months.

Q: Were the trips hard on you?

JOHNSON: Not on me. I was young and did not mind working long hours. However I missed my family and felt very guilty about leaving Carolyn with two very active boys for weeks at a time. During 25 years in the Foreign Service I spent two and a half years away from my family. That is a long time.

Q: Do you think that any of the inspections you participated in had a real impact on the post?

JOHNSON: My pet concern as an inspector was to ensure that our Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) were being treated well. In Zaire our inspection team documented that some of our Foreign Service nationals were suffering from malnutrition. An egg cost three dollars. Rice was very expensive. Some FSNs could not put food on the table and afford public transportation so they walked long distances to work each day. Our inspection report ran into a buzz saw back in Washington. Several USIA officials in Washington claimed we greatly exaggerating the deprivations our Zairian colleagues faced. State sent out its own team, and it verified our assessment. The State inspectors endorsed our recommendation that our FSNs receive a large portion of their salaries in food stuffs, which is what our Zairian employees wanted. The new system apparently did a great deal to alleviate the hardship our local employees had to contend with. Of course the Zairian economy was still in shambles. We were justifiably proud of that inspection.

And in another post in Spain, one of our officers was having problems dealing with his FSNs. He was completely frustrated and blamed himself for the impasse. I suggested we have coffee you talk about what was wrong in his office. For about an hour he spilled his guts while I listened dispassionately. The details of the situation are unimportant but the solution wal thoughfairly obvious. I proposed a simple line of action. He slapped himself on the head, and agreed. Sometimes the most important service I could provide as an inspector was to be a good listener.

Q: Were you looking at problems of sexual harassment?

JOHNSON: I never heard of any allegations to that effect. Our main concern was good management, effective programming and strong personal contacts.

Q: This was during the Carter administration, 1977 to 1977. I was wondering, was there sort of a different thrust to human rights? Was this sort of a USIA function?

JOHNSON: Yes. It was interesting. I worked on human rights when I was in Paraguay as the Student Affairs Officer, and spent more time on that than almost anything else. We practiced quiet diplomacy. We were constantly pressuring the Stroessner regime to release political prisoners, allow greater freedom of press and allow the opposition parties to operate without restrictions. Jimmy Carter, I think, set back human rights, because he was so preachy and public in his denunciations. One of the posts we inspected was my old post of Asuncion. The government wasn't even talking to us anymore about human rights. In fact, we also have to think of the cost of the human rights of the American worker, when the government tells you they won't let your companies bid on our contracts. The largest hydroelectric power project in the world was going on line, and Stroessner told our embassy to inform General Electric that its bids for the huge turbines would not be considered. I think Carter's naï¿½ve tactics cost American workers millions in wages.

I believe that human rights played a major role in winning the Cold War. I don't think the Soviets had any idea how potent a weapon it would become for the West. More about that subject when we talk about my work in the East Asian and Pacific Bureau.

Q: Where did the USIA inspections fit vis a vis State inspections? Did you have your own office in your own building or were you in Main State?

JOHNSON: When I joined the Office of Inspections it was at 1750 Pennsylvania Avenue. Later we moved to 14th and K. We read State inspection reports and they read our reports. We sometimes bumped into each other at meetings. We tried to help each other, but operated quite separately. In retrospect I realize that it would have been beneficial if there had been a system to coordinate State and USIA inspections.

Q: Were you looking at the support embassies were providing USIA?

JOHNSON: Yes, absolutely. That was another part of the process, something called shared administrative support (SAS). We wanted to be certain that USIA was getting its money's worth from services provided by State. Sometimes, we questioned numbers which then might lead to negotiations between State and the Agency in Washington.

Q: Who was your Inspector General?

JOHNSON: At that time the agency did not have IG. Our Chief Inspector was Dan Oleksiw. His deputy was Clifford Southard. Dan was brilliant, but he could also be gratuitously cruel as well as unswervingly loyal. We got along fine. Cliff Southard was also extremely bright and enigmatic. However he did not have a mean bone in his body. I was very saddened when he died last year at the age of 80. We had two very fine Senior Inspectors, Mike Weyl, a Swiss immigrant, and Serban Vallimarescu, a Romanian immigrant. There were about eight of us Inspectors.

Two stories about Cliff Southard: when he was a junior officer in Tokyo he was assigned to escort William Faulkner around the country. It was a daunting task since the author was rarely sober. Cliff told me how at the end of the visit the ambassador offered a dinner in Faulkner's honor. Faulkner arrived feeling no pain. Standing in a receiving line, Faulkner leaned forward to shake the hand of a Japanese writer but in doing so lost control of his high ball which he spilled down the cleavage of the ambassador's wife. Cliff said he had a picture of her surprised expression as the ice and booze splashed between her breasts. I never saw the photo.

Another Southard saga: Cliff was a savvy investor in stocks and made a tidy sum playing the market. However when he and Anne purchased their home in Chevy Chase from a artsy University of Maryland grad, he painted over the sketches that covered the walls of the recreation room. Unfortunately the sketches were the earliest versions of the Muppets. The former owner was Jim Henson. "I might as well have painted over da Vinci's The Last Supper," Cliff groaned.

Q: How did you get the job?

JOHNSON: When Monrovia was inspected during my second year at post, the team recommended me.

Q: As an inspector did you sometimes find yourself involved in matters that did not usually concern USIA?

JOHNSON: While we were inspecting our post in Stockholm we noted that the Marine guards did not live at the Marine house near the embassy but were scattered all around Stockholm in private accommodations. Only a couple years before terrorists had taken over the West German embassy which was just up the hill from our chancellery. We expressed concern to the State Department during our Washington debriefing that if there were an emergency at our chancellery, it might take quite a bit of time to round up the Marines. Accordingly the Marines were ordered return to the compound, whicinconvenienced their love life.

Also while I was in Stockholm I ran into a professor of film at UCLA whom I had programmed in Monrovia. He told me that he knew a GI who had deserted the Army in Germany and was getting homesick for the United States. I agreed to speak to the young man. I told him there was no easy way out and that he would have to the face military justice system. I never learned if the soldier took my advice.

Flying into Lubumbashi in southern Zaire on an inspection, I noticed a European was being given a hard time by the Zairian officials, one of whom called me over to adjudicate the problem. It seemed that the visa of the gentleman in question, a Belgian, had expired. "Should we let him in or not?" asked the officer.

"Who does he work for?" I asked innocently.

"Coca Cola," the white man said somewhat defensively.

"Why, Coca Cola is one of the great corporations of the world, so I recommend you welcome this fine man into your country," I opined.

"Done," agreed the Zairian as he stamped the man's passport. Naturally the Coca Cola salesman invited me for a drink. Naturally I accepted. After about a half hour of playing where have you traveled to, we established that we had lived in the same tent at the work camp in Velika Plana in July 1962.

Q: What was the most picturesque place you visited as an inspector?

JOHNSON: No question about it. It was the view from the office of Frank Albert, the PAO, in Port Moresby. I don't know how he did any work. He had a huge picture window overlooking a verdant hill and beyond that a magnificent lagoon. The color of the water constantly changed depending on the sun. It was mesmerizing.

Q: Papua New Guinea is an interesting country, isn't it?

JOHNSON: It is if you are a man, like nature and are interested in languages. Women are not treated with much respect there. The wife of one of our officers was raped by their gardener, who was flabbergasted when he was arrested. What had he done wrong? he wondered.

The trekking is world famous. When I was assigned to Singapore I knew several FSOs who trekked through spectacular mountain settings for more than a week.

Frank took us to lunch with a member of parliament. I asked the Papua New Guinean how the legislature managed with about 500 languages being spoken in the country. He pointed to a small man eating alone. "See him?" the politician said. "He comes from a remote area where they speak a dialect that none of us understand. Moreover he does not understand English or any or our dialects. About twice a year he rises and motions that he wishes to address his colleagues. The speaker gives him the floor and he talks for about ten minutes. We nod politely, but no one has any idea of what the chap has said. He sits down and we continue with our business."

Frank told us that he had traveled to a provincial town to meet a mayor. A few kilometers short of the town he ran into a band of almost naked tribesmen in war dress shouting and shaking their spears at another group of warriors further down the road. Frank explained to the first group and then to the second group that he was just an American and thus wished no part in their dispute. Both bands cordially waved him on. When he arrived at the city hall the mayor's assistant informed him that the mayor was away."Do you know where he went?" asked the PAO.

"Oh, he is down on the road defending the honor of our village," came the reply.

After leaving Port Moresby I changed planes in Sydney to continue my journey to Fiji. The man next to me turned out to be an American astronomer at an observatory in the Australian outback. I asked him what he did in his free time in such a desolate place. "We play a lot of golf," he responded.

"Sand greens I suppose."

"Sand greens. Sand fairways. Sand tees," came the response.

"I suppose you have electric or gas engine golf carts," I ventured.

"Nope. No such luxury," he said.

"Then you pull around the two wheel carts?" I suggested.

"No. They would get stuck in the sand," came his reply.

"Well, you certainly don't carry your bags in that hot sun. How do you manage?" I said quite perplexed.

"Kangaroos. We train them from the time they are very small. We toss them goodies and each follows us around with our bag around his neck," he announced.

"Oh, that's very interesting." I responded and went back to my book. After about ten minutes I remembered what I had learned about kangaroos a zoo in Germany. Turning to my seat mate I growled, "Wait a minute, kangaroos are nothing but big dumb rodents." "That's right, but I had you for a minute, didn't I?" the scientist responded triumphantly.

Q: Did you get back to West Africa for inspections?

JOHNSON: We inspected Nigeria. I think we were there for several weeks. The hotels were full and over-priced, so we rented a guest house from Westinghouse. The USIA operation was well run. Lagos is a hard place to work- terrible traffic, crime and a lack of recreation facilities. The PAO told me that he had outrun robbers on the airport road in his Plymouth Fury. We flew to Kano, which is the southern end of the old caravan route from Marrakech, Morocco. Our branch public affairs officer told us that his Tuareg guard had recently shot an intruder with an arrow. The "rogue" limped away. In Kaduna, a major city in central Nigeria, we found ourselves shouting at the branch public affairs officer, not because we were angry but because of the terrible noise on the street outside. Our delay to Lagos was delayed by three days because of dust storms. We used the time to write the report and swim laps in the hotel pool.

I think it was in Kaduna that our colleague told us that one day his guard had awakened him from a siesta with cries of, "Cobra! Cobra!" The American grabbed his shotgun and confronted a very large spitting cobra exiting his garage. Still sleepy and not thinking straight, he unleashed a hail of buck shot which killed the snake. Unfortunately the ricochets took out the rear window and the back tires of his jeep.

Another USIA colleague told us that an State officer had greeted his Tuareg guard as he was leaving for work. The tall African smiled and announced in an almost matter of fact tone, "Rogue come last night."

"Ah, but you defended my house didn't you?" replied the American relieved.

"Yes, Sir, I defend your house." the guard replied proudly. "What do you want me to do with rogue?"

"What do you mean?" replied the officer.

The guard had beheaded the intruder with his long sword. Fortunately the Nigerian police were very understanding.

Q: Did your duty take you to Latin America?

JOHNSON: Yes. Peru, Chile and Paraguay. When we were in Chile we met with the president of the Chilean Red Cross to discuss programming on human rights. During the course of our interview I asked him if he could give us a figure on the number of dead caused by Pinochet's coup against Allende. He replied that no one knew the precise figure, but that as things cooled off and as Allende's supporters gradually came out of hiding or returned from Argentina that what ever number were being circulated would diminish considerably. I suspect, actually I hoped, he was right.

Q: What was it like to go back to Asuncion?

JOHNSON: It was great seeing old friends. Herman Guggiari, an artist, had a party for me in a big the tree house he built in back yard. Unfortunately the post was not in good shape. The ambassador and the PAO were at odds and the PAO was bound to lose.

Q: Did you encounter other instances where a PAO and the ambassador were in conflict?

JOHNSON: I did, in Dublin. It was my last inspection and the PAO was my former colleague Robin Berrington. The ambassador was of course a political appointee, a former New York Times journalist named William Shannon who had his own agenda and was pressuring Robin to spend USIA funds on activities that did nothing to promote American culture. Robin was also at odds with his secretary who it is believed took her revenge by copying a Christmas letter Robin had left on his desk and leaking it to the press. In his letter Robin referred to Ireland as "small potatoes", not uncharitably but nonetheless accurately. The Irish media, which alternates between American worship and America vilification, seized on the trivial statement and made it front page news. Eventually Robin was recalled much to the regret of the Irish intelligencia who concurred with his assessment. Robin, they noted, was the only member of the embassy who seriously tried to learn their national language "Irish" (Gaelic). Ambassador Shannon received his comeuppance about a year later, when he alienated the Irish government by tagging along on a political campaign of an opposition candidate as a reporter. The State Department replaced Shannon with another political appointee.

Q: What was your experience working for political appointees as ambassadors?

JOHNSON: Mixed. I had a lot of respect for Benigno Hernandez in Paraguay, Kenneth Rush and Arthur Burns, whom I worked for in Germany and I admired Jack Gavin, albeit begrudgingly, my boss in Mexico. I was very disappointed in Rick Burt, a former New York Times reporter, who was our ambassador to Bonn in the mid-80s. The constitution grants the president the authority to choose his own ambassadors. I wish that Congress would pay as much attention to vetting nominations to our embassies as it does to our courts. As you are well aware, some of the ambassadors we have inflicted on loyal allies have been scandalously inadequate.

Q: Did you inspect USIA operations in Washington?

JOHNSON: No. Unlike State, USIA limited the tender attentions of the inspectors to foreign operations.

Q: Did you inspect USIA Germany?

JOHNSON: No, but I did help inspect our operation in Prague which was very ably led by my former boss and colleague Bruce Koch. Our ambassador was Frank Meehan, who was Chief of the Eastern Affairs Section in the US Mission Berlin when I was a student at the FU. Frank was later ambassador to Warsaw and East Berlin. It is always a pleasure to visit our embassy, which is one of the most beautiful villas in that wonderful city. Perhaps in the mid-70s the Czechs were unhappy with something Washington had done and as a form of petty harassment announced that the chancellery could fly only one flag. Accordingly the flag on the street was taken down and the biggest flag the State Department could provide was hoisted atop the pergola at the top hill that provided a garden. Everyone in Prague could see the flag and the Communist regime backed down. On another occasion, the Czechs insisted that our embassy reduce its staff to a handful of officers. The embassy received kudos from Washington for its increased efficiency. Again the Czech relented.

Bruce Koch told me an interesting story about the feature film Bridge at Remagen. Since it was impossible to shoot the film at its real location just south of Bonn because the bridge was not rebuilt after the war and there is too much barge traffic on the Rhein, a location in western Czechoslovakia was substituted. Filming occurred in mid-summer 1968. One morning the crew peeked out of their tents into the muzzles of Soviet tanks. Moscow and some of its Warsaw Pact lackeys had invaded Czechoslovakia to crush the Prague Spring. The Americans were allowed to finish shooting some scenes and returned home. The film was not shown in Czech cinemas, because according to their history books the great Red Army fought the Nazi war machine virtually alone. Bruce found out who had worked on the film and had a private screening to for them in his spacious apartment.

Q: Because you were traveling to branch posts you had to use domestic airlines. Were you worried that they might be dangerous?

JOHNSON: In Peru I accompanied the administrative office to Trujillo, where we had a Class C bi-national center (a cultural center without an American). On the way back to Lima the pilot announced that the passengers in the front of the plane should move to the rear. A couple minutes later I noticed a crackling sound and large flakes shooting past my window. We were losing the outside panes of our windows. The pilot put the jet in a steep dive for about 5,000 feet before leveling off. We got a much nicer view of the coast from the lower attitude. Meanwhile two inspectors who had traveled to Cuzco had a rough landing when two tires of their jet blew. Some years later I was traveling to the Bulgaria on Balkans Air when a loose seat slid past me down the aisle.

Q: How would you rate the local employees you dealt with?

JOHNSON: Overall very high. We certainly had excellent people in Europe, although there was a steady turn over of younger FSNs who found they could earn higher salaries in business. The US Government is regarded as generous and fair employer in the second and third world. When I visited Cuba I learned that we paid our locals part in Pesos and part in a script that they could use the hard currency store. They redeemed their last few chits in ground beef because the chits were only good for a given month.

Many USIA India employees boasted stellar qualifications. I recall reminding a senior FSN of an appointment with the university president in Calcutta. He fixed his gaze on me and said in an avuncular tone, "Mr. Johnson, don't worry. I have not forgotten the obligation. I am thinking of it and many other things that will likely never occur to you. Relax."

To return to a bad dream, the worst local national employees I ever dealt with were those at USIA Monrovia. Our receptionist was barely literate and prone to threatening colleagues with law suits. I almost had to fire our chief librarian for holding revival meetings in our conference room. She quoted the Bible to me, and I responded with the admonition of Jesus to "render under to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's." I fired an assistant I caught stealing office supplies. I had officially commended him just a few months before for catching a thief in my office. After Doe overthrew the Tolbert regime, the same employee returned to USIA with a gun toting soldier and demanded his job back.

Q: You must have seen a lot of poverty in your travels as an inspector.

JOHNSON: I had toured Guayaquil while traveling through Ecuador so Calcutta was not as grim as I expected. However on the road to the Taj, which we visited on a weekend, we drove past a woman dying on the highway. She had been hit by a car. The villagers put palm branches on both sides of her so other vehicles would not run over her as she quietly bled to death. Our driver told us that in India if some one helps an injured person he takes responsibility for that person until he or she is well.

While in Calcutta I heard about a nun who was helping the poorest of the poor. I sent her a check for the equivalent one day of my per diem, about $75. She responded with a lovely two page handwritten letter. I am sorry I did not keep it. A few months later the nun, Mother Teresa, received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Q: Were you concerned with the impact of careers on the families of officers?

JOHNSON: We didn't interview wives and children but we saw cases where officers had been so devoted to furthering their careers that they had neglected their families. As a result when the officers attained a senior rank and had been assigned to their dream posts, they had serious problems at home.

Q: Such as?

JOHNSON: Wives who were alienated from the Foreign Service and wanted their spouse to retire or resign from State or USIA. Some wives saw so little of their husbands that they became problem drinkers or alcoholics. Some children felt neglected by their fathers and developed emotional problems. I realize I am speaking of fathers but the Foreign Service in the 1970s was almost entirely male. Perhaps women officers were more sensitive, but I never encountered a female officer who neglected her family because of her career.

Q: Do you think a spouse can make or break an officer's career?

JOHNSON: Spouses are the unheralded assets in the careers of many officers. Carolyn was invaluable to me both personally and professionally. She like many other spouses provided countless hours of unpaid service to USIA and State. However if an officer does not do his/her job then I don't believe a spouse can save the officer's career. I know lots of spouses who have hurt an officer's career and even more spouses who have insisted that the officer resign from the Foreign Service to pursue another line of work.

Q: You inspected Korea. What was it like in Korea?

JOHNSON: Marshal Law in effect, thus when we attended a dinner at the home of an embassy officer we had to be back in the embassy guest house by 10:00. When we returned to our quarters we compared notes and drafted portions of our report. Wives were not invited to the dinners. Except for an incident in Taegu, I felt very safe in Korea. In Taegu I was wandering alone through a park when an attractive young Korean woman approached me and struck up a conversation. Koreans are usually very shy. She spoke good English and her questions were very prying. In a few minutes we were joined by two young men. I played dumb and pretended that I was a tourist. I resisted efforts to walk into remote portions of the park and keep steering the group back to the main gate where there were lots of people. After about a half hour the Koreans nodded to one another and left. I reported the incident to the post security officer and he said that I was possibly being set up for kidnapping.

One day I was walking alone in Seoul when I smelled the most incredible stench. I was intrigued and followed it for blocks. Finally I located the source, a shop cooking snakes. The owner smiled and offered me both boiled and raw snake. I politely declined.

The embassy arranged for us to tour the DMZ. I had not realized that downtown Seoul is only about 20 miles from the border i.e. within artillery range. We were ushered into the one storey building where the delegations face one another across a narrow table. We were warned not to touch anything as our military guide took us around the table. Technically we were momentarily in North Korea. A North Korean soldier eyed us coldly through a window. About 60 yards away we could see a tree which was the site of a deadly incident a few months earlier. The North Koreans had agreed for the US to trim a tree in no man's land. An American lieutenant was killed by an axe-wielding North Korean soldier as he stood near the tree.

Q: Did your travels take you to Japan?

JOHNSON: Yes. I spent several days in Tokyo on my way to Seoul to talk with an office that provided logistical support to several posts in Asia. Incidentally while walking down the street I noticed a very proper Japanese matron clad in a kimono carrying a shopping bag. It was the time of the Shaft films and the side of the bag in large letters read, "Bad Ass Mother". I impulsively broke out laughing, much to the chagrin of the lady who I am sure had no idea what the inscription meant. Unable to explain my faux pas, I hurried off.

Q: Did you get to North Africa on any inspections?

JOHNSON: Yes. We inspected USIA Algeria, which was very well run. The American officers spoke excellent Arabic and had very impressive contacts in the media and among intellectuals. I spoke to one State Department officer in Algiers who said he envied how much time the USIA FSOs spent outside the embassy cultivating contacts while so much of his work was writing reports for Washington.

I flew to Tripoli to visit my friend from my Berlin days, Bob Blucker. Bob was the economic counselor in our embassy. We drove into the desert where he showed me wheat fields. The government was experimenting in reducing the country's dependence on foreign grain. Unfortunately the cost of irrigating the projects made growing wheat prohibitively expensive. We also found an oasis with some faded signs in German, including one that said "Actung Minen". Bob assured me that the land mines had migrated elsewhere with the shifting sand dunes. On the road east I noticed two deep furrows each about two feet wide. Bob explained that during a recent confrontation with Egypt Qadhafi had sent tanks toward the border and that the tanks had left their imprint on the highway. We spent a day wandering through the extensive ruins of Lepus Magna. Because tourism to Libya had all but dried up, we had the ruins to ourselves.

I did have one item of official business to take care of in Tripoli. Marge Ransom, the Libya desk officer at USIA, asked me to evaluate the feasibility of reopening a USIA post in Tripoli. I consulted with embassy officers and collected a quantity of Libyan Government propaganda and wrote a report throwing cold water on the idea. I had not wanted to offend my friend, but I felt I owed her and the Agency my honest assessment. The post was not reopened and I belatedly received a meritorious honor award for my efforts.

My next stop was Morocco where, as I recall, I did a pre-inspection survey. I also took time off to visit Marrakech and Casablanca. The former city boasts a market that is a unique tourist attraction. I don't recall if I purchased anything, but I thoroughly enjoyed my wanderings. In Casablanca I spent a most agreeable day in the port. At the first dock just inside the gate an American freighter was unloading 105mm howitzers and crates of shells which I am sure were used only for ceremonial purposes since we had publicly declared that the US Government was not supporting the Moroccans in their fight against Polisario Front in the Western Sahara. Wandering past other ships I was accosted by Moroccans who generously shared fruit and nuts with me. Each insisted I try his wares. Nothing was for sale. It was all free. I don't think I would an American would get that reception in the port today.

Q: Did you have an occasion to use your civil-military experience as an inspector?

JOHNSON: Just once, in Spain. I visited the US Naval base at Rota and talked with the public affairs officer about civil-military issues. She was very savvy and anxious tcooperate with USIA in Madrid. I also called our Consul General in Seville, a post that has now been closed. There was no USIA officer in Seville.

Q: Traveling that much, you must have been constantly filling out travel vouchers and worrying about having all the right visas.

JOHNSON: The wonderfully efficient secretaries in our office always got us the required visas in time for our departures. However I once traveled from Fiji to Tokyo via Honolulu in one day which meant I had to cross the International Date Line twice in about 12 hours. The clerk working on my voucher could not comprehend how one could start on a Wednesday, be in Tuesday and then finish in Wednesday. The amount of money was all of $7 to pay for airline drinks and movies. I offered to withdraw my request, but after weeks finally received a check for the princely amount. A year or two after I left inspections I received a dunning notice for two sums $250 and $400 for overpayment of travel expenses. When I asked how I had incurred the costs, the clerk responded, "You know!" I didn't know and I suspected that the vouchers office was trying to balance its books partially at my expense. I ignored later requests for the money and finally the demands stopped coming.

Q: It seems you were having a lot of fun. Why did you leave the Office of Inspections?

JOHNSON: As I have already stated, I did not think it was fair for me to saddle Carolyn with raising two boys. Also I missed being with Patrick and Erik. Meanwhile she was pregnant with our daughter, Suzanne. What really made me ask to be released from inspections was a meeting with Patrick's teacher. She showed us his work, which was quite good, and included a family picture. She said she had asked each third grader to draw a picture of his or her family and Patrick had produced a masterpiece. Framed by a window, Carolyn was depicted gardening, Erik on his tricycle and our dog Shadow drinking from his bowl. When the teacher asked Patrick, "Where's daddy?" he responded, "Oh, he's traveling." I knew it was time to leave inspections.

Q: Tom, 1979 to 1981 what were you doing?

JOHNSON: I have always loved film and television. USIA had a large office devoteto purchasing video material and leasing feature films to be used for programming and representational events. If an ambassador wanted a science fiction thriller because the minister of trade was a sci-fi nut, then we got for him. During my first year I was in charge of obtaining material on the US politics and society, then I moved up to be Deputy Director of Acquisitions. I spent my days screening feature films and writing announcing cables. It was a great job but did not advance my career. In retrospect I should have punched my ticket by spending the two years as a county desk officer. Sometimes you can't afford to do what you love and I love film.

Q: What sort of documentaries did you lease or purchase?

JOHNSON: I recall finding and buying an entire series on the US legal system. One long documentary was about the death penalty. During the Presidential elections, we provided USIA posts with commercials from the various candidates during the primaries. We had total cooperation except for one candidate: George Bush. I took several trips including to Houston and Nashville for documentary film festivals. We put together the first package of films for the PRC. What they wanted was warm and fuzzy things so we got them things like "Little House on the Prairie". The series did not contain much freight on human rights but it was an opening. Dealing with the Chinese was challenging. The shadow of Mao still hung over the country and our contacts were very conservative and suspicious.

Q: Who was making documentaries?

JOHNSON: Both independent filmmakers and PBS stations, such WGBH in Boston and WNET in New York. We often received works by filmmakers and either purchase or reject. We leased some products and bought others. For example we purchased many short stories by noted American authors for use in classrooms.

We received from filmmakers lots of junk to review. One cinematographer sent me a production about the singer Tanya Tucker. It was raunchy and I rejected it. A few weeks later I received a letter from the filmmaker's Congressman, Sam Stratton, asking why I had rejected his client's work. I responded to the lawmaker that I was one of his constituents and that I didn't spend government funds on trash, although I believe I used a less pejorative term. The USIA front office got involved in our exchange of correspondence and backed me.

Q: How big was the Film/TV Acquisitions staff?

JOHNSON: There were, as I recall, six officers and 15 GS staff, including secretaries. Some of the GS employees had been in the office for years and were very skilled a negotiating television rights and in finding material.

Q: What format did you acquire the products in?

JOHNSON: Most on video tape but also on 16 mm film.

Q: Did you buy TV rights to the products?

JOHNSON: Not very often. TV rights were fairly expensive.

Q: And how large was the budget?

JOHNSON: Several hundred thousand dollars. Budget cuts and the folding of USIA into State doomed film and television acquisitions along with many other public diplomacy services.

Q: Was USIA involved in the inauguration?

JOHNSON: Very much so. We assisted about a hundred foreign journalists in covering the gala weekend. I escorted a senior producer from Indian television to the ceremony. We had good seats on the west lawn of the Capitol. Afterwards he did a voice over of video coverage provided by USIA. At one point in Reagan's speech the president made reference to "potential adversaries" and the camera swung over to a rather dour diplomat in a dark overcoat. I told the Indian that the person on the screen was the Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. The Indian jumped up and said, "I can't use that footage! There are political sensitivities at home that you don't understand." I called the control booth and footage of the Washington monument replaced the footage of the diplomat.

Q: Did USIA have an in-house production facility for film or TV?

JOHNSON: Acquisitions was the tail and production was the dog. There were modern sound studios which were kept busy doing documentaries for placement on foreign television. It was a multi-million dollar operation. It is of course gone.

Q: Is there something you did while in the Office of Acquisitions that you are really proud of?

JOHNSON: There is, but it had nothing to do with films, but rather personnel. As deputy chief of the office, I wrote the evaluation reports on the staff. I had one employee who was a total goof off. He was notorious in the agency. I tried to counsel the officer and having failed at that, carefully documented his failings. Before leaving the office for my next assignment, I recruited a successor with backbone. In 1982 the FSO was "selected out" of the Foreign Service for poor performance. I did USIA a real service getting rid of that guy.

Q: Did you find in sampling the documentaries of that erthis was after our pull-out from Vietnam and you were still dealing with the generation of the sixties - I would think there would have been a surplus of protest documentaries telling how awful things were.

JOHNSON: No. The protest movement had largely abated with the end of American involvement in the Vietnam War in 1975.

Q: I was just wondering since the spirit of the times was still not to trust anyone over thirty. You didn't get that feeling at all?

JOHNSON: No, I didn't get that feeling at all.

Q: Before we leave your four years in Washington is there anything that occurred that we have not touched on?

JOHNSON: There was and it concerns my old friend from Berlin, Bob Blucker. Bob had been assigned to our embassy in East Berlin as economic officer, but after a few months on the job in his favorite city he found he could not stand working for the ambassador. I don't recall if he ever told me why he and the ambassador did not get along however Bob was not prone to compromise. In any case, he agreed to be transferred to Tehran, if the Department would let him break his assignment to East Berlin. He joined Carolyn, me and our children for a picnic during his consultations in Washington. He had been in Tehran for only six days when the zealots stormed the embassy. I knew that Bob would hold up as a hostage. He was stubborn and had no family so he was not worried about dependents. I wrote Bob regularly but he never received any of my letters. I also helped staff the special office in the State Department operations center as press spokesman for a hectic Sunday. Meanwhile I was told Bob endeared himself to his fellow hostages, and probably also to the male guards, when one day he announced he was a nudist, and stripping off his clothes, he sunned himself in the patio of the bungalow. Bob told me that his action caused the immediate withdrawal of the women guards who were stricter than their male counterparts. Bob did not endear himself to his captors, who referred to him as "that old woman." He regularly lectured them on the legality of their actions and other subjects he deemed of importance. Maybe Bob's hectoring of his guards helped convince the Iranians that holding the Americans was not without its price.

When Bob stepped off the plane at Rhein Main Air Base in Frankfurt on his way home, he was wearing a three piece suit. The other hostages were casually dressed. I was at Andrews Air Force Base when the hostages arrived in Washington. I spoke with Bob briefly on the tarmac before he was whisked away to be with his kin and receive a medal from President Reagan. As a former hostage Bob received the assignment of his choice, Consul General in West Berlin. Carolyn and I visited him there while we were assigned to Frankfurt.

Unfortunately whatever happened in Tehran, its aftermath and retirement evidently took their toll on Bob. After retiring from State, he lived in San Antonio for some years and then moved back to Little Rock, Arkansas where he grew up. We corresponded. His letters were full of sardonic humor and accompanied by newspapers clippings of absurd happenings. He often added funny comments in the margins of the clippings. By that time I may have been his only friend.

Bob refused to travel back to Berlin and he never visited us, although he was always appreciative of news regarding our family. He claimed that he was not "fit company." I never got out to Little Rock. I might have made the trip, if Bob had invited me. One day in 2004 I received a letter from Bob with two sizable checks. Bob said he was terminally with cancer, did not have long to live and was settling his affairs. He asked me to dispose of the money prudently, e.g. not to give it to a liberal cause. A few days later Bob was dead.

Q: In 1981 what happened?

JOHNSON: Then in '81 I was offered the positions of Press Attachï¿½ in PanamanPAO in Surinam. I rejected Surinam because of the lack of good schools for our children. Since the Panama Canal hand-over had already been negotiated, I figured Panama would be pretty quiet so I chose to go to a big post, and I accepted the position of Assistant Information Officer dealing with the electronic media in Mexico City.

Q: It was rather late in your career to be an assistant. Wouldn't have been better to have been a PAO or an IO?

JOHNSON: The summer of 1981 everyone seemed to be sitting tight, so there was not much available in Latin America. I didn't want to go back to Africa and I had never punched my ticket by serving in a big post. Moreover my parents were both in failing health and I wanted to stay as close to the US as possible.

Q: What did you think of Mexico?

JOHNSON: It is the most exotic country I have ever served in. I soon realized that I would never figure out the Mexicans no matter how many times I read Octavio Paz's The Labyrinth of Solitude, a penetrating analysis of the Mexican national character. And of course the country offers stunning landscapes. Its culture is fascinating . Mexicans are world class wood and stone carvers and create items of unparalleled beauty out of cloth and clay. The clash and accommodation of Indian, European and foreign cultures is fascinating. The country has a delightful climate and the authentic (not Tex-Mex) cuisine cannot be topped.

Perhaps what really enthralled me is the complexity of US-Mexican relations.

Q: How did you travel to Mexico City?

JOHNSON: I sold our trusty 71 VW station wagon and purchased a new Chrysler Lebaron station wagon, the most comfortable car I have ever owned. We drove across the country to El Paso and then down to Mexico City. The Mexican customs officials in Ciudad Juarez treated us very cordially. When I told the senior inspector that we were headed for the "DF" (Districto Federal) i.e. Mexico City, he drew me aside and said, "Senior, I was born there and I am very sorry for anyone who must live there." I asked him to be more specific. He winked and said, "You will find out soon enough," and laughed.

We spent a couple days in Chihuahua and visited the Pancho Villa museum, which contains the open touring car he was riding in when he was assassinated by a jealous husband in 1923. Ironically the very day of our visit, Villa's widow was being laid to rest at the edge of town. It is not that she was that old when she died, it was that she was so young when she married the bandit-revolutionary.

Our next stop told us more about Mexico: Zacatecas, when we toured a silver mine where the Spanish worked natives under conditions as bad as in a Nazi concentration camp. There were five levels in the mine and many Indians allegedly never again saw the light of day once they entered the mine. Our guide was a university student. Since I didn't know what his political sentiments were, I did not tell him that I was an American diplomat. However I tipped him generously when we got back to the surface. I was really glad to be out of those tunnels.

The following day we arrived in the DF and found our way through the traffic to the embassy. We took up residence in an apartment in the Zona Rosa, a few blocks from the chancellery.

Q: What was USIA like and what did your job consist of?

JOHNSON: The great Stan Zuckerman was the PAO. Stan was a wheeler and dealer and great fun to work for. He told me that my predecessor had been more interested in the fine arts than in her job and that I was free to expand the duties of my position. When I checked with the post Executive Officer, Jim Romano, I learned that although the fiscal year that was fast coming to an end, only 20% of my budget had been even obligated. In the ensuring weeks I spent thousands dollars modernizing the embassy's radio/television studio, which I was in charge of. I don't remember how I used up the rest of my budget but my operation soaked up available resources from other sections in USIA.

Consul General Larry Lane told me that he would appreciate more attention from USIA and so I became the embassy spokesman for consular issues: missing and dead Americans, car crashes and plane crashes. Ambassador Gavin asked me to read the Privacy Act and Freedom of Information Act and to be ready to advise my colleagues on their application. I had a lot to learn.

During my first week on the job, the embassy received a bomb scare. Bomb threats were common but the Regional Security Officer advised the DCM to send everyone home early that day. Just as I was going out the front gate behind, Perry Steele, the INS chief, stumbled backward holding his chest. I could see blood seeping through his fingers. Meanwhile the Mexican police guards were beating a man on the sidewalk. Perry had been stabbed. A Marine guard rushed him up to the medical unit where it was determined that the wound was superficial. Welcome to Mexico City.

That night we went to dinner at the home of the sister of a Foreign Service classmate. She served a lovely pasta. That night I lay awake. It felt like a cement block was on my stomach. Moral of the story: Until you are accustomed to the altitude, don't eat heavy dinners and expect to sleep. Welcome to Mexico City.

Because of the terrible traffic and the numerous family obligations that Mexicans, most substantive contact was over lunch. A typical lunch started at 2:00 or 2:30 and lasted three or four hours. I hosted one lunch in the Zona Rosa which consumed six hours. When I returned home Carolyn had prepared my favorite dinner of pork chops smothered in onions and tomatoes. I could only look at them. Welcome to Mexico City.

On another occasion, the ambassador, Stan and I had lunch in a private dining room of Televisa. A senior vice president opened a 60 year old bottle of cognac. The others begged off and returned to the embassy. To uphold the honor of my country I matched the VP sip for sip of the wonderfully smooth cognac. I did not return to the embassy but several hours of quality contact time, took a taxi home. The next morning I did not have a hangover. Welcome to Mexico City.

Q: Didn't the Mexican economy suffer a serious recession while you were there?

JOHNSON: Yes. In 1981 the Peso was way over valued, 24 to the dollar. The first year we received a cost of living allowance because Mexico City was more expensive than Washington, DC. Unfortunately the economic model which the Lopez Portillo regime was following expected the value of a barrel of oil to rise to $70; instead it was in the teens. Combined with a lot of other bad economic news, the peso plummeted and economy tanked and many Mexicans had to sell off real estate in the United States because they could not afford the mortgages which were of course in dollars. One weekend we were in southern Mexico and the banks were closed because of the economic crisis. We were stranded without money. Somehow we got home.

Q: What was your housing like?

JOHNSON: I lost out to a colleague in the political section for a lovely house. I was so discouraged that evening I decided to go to bed early lest something else go wrong. I confused Suzanne's diaper ointment with tooth paste. Carolyn answered my cries of repulsion with comforting words.

A couple days later we took the ugly duckling of houses which no one wanted. It was huge villa near the Museum of Anthropology. We had the vines covering it ripped down, the house repainted and cleaned. We were very happy there for the next three years. Our sons destroyed two mattresses by riding them down the marble staircase into the living room which had 18 foot high ceilings. Meanwhile the house we wanted so badly turned out to have incurable plumbing problems.

We lived in Polanco, one of the two Jewish neighborhoods. There were four synagogues but only two churches within walking distance of our house. Although our gentile neighbors ignored us, a Jewish lady across the street welcomed us. One evening during the Jewish holy days I was walking our dog, Turbo. A Mercedes pulled up with two couples inside. One of the men asked, "Can you tell me where the synagogue is?"

"Which one", I responded, "conservative or orthodox?"

"Conservative."

"Which one, the one with the dome or without the dome?"

"With the dome."

"Next right and it's on your right in the third block."

Jews have lived in Mexico for centuries. Many arrived in the late 1800s. Enrique Strauss, a journalist, told me that in the 1880s his ancestral clan had departed Bremerhaven in two boats. One landed in Baltimore and one in Vera Cruz. One of the descendents of the Baltimore group was Robert Strauss, chairman of the Democratic Party and ambassador to Moscow. "My great grandfather got the wrong boat," Enrique remarked with a smile.

After World War II President Miguel Aleman opened the nation's doors to survivors of the holocaust, which provided Mexico with a major infusion of talent.

I organized a synagogue tour for my embassy colleagues. We were received very warmly by the rabbis who explained Jewish doctrine to us and led us through their houses of worship.

Mexicans are remarkably tolerant. During the siege of Mexico City by the US Army in 1848 the Union Church, a protestant congregation which included some Americans, continued to hold services without interference by the authorities.

Q: How good was the cooperation between the various sections in the embassy?

JOHSON: Numerous government agencies were represented in the embassy and we all worked together very well. Probably 60 or 70 officers attended monthly staff meetings. USIA coordinated press interviews with numerous offices. Most reporters wanted to talk to State officers in the consular, political and economic sections but we had requests for appointments with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Agency and others agencies.

Q: Next question: how well did the cultural and information portions of USIA collaborate.

JOHNSON: I was of course part of the information section, but I became good friends with Diane Stanley, the Cultural Affairs Officer. Diane was a delightful person with a remarkable understanding of American culture and an abiding interest in Mexico. She had terrific contacts. I participated in her programs whenever I could. One of Diane's most endearing characteristics was that she was unflappable. For example, the post was returning a major art exhibit to a New York museum. She insisted on going to the airport to make sure the crates were loaded safely onto the airplane. To everyone's chagrin, the crates did not fit into the cargo hold of the commercial carrier. There had been no problem getting the exhibit to Mexico by air. Lesson: Not all cargo doors are the same size. Diane swung into action and hired carpenters to make slightly smaller crates and the problem was solved. I don't know if the museum noticed the difference. Sadly Diane died of cancer soon after she retired.

Q; Was Mexico City a hardship post?

JOHNSON: In spite of the terrible air pollution there was no hardship pay which Ambassador Gavin agreed was unfair. Several million residents had no potable water. The air was laden with dried feces. Gavin was ill several times.

Q: Did you suffer from the pollution?

JOHNSON: About my second year at post I came down with a virus which was much more serious than the embassy physician or I realized. I should have taken two weeks off to stay with a friend outside of the DF. Instead I went back to work.

Q: Did the virus leave you with any lasineffects?

JOHNSON: The virus attacked the part of my heart that controls the rhythm. A surgeon tried to correct the problem, but the operation failed. I will be on medication for the foreseeable future.

Q: Did anyone else in your family suffer from the altitude or pollution?

JOHNSON: Not that we are aware of.

Q: Back to Gavin: being a former actor, Jack Gavin was very sensitive to publicity. As the former head of the Screen Actors' Guild, he was known as a difficult person. How was he to work for?

JOHNSON: In many ways I admired Gavin and his grasp of Mexican culture. Gavin was also very sensitive to his image in the press. In spite of his good looks and the prestige of his position, he was insecure. He was very wary of the Mexican press, which he accused of being hostile to him. He asked us in USIA to compile a list of lies about him that appeared in the media. His suspicion of the media was almost Nixonian. We reminded him for generations the Mexican press has often been hostile to the American ambassador.

Gavin's mother was from Sonora. He grew up speaking flawless Spanish. He knew the country well, including its politics and economy. I don't think the US has ever sent an ambassador to Mexico who was better versed in the country.

He was very smart and could absorb most complex briefing notes with a single reading and then respond knowledgeably on the subject in a press interview. He handled television appearances with aplomb. I produced a number of TV spots with him in the USIA studio. All he needed was a couple of cue cards and he was good to go.

Gavin knew a lot of the top people in the media and was personal friends with the owners of the largest television network in the country. The family is also the major stockholder in SIN, the Spanish International Network in the US. He could charm almost any reporter and was well read.

He was touchy about having his picture taken. I once accompanied him to a lunch at the American Chamber of Commerce. I sat with a table of Mexican reporters whom I briefed regarding photos: no pictures of Gavin while he is eating. Sure enough, half way through lunch a photographer got up from our table and headed toward Gavin. I impulsively reached out and grabbed the back of her blouse, which parted company with the rest of her blouse with a resounding rip. She spun around enraged, but with one hand on her back and the other on her camera she could only make a mad dash for the door. Afterwards Gavin asked me, "What was that applause at your table about?"

Q: Did you handle any of the ambassador'correspondence?

JOHNSON: Gavin got a lot of mail but the embassy was so big that each section handled its specialty. Reporters didn't write to Gavin, although they sometimes wrote about him. Several artists presented the embassy with portraits of President Reagan. Carol Ludwig, a colleague, and I replied to the painters with courteous notes. One day a truly hideously bad portrait of our beloved leader arrived. Carol kept putting off writing the poor fellow. When she was transferred to Tokyo, the portrait was still in her office. I dashed off a polite note to the painter and air pouched the portrait to a buddy in USIA Tokyo. The painting was hanging in Carol's office when she took up her new duties.

Q: Did Gavin receive many important visitors?

JOHNSON: When George Bush was Vice President he visited Mexico City. Gavin threw a big dinner for him. At least half a dozen cabinet members and a couple dozen members of the US Senate and House of Representatives made junkets to Mexico during the three years I was there. Gavin was an articulate briefer and, as I have already stated, had a very broad grasp of the problems facing Mexico.

Four members of the Reagan cabinet were in town at one time. Gavin gave an elegant dinner party for them, which we spear carriers did the leg work for. Afterwards Gavin gave each of us a framed copy of the menu. Thanks, Jack!

When John Glenn was testing the waters for a presidential bid, he spent several days in Mexico City. The ambassador accompanied Glenn and his fellow Senator Christopher Dodd to appointments with high government officials. I had the pleasure of taking care of Annie Glenn, a thoroughly delightful lady. She told me she had had a terrible stutter and that she had cured herself by going silent each time she began to stutter. As soon as she regained her composure, she resumed talking. When I told her that I used to stutter badly, she nodded appreciatively.

One afternoon I took Annie shopping in the Zona Rosa and two young men began to follow us. I stared at them and unbuttoned my jacket and reached menacingly reached inside. They took the hint and turned away.

Incidentally, Jesse Jackson also visited Mexico under the guise of possible presidential candidate. The de la Madrid regime which had replaced the Lopez Portillo bandits did not take Jackson seriously. As I recall, no senior officials received him.

Occasionally celebrities dropped by the chancellery for a chat with the ambassador. For example Los Angeles pitcher Fernando Valenzuela arrived with a body guard. I met them at the front entrance. I told the athlete that he would be quite safe without his gun toting companion who seemed intent on remaining at his master's side. A very tall Marine guard joined me and announced firmly, "Only Marines carry arms in this building." Valenzuela accompanied me to the ambassador's office for a pleasant chat and a ball signing. His guard sullenly took up a position outside the gate.

Q: Did you ever travel with Gavin?

JOHNSON: A couple of times to consulates. He was thoroughly agreeable one-on-one. We talked about Mexican politics and also about his days as an actor. He told me about working with Hitchcock and other directors. I asked him which his favorite role was. I expected him to respond the good guy in "Psycho". No he responded that it was his role in "Thoroughly Modern Millie" with Julie Andrews.

Q: Did Gavin take pride in his acting career?

JOHNSON: He used to joke that he had more than 20 films in the can to prove he was no actor. He once told me that someone had complained to President Reagan about his appointment as ambassador. Apparently the malcontent declared, "But he's an actor." The Gipper then curtly reminded the caller who he was talking to.

Q: Mrs. Gavin was actress, wasn't she?

JOHNSON: During the three years I was in Mexico City she was acting in a soap opera in the United States, so she didn't spend much time at post.

Speaking of soap operas, a Mexican journalist told me that during their exile years in Mexico before the Cuban revolution, Fidel and Raul Castro acted in soap operas. That was before the time Mexico had video tape and none of the low budget episodes was filmed. I can't vouch for the truth of the allegation, but it has always intrigued me.

Q: Mexicans love soap operas?

JOHNSON: They adore soap operas, many of which are now made in this country. Soaps are part of their culture which does not prize understatement. The biggest hit from Hollywood during my tenure in the DF was "Officer and a Gentleman-" a super soap.

Q: How would you describe that section of the Mexican electronic media?

JOHNSON: Radio was the medium which was accessible to even those Mexicans living in remote villages. The radio networks were mainly privately owned and had very modern facilities, particularly in Mexico City. Numerous independent radio stations made do with basic equipment. Radio was very profitable and there was a great variety of stations. However I don't think there was much broadcasting in the Indian languages. The audiences were probably too small and financially marginal.

The government operated Channel 11 in Mexico City which paled in comparison to Televisa, the commercial network. As I noted above Televisa owns or owned most or perhaps all of the Spanish International Network in the United States. Televisa was careful not to exceed FCC regulation governing foreign ownership of TV stations in the United States. Televisa executives were continually asking me to provide them with the latest FCC rulings.

The Mexicans had their own version of PBS, Channel 8, which was woefully under funded and reached only a very narrow audience. The chief executive of the channel and I were good buddies. I provided him with some video material.

Q: We have these talk shows particularly on Sundays where people in the government get up, ambassadors or other people get up, and state positions which seem to then spread out to the rest of the media. Was there an equivalent of that?

JOHNSON: No, I don't recall a Mexican version of "Meet the Press" or "Face the Nation". Few senior Mexican politicians would have allowed themselves to be questioned by reporters in a substantive fashion. On the other hand, most foreign dignitaries, including ambassadors, were fair game.

I think most people in Mexico City slept in on Sunday morning or went to church. Moreover politicians and business leaders were not accountable to the nation via the press as they are here in the US. Televisa broadcast something called "Sixty Minutes," including the ticking watch, but it was badly made and dreadfully boring. Televisa and, as I recall, also Channel 11 had hour long newscasts week nights but because of inadequate funding and a lack of professionalism, the shows consisted almost entirely of talking heads- very dull. I didn't even bother to report on their contents to Washington.

Q: The press was not in the position of looking for the latest government scandal and exposing it?

JOHNSON: No. Press freedom in Mexico was limited. Most censorship was largely self-imposed. Reporters usually knew how far they could go before they got in trouble. With a high unemployment rate among even the educated, few were willing to risk their livelihood for the public good. Moreover Mexicans are not taught to think critically in school or in the university. Conformity made careers; moreover, most Mexican reporters were not well trained and seemed content to print government press releases as their own copy. Politicians routinely bribed reporters to carry favorable material.

The government could shut off the power to radio and television stations that carried material it deemed offensive. Moreover the government had a monopoly on the importation of newsprint, which meant it could close down the presses of any newspaper or magazine.

For several months rumors circulated in Mexico City that the government planned to nationalize Televisa. The owners called the regime's bluff or persuaded it to back down. In Mexico such delicate matters are resolved behind tightly closed doors. Mexico is a country of many walls.

Censorship was also exercised by non-government organizations. A newspaperman told me how he had received a call at home late one night with the following message: "We know your children stand at the corner of X and Y street every weekday morning waiting for a bus. It would be a shame if a truck were to go out of control and run over them."

Sometimes threats were followed by violence and sometimes violence was not preceded by a threat. One morning I was having breakfast in a cafï¿½ in the Zona Rosa with a contact from television. Sitting at a table near the door was Mexico's leading newspaper columnist, Manuel Buendia - a fearless maverick. He was a man with many enemies. My companion suggested we pay our respects to Buendia. I demurred. A few hours later Buendia was retrieving some files from the trunk of his car when two men shot him to death from close range. According to a recent search I did on Goggle, the assassins have not been caught.

Q: Do you recall foreign correspondents being subjected to pressure?

JOHNSON: No, but then their material was destined for export and did not threaten the status quo. American foreign correspondents were regular visitors to our embassy, which was so well staffed that we could brief them on almost any subject. I sometimes wondered if the American public knew how much information they received from foreign correspondents on Mexico was provided by the embassy.

Q: Did third country correspondents ask for interviews or material from USIA?

JOHNSON: I had one regular visitor, a Chinese reporter from a major PRC daily whose beat included Central America. I told him that if he went to El Salvador he would probably be killed by a right-wing death squad. "I realize that," he replied, "So could you please provide me with material on the conflict?"

So every week I provided him with a thick packet of USIA wireless stories. I have no idea how he reworked the material in writing his articles and I never asked him. When I was transferred to Frankfurt he invited Carolyn and me to his home for a fabulous dinner of innumerable courses which he and a Chinese student prepared. We will never forget that evening.

Q: Was information plentiful in Mexico?

JOHNSON: Soft stuff, sure. The government could tell you how many tourists enjoyed the country's pristine beaches. However I was never able to learn how many demonstrators were killed by the police and/or military in 1968 at Tlatelolco. As in China, uncomfortable data is swept under the rug. Other information, such as simple statistics regarding traffic fatalities was not kept or if it was compiled the validity of the figures was questionable.

Q: Was the United States the designated whipping boy in the media?

JOHNSON: Often. The Mexicans are prone to blaming others for their short comings and so do we gringos. Certainly, when they needed a scapegoat they looked often north. The Mexicans have never forgiven the French for imposing Maximilian as emperor. As far as I know, Mexico is the only country in the world that has a Museum of the Interventions, which depicts how the country has been subjected to foreign interference in its internal affairs. Even the language embodies this notion of violation. Mexicans often use the vulgar verb "chingar" (sodomize) or the noun "chingada" (screwed).

For a bitter-sweet glimpse of Mexican profanity, I suggest you see the film "El Norte," which tells the story of a Guatemalan brother and sister fleeing their native land for safety in the United States.

The cover of a major magazine depicted then Secretary of State Al Haig as a cave man lumbering into Mexico carrying a huge club. I had the cartoon framed and it hung my office in Mexico City and Frankfurt. Eventually I offered Haig the picture. He gratefully accepted the gift. Today I believe the cover hangs in his office on K Street.

Shortly after I arrived at post Enrique Esteineu, my senior local, and I lunched with several Televisa executives, one of whom, Felix Cortez, had studied in Germany and had been married to a German. We conversed in German and found we had a lot in common. At the end of the meal, Felix said to me, "I enjoyed our conversation today and I look forward to working with you, but I must warn you, the time will come when I turn on you." I let the remark pass. Afterwards on the way back to the embassy I recounted the journalist's remark to Enrique and asked what he made of the warning. Enrique shook his head and said, "We will find out."

Months later I negotiated with Felix placement with Televisa "Let Poland Be Poland", a major USIA production about that country's efforts to win a measure of independence from Moscow. The documentary was to run at prime time. The Friday morning of the day the documentary was to be aired, I called Felix to confirm that there were no hitches. The journalist responded coldly, "I don't know what you are talking about. There is no such arrangement." I was stunned. I reminded him of our meetings regarding the placement and he replied again, "I have no idea what you are talking about." Then he said something about a meeting and hung up. When I told Enrique what Felix had said, my colleague responded, "He warned us."

Q: Did you tell Ambassador Gavin about your problem?

JOHNSON: Yes. His response was, "Welcome to the club." He gamely endured his share of disappointments dealing with Mexicans.

Q: What happened to your relationship with Felix?

JOHNSON: We cooperated on other endeavors but never discussed "Let Poland Be Poland." I am sure the decision not to air the documentary came from his superiors. The Mexicans were very sensitive to any situation in which it appeared they were doing our bidding. The Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz once remarked, "Poor Mexico, so close to the United States and so far from God."

Q: Are Mexicans nationalistic?

JOHNSON: Their nationalism vis-a-vis the US has a defensive quality. Mexicans look down on the Central Americans and regard themselves as North Americans. Meanwhile they have an inferiority complex regarding their position vis-a-vis the US. Mexicans are nationalistic but not patriotic. Although Mexicans spout nationalistic rhetoric, they are usually unwilling to make sacrifices for their nation, in part because of their Spanish/Indian heritage and because they rightly see corruption eating up tax revenues.

If I may digress for a moment, I will offer Tom Johnson's model of patriotism. Let's assume we have three concentric circles with the individual as the center circle, the family or clan as the middle circle and the nation as the outside circle. In a totalitarian society such as Nazi Germany or Stalinist USSR the individual accounts for very little, thus the innermost circle is very small. The family or clan is accorded lip service by the state but is very secondary importance thus the middle circle is thin. Most of the space in the model is taken up by the outside circle of the state for which no sacrifice is too great.

In a Latin American country, for example, Mexico, and in Africa, the individual may be important, but his or her personal interests are usually subservient to those of the family or clan whose circle takes up most of the space. Meanwhile the outer circle, the state, is thin, i.e. there is not much genuine nationalism.

In the US and in much of Western Europe, the innermost circle is large because individualism is important and nurtured, sometimes even to the detriment of society. The family or clan plays a far smaller role in society than in Latin America or Africa so the second ring is only modestly wide. The state plays a significant but not overpowering role and its ring is likewise only moderately wide.

Q: Did Mexicans ever complain to you about immigration issues?

JOHNSON: I am not sure I would characterize their remarks as complaints. One of our senior FSNs in USIA Mexico had been in the US illegally for several years. He worked as a newsman in Los Angeles and had an understanding of the differences between US and Mexican journalism which we found invaluable. Mexicans pointed out to me on more than one occasion that land concessions contained in the treaty that ended the Mexican-American War had been forced down Mexico's throat by an expansionist USA. "Do you Americans consider a contract binding that was signed under duress?" one Mexican reporter asked me at lunch. "You dictated the location of the border," he continued softly, "and you must not be angry if we sometimes visit lands that your ancestors robbed from our ancestors."

Q: Overall you got a lot of placement.

JOHNSON: Absolutely, particularly with non-attributed material from VOA on radio. USIA material was well done and the Mexican stations and networks were glad to get it. My main regret was that funds were not available for me to travel all over the country to place material. Meanwhile I did not brag to counterparts in other embassies about our success in placing material.

One innovation which the much maligned USIA Director Charlie Wick introduced was "WorldNet", live satellite interviews with top US officials and recognized experts. The first "WorldNet" USIA Mexico City participated in was with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at the end of the US invasion of Grenada. As I recall, USIA posts in two other Latin American countries participated in the interview. Senior reporters questioned the Secretary from our embassy studio. Before "WorldNets" became a very useful tool of communication for USIA Mexico, the post had to calm the ruffled feathers of Yolanda Sanchez, Televisa's senior correspondent in Washington, who claimed the interviews undercut her position.

Q: What did you think of Wick as a USIA Director?

JOHNSON: He was imaginative and energetic, but he was also crude and tactless. When I introduced him to an ambassador at a reception in Mexico City, Wick's opener was to tell a tasteless ethnic joke. The ambassador stared at him in disbelief. I was embarrassed for my country.

Q: Was there much in the way of the American presence in the television or radio of Mexico or was this maybe they would send somebody down as needed?

JOHNSON: There were a couple dozen foreign correspondents in Mexico City. In addition there were numerous stringers. Some reporters used Mexico as a base to cover the conflicts in Central America. We in the embassy press section spent a lot of time with them. And, of course, any good interview is one that you learn as much as you give.

Q: During this period from 1981-84, were there any major stories? Well I guess Central America would certainly be on your plate.

JOHNSON: El Salvador and Nicaragua were both in the headlines. The Mexican government was very concerned with rumors that the US would intervene in Nicaragua to oust the Sandinistas. We in the embassy kept reassuring them that we had no intention of invading Nicaragua. I spent several months on detail to the press section of the American Embassy in El Salvador during that country's elections. One day I was sitting beside a hotel swimming pool talking with a Mexican businessman, and I said, "Look, I am telling you we are not going into Nicaragua. But suppose we did, what would your reaction be? He thought for a moment and responded, "I would denounce you in the street and sleep much better that night."

I think that's the way a lot of Mexicans felt. The Mexican government, which pretended to still be revolutionary, talked leftist and acted rightist. They espoused the homey proletarianism of the likes of Fidel Castro and Daniel Ortega. Meanwhile when the Communists won an election fair and square in a little town in the southeastern Mexico, the federal government in Mexico City declared the election null and void and took over the municipal government.

In another case, a Puerto Rican terrorist was arrested in a shoot out with Mexican authorities. I don't know what he was doing in Mexico. His name was Willie Morales, Willie Guillermo Moralein Spanish, Guillermo means William so we called him Willie-Willie and No-fingers Willie because he had blown most of his fingers off making bombs. US authorities wanted him to stand trial this country in the worst way. After a year or two in jail, the Mexicans allowed Willie to fly to Cuba. The embassy was not pleased. I hope Willie still in Cuba. By the way, Willie refused to talk to American consular officers, insisting that he was a citizen of Puerto Rico, not the US.

Q: Was there a media difference say up to the north of where ties with the various American states were so close? Did this make for a difference in attitude, a different world almost?

JOHNSON: Sometimes in the embassy we thought we were dealing with three countries: the south part of Mexico with Mexico City in the center, the northern and eastern part of the United States with perhaps Chicago in the middle and a border nation of the northern states of Mexico and the southwest US states with the Rio Grande in the center. Certainly after the sudden devaluation of the Peso in 1982 the northern states of Mexico were restless. I don't know how popular separatism may have been in places like Monterrey, because I didn't travel much in the north. I was pretty busy in Mexico City and on the west coast and in the south. By the way, Mexicans living in northern Mexico who were within range of American television and radio stations were much better informed than their compatriots further south. Although sometimes Mexican television stations would pirate programs from US stations and rebroadcast them. Once I was talking to the news director of a station in Texas and I told him how much I enjoyed a documentary I assumed he had sold to a Mexican station. The American was speechless. "Where did you see the film?" he asked in amazement.

"Last night here on -." I replied innocently.

"I don't know anything about that," he stuttered. "I will call our attorney tomorrow."

"Please leave my name out of it," I said defensively.

"Don't worry, but thanks for telling me." he said and hung up.

Q: Was corruption a major problem in Mexico?

JOHNSON: Corruption was everywhere in Mexico, starting with the first family. When President Jose Lopez Portillo left office in 1982, reliable sources estimated that he and his clan were two billion dollars richer. The state owned oil company PEMEX was full of graft. Hundreds of non-existent workers, "paracaidistas" (parachutists) were on the roles. One petroleum expert told me that corruption had made the extraction of crude oil in Mexico the most expensive in the world.

If nepotism is corruption, I found that every time I went to the Foreign Ministry I saw it in an amusing form. The halls were crowded with surplus employees. While the clerks were not paid very much, the Foreign Ministry would probably have worked more efficiently if they had been "paracaidistas" and not shown up for work.

Police corruption was commonplace. When Lopez Portillo left office Arturo Durazo, the nation's police chief was indicted for a variety of transgressions. He was finally captured in the US and extradited to Mexico for, as I recall, arms trafficking. Durazo's chief of staff published a best seller "Lo Negro del Negro" (The Black of the Black). Durazo was dark skinned, a distinct disadvantage in Mexican high society. The author begins the expose with a simple confession, "... I started killing at the age of 28 and have on my conscience a number exceeding 50 individuals whom I have sent to the other world..." It is quite a book.

A more mundane problem with police corruption concerned robberies of American citizens by police in uniform. One of the Marines assigned to the embassy was grabbed by police, shoved onto the floor of the squad car, robbed and let go in a large park near the embassy. A foreign correspondent had the same experience. Although both men were trained to be observant and to react calmly under pressure, they were so traumatized by the experience of armed robbery that they were unable to note or remember the 12 inch high four digit number which appears on the doors, trunk and hood of the vehicle.

One case of a police robbery was downright funny. A colleague from the State Department was in Mexico on temporary duty when he was nabbed by the DF's finest and relieved of his material possessions during a ride to a nearby park. One of the policemen apparently noticed that the book of matches taken from the gringo's pocket was from a government ministry. "How did you get these?" demanded a cop. "I'm here for consultations with .....," and he reeled the names of a number of high officials.

The police realized they had made a very big mistake. Property was returned to the American and apologies made. The police took him back to the Zona Rosa and sped away. The Embassy was furious and demanded that the culprits be caught and punished, but I don't know if justice was very done.

Q: Did your work in the consular section involve cases of corruption?

JOHNSON: The consular case which took more of my time than any other was the result of police corruption in the state of Sinaloa in western Mexico. Nicholas Schrock, a university professor from the University of Denver, disappeared on his way to Guadalajara. Our consulate in Mazatlan was alerted and after a few weeks one of the Mexican employees discovered Schrock's jeep parked next to the Culiacan police station. The jeep was decked out with the government party's campaign placards. The consul confronted the police and got the vehicle back. I flew to Mazatlan with some journalists. A few miles outside of Mazatlan, the reporters and I found a suspect hooked up to a car battery being questioned by the police. It was clear to us that the poor guy had no idea where the Schrock's body was buried. A few days later the police released the suspect.

Meanwhile the suspect and car battery story made news in the US. I received lots of phone calls from journalists in the United States. Although disgusted with the Sinaloa police, I tried to be as diplomatic as possible. One night I received a call from ambassador Gavin. "Tom, I am in Tucson and the local paper says you stated the Mexican police are torturing prisoners."

"Well, Mr. Ambassador, I don't think I said anything that strong."

"Well, what did you say?"

"She asked why the prisoner confessed and as I recall, I responded, 'Perhaps he wanted to avoid further discomfort.'"

"I understand reporters are calling you day and night but you are not making my job any easier."

A few weeks later I made a second trip to Mazatlan when the police announced that they had found Professor Schrock's body. Our consular section offered to provide the Mexican authorities with the decease's blood type and dental records. The police responded that they had made a positive indemnification and that they didn't need any help from the embassy. Professor Schrock's cadaver was flown to Denver.

A few days later, a peaceful Friday afternoon, I got a call from Stan Zuckerman. Stan said, "The Mexicans sent the wrong body to Denver." At first I thought Stan was kidding. He replied, "I hope you don't have any plans for this evening. You are going to be busy."

During the next five hours I responded to more than 80 calls from correspondents in Mexico City and from reporters from all over the western part of the United States. There was little I could say other than the Sinaloa authorities had screwed up. I soon learned that the corpse in Denver belonged to Jesus Valenzuela, a carpenter, who had died about a year earlier. Because the area there around Culiacan is very dry the body was basically mummified. Wrong height, wrong weight, wrong complexion, wrong everything. Perhaps the Mexican police thought the gringos would bury the missing professor without even peeping into the coffin. The debacle was the object of a lot of newspaper coverage. A piece in a Mexican paper provided us with a laugh. The brother of Mr. Valenzuela was quoted in the daily as stating, "Poor Jesus, he always wanted to go to the United States, and now the gringos, they are sending him back."

In spite of pressure from our embassy, the Mexicans were in no hurry to solve the mystery. About a year later a violent thunder storm washed a skull out of a shallow grave. The skull was positively identified as that of Nicholas Schrock. A policeman was eventually convicted of the robbery-murder.

Q: Did your work with the consular section concern visas?

JOHNSON: I did not issue visas but I facilitated the issuance of many visas to journalists. I did become involved in a very interesting visa case. It concerned the writer Octavio Paz, who at that time was Mexico's leading author. In his younger days he flirted with the Communists, although I do not believe that he was a member of the party. In any case, his close association with radical leftists put him on a watch list that required a waiver every time to get a visa. He traveled to the United States on a fairly regular basis. The embassy granted Paz a waiver and a visa but the whole procedure was time consuming and, given Paz's importance, embarrassing. I think he considered it our problem, not his. Paz was a good friend of the United States and very critical of Fidel Castro. Ambassador Gavin asked if there were a way to get Paz off the waiver list. The Consul General came up with an ingenious solution: have Paz declared a defector. I was tasked with drafting a long telegram to Washington containing extensive quotes from his writing and other evidence that Paz had renounced his support of leftist causes. Over a period of a couple of weeks I analyzed his writings from the previous ten to twelve years and in a lengthy report I documented his alienation from Castro and Communism. I believe I also included coverage of Paz's meetings with prominent Americans. In a few weeks the Treasury Department informed us that Paz had been approved as defector. The next time Paz applied for a visa, he was given a multiple entry visa. Paz never said a word. As far as he was concerned, his status on the waiver list, was our problem, not his. I met Paz at a luncheon in Frankfurt in 1986 when he received the Book Prize of the German Publishing Industry. He was kind enough to pretend that he remembered me. In 1990 the Mexican writer was the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Carlos Fuentes, another famous Mexican author, was related to Jack Gavin. I believe they were cousins.

Q: You mentioned that you found yourself the spokesman for the consular section. I'm an old consular type. I was wondering, Mexico always has so many tourists coming down, including visiting professors who get into trouble one way or another and get killed or arrested. What sort of things were you dealing with?

JOHNSON: I handled press inquiries regarding several fatal crashes of private planes. Several tourists died in scuba diving accidents: two from carbon monoxide poisoning when their tanks were filled with air down wind from a gasoline operated compressor and three or four divers who apparently disturbed "sleeping" sharks in a cave. I had to try real hard not to use the word "stupid" responding to the press interest in the shark case.

Of course lots of Americans were arrested in Mexico every year. Under the constraints of the Privacy Act I was prohibited from giving out the names of our countrymen under arrest. Once they were convicted, I could confirm their status as a prisoner. Dead people waive their coverage under the Privacy Act, although the embassy was sensitive to the feelings of the family in cases of bizarre deaths.

I don't recall how many missing persons we had on our look-out-for list, but there were many, including runaways and disappearing spouses with/without children. One missing person, I remember, had been missing for two years. One day she walked into the consular section to get a new passport. The consular officer said, "We've been looking for you."

"Who's we?" she wanted to know.

"Your brother is very worried about you. He is calling us all the time," declared the vice consul.

"Oh, that son-of-a-bitch," she shouted. "Don't you dare tell him where I am."

"OK," the vice consul reassured the irate visitor.

So the next time he called the embassy, the consular office said, "We know where your sister is and she's fine."

"What's her address and telephone number?" demanded the brother.

"We can't tell you that," replied the consular officer.

"What do you mean, you can't tell me?" growled the brother.

"I can't give you any more information because your sister has made it very clear to us that she does not wish to see or hear from you," came the reply.

Missing adults have the right to stay missing and keep their whereabouts private. The sister, incidentally, had been living within two blocks for the embassy.

We had another missing persons case, more tragic. The embassy had been alerted to the disappearance of a wealthy young American with a drug problem. One day we received word from the police that there was a completely brain wasted Americano living at the edge of the sprawling city dump. The consular section alerted the missing boy's father who flew to Mexico City. He returned home the same day after stating that although the young man at the dump looked like his son, he was someone else. About a week later the person living at the dump was dead. We never learned who he was nor even if he was a US citizen.

Q: I assume lots of Americans die in Mexico, particularly the elderly.

JOHNSON: I don't recall the number, but every few months the embassy sold unclaimed personal effects of the deceased. One cause of deaths was the failure of the elderly to take into account the effect of the altitude and pollution on their health. I recall several cases of Americans arriving at the airport and collapsing of heart attacks because they insisted on carrying their own luggage. Famous last words: "Can't trust them thieving Mexicans."

The most famous American to die in Mexico City while I was there was Marty Feldman, the comedian. He was working on a film when he succumbed to a heart attack one Thursday night. I received a call from the film's director the following morning with the news of Feldman's unexpected passing and an urgent request to help to repatriate his body to Los Angeles. The filmmaker told me Feldman was an orthodox Jew and had left instructions in case of his death that he not be moved on the Sabbath which of course began at sundown. Meanwhile Mexican law required that all cadavers be in the ground or cremated within 48 hours. There was no space available for the coffin on any flight leaving Mexico City until Sunday. I briefed the ambassador Gavin who used his extensive contacts in the airline industry to get an afternoon flight diverted from Guadalajara to Mexico City. As the sun began to set the coffin with the funny eyes slowly entered the cargo bay of a DC-9. Marty, it was the best we could do.

One afternoon I was leaving the embassy and noticed a tall black man speaking to the guard at the gate. I approached him and he told me that he had lost his passport when a violent thunder storm had carried away his tent. I immediately recognized him: Lou Gossett. I escorted him to the consular section. And for the next couple of hours while his passport was being issued, the actor entertained several of us with stories about making films.

While we are still on film, John Huston had a home in Mexico. He made his last film, Under the Volcano, in and around Cuernavaca. One bit of film trivia: the hookers in the film were professionals from Mexico City bordellos. I persuaded the ambassador to invite Huston to travel to Mexico City to speak to a small audience of filmmakers. Huston declined for health reasons. He died in emphysema 1987.

Q: How about American snow birds, did they have any problems while you were at post?

JOHNSON: As you are aware thousands of Americans live in Mexico, particularly retirees. In 1984 a trailer park full of out countrymen found itself literally in the cross fire of a land dispute. In the northwestern state of Sonora some very poor campesinos got into a dispute with local authorities regarding a small parcel of land and a stretch of dirt road. Shots were exchanged and several bullets hit trailers belonging to the American snow birds, whom neither party wished ill. The Americans lay on the floors of their trailers and called for help. Needless to say the incident made news in the US, particularly since the site of the trailer park happened to be El Alamo. I was getting calls from newsmen late into the night. After a few days the Mexican Army made a show of force and the dispute was settled. More than one reporter wanted to know if the officer commanding the Mexican unit was named Santa Ana. Regrettably the captain's name was something very pedestrian, such as Lopez or Gomez.

Q: Was there a lot of crime against American tourists in Mexico City?

JOHNSON: I was robbed on a Saturday morning three blocks from our embassy and my colleague who handled the welfare of American citizens was the victim of an armed car jacking. Most Americans who came to the embassy to complain of criminal acts were victims of purse snatchings and pick pockets. However thieves could be violent if the stakes were high. Most banks had guards armed with shot guns. Robbers gunned down the guard outside of West German Embassy when he tried to stop them from looting a villa in our neighborhood. Most crime concerned property.

Q: Did you try to keep Americans from getting into trouble?

JOHNSON: Parts of Mexico were very lawless. One day an American correspondent called me and stated that she had a possible lead on either the private papers or the diaries - I don't recall which - of SS Chief Heinrich Himmler. She said that according to her source, the papers had been smuggled out of Germany after the war and were in a village in the state of Durango. We finally located the village on the map. It was at the end of a long canyon. I told her that as far as I knew, of the top Nazis only Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels had kept a diary. I suggested that if she wanted to pursue the lead she should take a dozen well armed body guards with her. The next morning she called me to tell me that she had had second thoughts about the diaries and was not going to pursue the story. A few months later she and her El Salvadorian guide were stopped in a contested area of that war-torn country. The soldiers executed her guide whom they suspected of being a rebel sympathizer.

James Michener came to Mexico City in 1982. He was writing his book on Texas. Michener told me he wanted to go to a small town near Veracruz and do research. I checked with the consular section and learned that the area was frequented by robbers and carjackers. Stay out of there, I was told. I offered to hire body guards and go with Michener. He responded, "I can't operate that way." As far as I know he never made the trip.

Q: For the Americans who did get in trouble how bad were Mexican jail and prisons?

JOHNSON: Mexican police routinely beat up anyone they arrested. The embassy continually pressured the Mexican government to treat American prisoners humanely and for the most part they did. However I recall one morning getting a call from the Consul General that an American who had been arrested for setting his mattress on fire in a hotel had been hospitalized after a beating. Ambassador Gavin hit the roof and ordered me and a consular officer to go to the hospital and to take along the USIA photographer to shoot pictures of the old man's injuries. Just as we were leaving the embassy we learned that the prisoner had just died. Now Gavin was really steamed. However when the family was notified, the bereaved told us in no uncertain terms that the deceased had been asking for trouble for a long time and that he had finally gotten his due. They stated they wanted no investigation of the incident and that we were to have the old man cremated and were to ship his ashes back to wherever it was they lived.

The US negotiated an agreement in about 1980 which allows Mexicans incarcerated in US prisons to be transferred back to Mexico to be closer to their families while they serve out their sentences. Likewise US citizens are eligible for transfer back to this country. The agreement has some limitations on which crimes it covers and predictably most of the prisoner traffic flows north and not south.

Prison conditions in Mexico varied greatly from facility to facility. Some Americans slept on concrete floors while others lived quite comfortably. There was a prison on an island off the west coast of Mexico where families were permitted to stay with the prisoners. As a rule, I don't think Americans were discriminated against. If the prisoner had money he/she could receive better food and even female companionship.

Sometimes prisoners in Mexico can buy the ultimate luxury: freedom. A twin engine plane landed at an isolated field in Yucatan. When soldiers investigated they found not only cocaine but also automatic weapons. Perhaps the soldiers thought the guns were destined for insurgents. In any case, they treated their captives, including at least one American rather rudely. I don't remember if their case was ever tried, but the four men were placed in a prison. One night the power failed and three escaped, including at least one American. One of the smugglers apparently lost his way in the dark and was still inside the wall when power was restored. I don't think he relished being in the spotlight. Clearly someone(s) was paid off. I don't know if DEA and the FBI ever caught the fugitives who were thought to have made it back to the United States.

Q: Did Mexicans cooperate in interdicting drug smuggling?

JOHNSON: There were levels of cooperation and corruption. There were some completely honest "narcs". Smuggling went both north and south and, although under funded, the Mexican customs service developed some innovative means for catching the bad guys. Admittedly sometimes the confiscated drugs quickly found their way back onto the streets. As in Paraguay, smugglers used everything from single engine puddle jumpers to four engine jets. Typically smugglers headed north with a load marijuana would file a false flight plan or no flight plan, try to fly under Mexican and US radar and land in remote areas in southwestern states. The pot would be offloaded and luxury goods or blank cassette tapes would be put aboard. Again a false flight plan or no flight plan would be filed and the airplane would head south to an airfield in northern or central Mexico. If the machine was picked up on radar by the Mexicans, a customs plane with an Aero-Mexico pilot would be scrabbled to intercept the smugglers, preferably over land. Once sighted the customs plane would attempt to contact the contrabandist by radio. If that failed, it would fly alongside the smuggler and hold up a sign ordering him to land at a nearby airfield. If there was no reaction to the attempt at visual or electronic communication, the customs officers were authorized to open fire with automatic weapons. The customs officers tried to disable the smuggler's aircraft by hitting it in the engine. Since the customs officer and the Aero-Mexico pilot received a portion of the value of the recovered goods, careful marksmanship was essential to their operation. The cassette tapes, by the way, would be dubbed with music in clandestine studios and sold in Mexico.

DEA agents were always telling us about the latest tricks the smugglers employed using automobiles and trucks. For a while steering columns were a favorite hiding place for cocaine.

Q: Speaking about the south of Mexico City, Chiapas and other places, or course you in Yucatan you had the ruins and all that, but the other parts, was this sort of a blank area for American interests? In other words, did we have many people down there other than tourists?

JOHNSON: Other than tourism, no. In fact, the most dangerous areas in Mexico were the ones where drug trafficking was going on. Yucatan, Durango and Culiacan, were hot beds of drug dealing. Young Americans who saw "Easy Rider" might conclude that they could go to Mexico with a few thousand dollars, buy cocaine, bring it back to the US and make a bundle. Accordingly they would go into a buying situation with a briefcase of money and the Mexican dealers had a choice: take the money and give them the drugs, or take the money and kill them. We had a case of two brothers who disappeared in the state of Durango. We sent a consular officer up there, and the consular officer reported that the brothers had been last seen at the end of a long canyon. The Consul General looked at the map and said, "Don't risk it." We never found out what happened to the brothers. They were probably dead. How many Americans died in Mexico trafficking drugs no one knows.

Q: What about the students in the universities in Mexico particularly? Were they involved in your particular contacts?

JOHNSON: That was more the responsibility of the cultural section. However I did organize a mini-film festival at an institute of cinematography. The festival was a great hit, and was attracting many of our important contacts. Then the university went on strike very unexpectedly. The whole university closed, including the institute. Unfortunately the films were scheduled to be shipped to USIA Lima. I called the director the film institute and asked when I could retrieve the films. He was very apologetic as he explained that not he was able to get into the university and that I would be well advised to stay away from the institute. It seemed that Mexicans had a quaint custom of sometimes shooting at people who crossed their picket lines.

Q: Did university students demonstrate in front of the embassy very often?

JOHNSON: I don't recall any student demonstrations and the other demonstrations were very lame. Half of the protestors would be wearing NFL tee-shirts. The Dallas Cowboys was their favorite team. One day a colleague handed out Philadelphia Eagles shirts to provide a bit more variety. Demonstrators, like journalists, were often paid.

Q: Did you run across the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which seem to be almost the designated anti-American element of the Mexican government? We had a lot of cooperation in a lot of other fields. It was just the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that seemed to be the odd person out.

JOHNSON: I'm sure the Ministry of Foreign Affairs never did anything that it wasn't told to do so by the President. It may have been the good guy, bad guy, and in that case maybe sometimes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the heavy. I had only a few dealings with the ministry which were quite cordial.

Q: Did you have any feel for the Mexican film industry?

JOHNSON: Sad, sad. Up until the late 1950s or early 1960s Mexican studios pretty well dominated the Latin American market. Only Argentina had significant production capability. But then US filmmakers began making films for the Spanish speaking audience on a large scale. Combined with a superior hemisphere-wide distribution system, Hollywood soon dominated the market all the way to the Tierra del Fuego.

The Mexicans exacted a modicum of revenge by requiring all foreign films to be subtitled and shown in the cinemas with the sound track down so low that it was hard to understand.

During a UNESCO conference, I was the escort officer for Charlton Heston, who was one of our ambassadors. I took Heston to meet President Lopez Portillo's sister Margarita who was head of the government film board. The woman had a grotesque attachment to cosmetics. Prior to our appointment, I told Heston that Margarita had a reputation for active incompetence. His meeting with Margarita was polite and inconsequential. As we left Heston was shaking his head in disbelief at her appearance.

Q: How did you get along with that towering personality?.

JOHNSON: Heston obviously has a healthy ego. I don't see how he could have played the epic roles he did so convincing without an enormous sense of self. And yet he was delightful, as was his wife Lydia. In between appointments and sessions of the UNESCO conference we toured my favorite haunts of Mexico City and talked about film. I floated an idea I had of making a Biblical biography of the life of Christ from the viewpoint of the temple elders. Heston considered my proposal for a long moment and announced his support of the project which he said no studio would ever touch. We agreed that any movie that infuriated conservative Christians and Jews would not do well at the box office.

Heston and I got along famously until the trip to the airport and the subject of home security came up. Heston described the elaborate security system he had in his home and the guns he had ready to protect his property. I listened politely and said, "It seems to me that you are describing a fortress complete with guns. (Meanwhile Mrs. Heston is motioning for me to saw no more.) Aren't you giving up your most important possession: your personal freedom?" At that point Moses threw the stone tablets at me. He erupted in righteous indignation. I had not realized that he was Mr. NRA. A few weeks later he sent me a telegram asking my assistance in expediting the issuance of a new passport for his daughter who was in Paris. I called the embassy and asked a consular officer to treat the young lady with utmost courtesy, which he did. For several years the Hestons sent me Christmas cards.

Q: Did the President visit Mexico while you were there?

JOHNSON: Yes, twice. Vice President Bush came down for the national day in 1981. Soon after I arrived in 1981 Reagan attended a multi nation conference in Cancun. To support our imperial presidency, the US spent more money than the Mexican hosts. The Air Force flew down presidential helicopters and armored limos. The US Navy was present in force, although out of sight. The White House press corps realized the conference was rather farcical and used the time to water ski and parasail. As with any presidential visit, security is of paramount importance. At US insistence press access to the hotel where the chiefs of state were residing was highly restricted. Then someone realized that tight controls meant RR might not be on the evening news. Since the Mexicans would not relent, we had to smuggle reporters in to see the President. I hung a camera around the neck of Helen Thomas, the dean of the press corps, and marched her past security as an official White House photographer. Thomas kept a straight face and the Mexican security officers nodded knowingly.

The Cancun conference gave me a chance to thank the German government for providing me with a subsidized graduate program. While waiting for a reporter to finish an interview with a Secretary Al Haig, Helmut Schmidt wandered past me. I introduced myself and we had a very congenial conversation about Germany until the chancellor looked at his watch and before turning away said, "My allotment of freedom is up."

Q: Did you travel to other countries in the area?

JOHNSON: I spent several months in Central America. I filled in for the press attachï¿½ in Tegucigalpa for six weeks and helped handle VIPs and the press during the elections in El Salvador. Our main concern in Honduras was victory of the Sandinistas across the border in Nicaragua. I took several Honduran helicopters full of journalists to visit a relief project for Nicaraguan refugees USAID was funding. The following day Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger visited an airfield providing supplies to the refugees. As the secretary was speaking a C-130 with no markings rolled out onto the runway and then flew away into the twilight. Every still and TV camera followed the plane as it turned south toward Nicaragua. Imagine that, the United States supporting the contras?! Later I wondered why I never crossed paths with Lt. Col. Ollie North. I gather he kept a low profile. Besides, in the US military lieutenant colonels are a dime a dozen.

On another occasion I escorted a team of VOA technicians to the Honduran coast to look for a good site for an antenna field. The spot VOA was considering was a muddy flood plain. If the antennas did not sink into the soft ground, they probably would have been blown up by leftist guerrillas heading back and forth between nearby Nicaragua and El Salvador. That's right, Washington had not realized that the intended location was in the middle of an infiltration route. VOA did not build the antenna field and somehow we still won the Cold War.

The Nicaraguans tried to destabilize the Honduran government by recruiting about a hundred campesinos, training them in guerrilla tactics in Cuba and then infiltrating them back into Honduras. The attempt to foment an insurgency failed miserably. Although the guerrillas carried more than enough arms and ammunition to start a moderate size civil war, they were desperately short of provisions and in triple canopy jungle, where nothing grows on the ground, most starved to death. I took three Honduran helicopters with six newsmen in each to see the base camp the Honduran Army had discovered. In addition to the ammunition and dozens of M-16 assault rifles there were numerous personal effects of the insurgents including a chalice that had belonged to their chaplain, an American priest. The M-16s were traced back to stocks of weapons we left in Vietnam in the mid-70s.

On the way back we ran into a thunder storm. One of the cameramen, who was getting soaked, signaled me to close the sliding door of the chopper. I would have had to unbuckle my seat belt and inch my way along the door way to the latch and then pull it shut while the helicopter was rocking back and forth. I gave the cameraman a gesture that was universally understood.

When we arrived back at the airbase, I realized that only three choppers had landed. Loss of a helicopter looks bad in a Foreign Service Officer's annual efficiency report. I was told not to worry. The machine had run out of gas and had landed safely in a clearing. Another helicopter with extra fuel was ordered to the rescue. I declined to go along.

Q: Was Honduras a dangerous place for Americans?

JOHNSON: Not really, although one day I was walking through a market and a grape fruit whizzed past my face. I never saw the assailant, but it was a hell of a throw. I decided to see a movie that evening. The people at the hotel told me that it was not within walking distance and called a taxi for me. I told the driver the name of the cinema and off we went. Suddenly we found ourselves on a dark road going through cane fields. I asked the driver how much farther it was to the theater. He just grunted. Remembering my training in anti-terrorism and the characteristics of a kidnapping, I was alarmed. I prepared to take the driver out with a fist to the back of the neck and ride out the crash ithe back seat when suddenly a modern shopping center appeared around the next turn. I breathed a deep sign of relief. I had come very close to causing a serious incident. The following morning I told the Regional Security Officer about my ride. He responded, "You see why we do not encourage people to carry guns?"

Q: Let's talk about El Salvador. What was your role at the embassy?

JOHNSON: Before we get to that, I did not carry a side arm while I was in El Salvador, although the PAO kept a pistol with him whenever he left the heavily fortified embassy compound. I told him that by the time he got his gat out of its zip bag he would be very dead. Gun fire was a common occurrence in San Salvador. Most mornings the insurgents awakened the populace with a bomb blast at 7:00. A utility pole or some other non-essential object was usually destroyed, but the main purpose of the blasts was to remind everyone that the guerrillas were at hand.

Most of my work concerned escorting American VIPs visiting El Salvador to observe the elections. Senators and Representatives came down for briefings and tours. I took then representative Olympia Snow out into the campo to watch the El Salvadorians exercise their suffrage under the treat of death from the leftist insurgents. Our driver took a wrong turn. After about ten minutes on a road that went through a contested area, he got us to our destination.

I also briefed visiting journalists. In fact, I lived in the Hotel Camino Real with the reporters and spent a lot of time with them. One day as I was returning to the hotel from a meeting at the embassy, I was almost knocked over by a dozen reporters rushing to their cars. I asked them where they were headed in such a hurry. "Five decapitated bodies have been discovered on the road in from the airport!" I was on third beer when the group of newsmen returned. Predictably there were no corpses, not even any blood.

Q: So you observed a herd mentality among members of the fourth estate?

JOHNSON: A lot of coverage for that awful civil was written by consensus in the bar in the Camino Real. Going out with the El Salvadorian Army was dangerous and inconvenient. Soldiers get up early and they go looking for trouble. One morning I shared an elevator with a newsman who was dead an hour later, the victim of a stray bullet fired in skirmish between rebels and an elite unit of the El Salvadorian Army. His death was probably an accident, since neither the rebels nor the army targeted newsmen. A minority of the press corps pursued independent leads aggressively. Many reporters did not speak Spanish well and, in some cases, not at all. Most tiring were what I would term "groupie reporters," young men and women in their early 20s who went to El Salvador for adventure and to try to become news correspondents without really learning the language, culture, history and politics of the war-torn country. When the first question from a recent arrival was something very basic, such as "How big is El Salvador compared to the United States?" I usually responded, "Don't waste my time. Go home. You are going to get hurt."

Q: Sounds a bit cruel.

JOHNSON: Hey, El Salvador was dangerous and those kids had no business being there. One morning I was riding in a taxi up the ambassador's residence when I noticed a man lying on the side walk. I thought perhaps he had fallen down drunk, but there was a TV camera team standing near him. Of course it dawned on me that the man was another victim of a death squad. A few days later I passed a crowd standing in front of a primary school looking at two corpses on the sidewalk. Rebels had gunned down a conservative member of parliament as he was letting his little daughter out of his car. The child had taken several bullets. I was making a lot of extra money from danger pay but there was a good reason for not allowing the American staff to bring their dependents to San Salvador.

Q: Were foreign newsmen targeted in El Salvador?

JOHNSON: Not to my knowledge. I was acquainted with a reporter in San Salvador who was killed in a fire fight, although probably not intentionally. Two correspondents based in Mexico City lost their lives when their jeep ran over a land mine on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. We surmised that the mine had been planted by Sandinistas on a back road used by contras. I knew another reporter who had lived in Mexico City and moved to Costa Rica to write for the Tico Times. She was covering a press conference of a contra commander when her legs were blown off by a bomb which had evidently been planted by a KGB or Sandinista agent. She bled to death. The contra leader, by the way, escaped serious injury. He was shielded from the blast by an assistant who was bending over serving him coffee.

Q: Was the embassy in San Salvador a fortress?

JOHNSON: Oh yeah. The Marines had a machine gun bunker on the roof and everyone was asked to check his/her gun at the back door. I did not spend much time at the embassy. My place was with the newsmen. I dressed like them and talked like them. They were my best protection.

Q: Are you aware of any US Embassy personnel who were killed in El Salvador?

JOHNSON: Three or four Marine guards were gunned down as they sat in an outdoor restaurant and a Navy officer who was advising the El Salvadorian coast guard was assassinated as he waiting for his girl friend to get out of class at the university. The killings were preventable. Marines should not have allowed themselves to be such easy targets and the Navy officer, we learned later, followed a routine that made him an easy mark.

Q: The city of San Salvador is rather drab, isn't?

JOHNSON: There are some lovely residential areas but there is nothing picturesque about the downtown. Salvadorians are hard workers and prone to violence. However they also have a sense of humor. One of the cottage industries was civil war tee-shirts. Nearly all the buyers were foreigners, mostly Americans. Of course there were no pro-rebel logos. To demonstrate any sympathy for the rebels, such as by printing or selling leftist shirts, was to invite a nighttime visit by men an SUV with tinted windows, the favorite vehicle of the right-wing death squads. The anti-communist tee-shirts depicted the El Salvadorian military getting the better of the rebels. My favorite tee-shirt and one that my daughter still wears shows a frightened TV cameraman caught between guns from the left and right and with the caption, No Dispare! Soy Periodista! (Don't shoot. I'm a journalist.) The proceeds from the sale of the shirt went to support an orphanage.

Q: Did you travel elsewhere in Latin America while in Mexico?

JOHNSON: I visited Managua for several days. I was shocked by how little had been rebuilt from the earthquake. The center of the city looked like a subtropical Hiroshima. Don Besom, my former personnel officer, invited me to visit him in Havana. The chief of our interest section was John Ferch, who had been DCM in Mexico my first year there. Don asked me to bring him a brass chicken which he wanted to give his wife Kay for her birthday. He paid me in Cuban Pesos which I had a hard time spending since there was so little to buy. John asked that I bring him a bundle of his favorite Mexican stogies, which he preferred to Cuba cigars.

I spent about ten days wandering around Havana, which reminded me of a tropical Prague in that the old city was decaying as Prague did in the 60s and 70s. In both Havana and Prague one had to be careful not to be hit by falling masonry from dilapidated building. I quickly learned to enjoy the "Mojito", national mixed drink which is made with white rum, soda water, sugar and fresh mint. We took a couple of day trips into the countryside. We discovered just off a main highway a Soviet memorial guarded by a Russian soldier, unfortunately he spoke only Russian, thus we never found out how the Soviets were killed. Incidentally the Soviets were building a huge block house style embassy- a looming a grey fortress. I wonder if they ever completed it.

Q: Were you followed while you were in Havana?

JOHNSON: Not as far as I can tell. Any time I approached our interest section (our old embassy) Cuban police tried to stop me but I ignored them. Early one morning I had a very interesting conversation with a priest in a small church in the old city. He told me about the pressure that authorities put on him to hew the government line. After about ten minutes of whispering, he directed me to leave by a side entrance.

Q: What do you think about our foreign policy toward Cuba?

JOHNSON: It is a hostage to Florida politics and the state's very politically powerful Cuban ï¿½migrï¿½ community. I wish we would normalize relations and then Castro would have no one to blame for the mess he has made of Cuba.

Q: Speaking of ï¿½migrï¿½s, how powerful was the Cuban ï¿½migrï¿½ populace in Mexico?

JOHNSON: Carolyn and I met a number of Cuban exiles in Mexico. Most identified more with the US than with Cuba. I once asked a prosperous exile how many Mexican-Cubans would return to Cuba if Castro suddenly disappeared. Without hesitation she replied, "Pero ninguno!" (Not a one.)

One ï¿½migrï¿½ group which amused us and vexed us was the Argentine exile community, many of whom were journalists. One lovely Sunday afternoon during the Falklands War, my family I were picnicking with a half dozen Argentine reporters and their wives and children when suddenly the Argentines began berating us for supporting the British. I was stunned by the vehemence of their attack. "Wait a minute, " I shouted, "You are here in Mexico because you fled your homeland which is being terrorized by a military junta which is torturing and killing anyone it suspects might oppose it, particularly from the left. Right?"

"Yes," they replied.

"This same junta has blundered into a war with Great Britain, which may not be the nation it once was but is now in the process of kicking the butt of the Argentine army and navy. Hundreds of your countrymen have died in this ill conceived venture. Right?" I continued.

"No! No! No! The Malvinas are Argentine," they declared.

"Why don't you go back to Buenos Aires, join the army and fight the Brits?" I suggested.

"We can't do that," they replied softly.

"Yes, and we know why you can't do that, don't we?" I shot back angrily.

Sometimes there is no reasoning with the Argentines. Paraguayans refer to them as "Italians who speak bad Spanish."

Q: And in '84 you're off to Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: I thought I was destined for Central America, but Frankfurt turned out to be our favorite post. While we were waiting for our flight to the US I ran into an American businessman. I told him I was headed to Germany. He replied, "That's probably safer than Mexico City?"

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"You were Gavin's bodyguard, weren't you?" he asked.

"Bodyguard?" I responded incredulously.

"Yeah, every time I saw you, you were standing menacingly behind him," the executive replied.

"I was one of his spokesmen, not his guardian," I said defensively.

I could not help but think that Gavin would have been pleased with the businessman's image of me.

Prior to my arrival in Frankfurt I had to cut my home leave short and take the two week consular course, otherwise State would not have granted me the title of consul. Being a "Herr Konsul" in Germany is a big deal, because the Germans think of consuls in the context of their own Roman history and a consul two thousand years ago was a powerful man.

My boss was Bill Bodde, one the most capable Foreign Service Officers I have ever known. I had met him in 1979 when I inspected USIA Suva, where he was the ambassador. Bill's considerable diplomatic skills were augmented by limitless energy of his gracious wife Ingrid. Ingrid and Bill developed a lasting friendship with Carolyn and me. Bill's deputy was Merle Arp, an easy going consular officer. Merle's wife Jean was a joyous extrovert. Together the Boddes, Arps and Johnsons made a great team.

I inherited a very able local national staff and an American assistant. My family and I moved into a spacious ranch house with a large yard within walking distance of the Consulate General and the Amerika Haus. My large office overlooked a park near where the Rothschild's' Palace stood before the war. The stately old building was badly damaged during an air raid in World War II and was demolished like so many other partial ruins. Had the Germans thought more about the esthetic quality of their future than obliterating reminders of their past, they could have restored many damaged buildings of architectural merit. On most days I walked to my office to check the newspapers and meet with my staff before continuing on to the Consulate General to check classified cable traffic and meet with Bill and Merle.

Q: You were doing that from '84 to '88. What was the importance of Frankfurt as a post at that time?

JOHNSON: Frankfurt was important for several reasons. It is the banking and finance capital of Germany. The Bundesbank, the German Federal Reserve Bank, is less than a mile from the headquarters of most the country's most important banks. The Frankfurt stock exchange, the nation's largest, is few blocks from the headquarters of several large commercial banks. The largest single biggest employer in the state of Hessen, which includes Frankfurt, is the Frankfurt am Main Airport, which boasts the busiest freight and second busiest passenger terminal in Europe. The US had major military facilities in Frankfurt and its environs, including Rhein-Main Airbase, V Corps Headquarters, Wiesbaden Airbase and two hospitals.

When I was living in Heidelberg and Berlin I swore I would never serve in Frankfurt, which had a reputation as boring. As a student I had spent a couple days in Frankfurt while attached to a TV camera team covering a trial of some SS guards who had served at Auschwitz and I had not been impressed with the city. However a Christian Democratic Lord Mayor Walter Wallmann and a Social Democratic Kulturstadtrat (senator for culture) spent more than $2 billion dollars rebuilding the Old Opera and constructing theaters and a half dozen major museums. The city became one of the most culturally active metropolises in Germany. The center promenade was aptly named "Die Fressgasse" (chow street) for all the little fast food spots and restaurants which were intermingled with boutiques and book stores. The Rhein Valley was at our doorstep, Heidelberg was only 70 miles to the south, France just two hours to the southwest and Berlin seven hours to the northeast.

Q: What was the quality of your German and American staff?

JOHNSON: I had an American assistant and a dozen German staff. The assistant I inherited was competent although he didn't seem to be very interested in Germany. He was rather tense and my efforts to get him to loosen up met with little success. His replacement was a chain smoker, lethargic and a slow writer. He did not receive tenure and settled in Germany after marrying a USIA local employee. We parted cordially.

I had a very strong German staff, including a dynamic secretary and a director of programs who was eccentric but completely competent. I often teamed up with the program director for joint lectures- more about that later. By the time I left Frankfurt I am convinced the Amerika Haus Frankfurt was the best branch post in USIA Germany.

Q: What did you think of the US and German staff at the Consulate General?

JOHNSON: Overall the quality of the German employees was high. The political-economic officer had an able assistant, Christine Bunz. I worked closely with her boss, a mid-career officer. There were three Administrative Officers during our tour of duty. One, who lasted only a few months, was a tragic figure. He had served previously in Beirut where he had helped staff a new embassy building. Unfortunately many of the Lebanese he hired were killed when the embassy was bombed on April 18, 1983. The American unfairly blamed himself and returned to the US where he could get counseling.

Most of the junior officers were punching their tickets in the large consular section prior to moving on to more desirable assignments. One Junior Officer Trainee nearly ended his career during a Fourth of July picnic in the American housing area. Merle Arp had assigned him the task of buying beer for the event and the young man arrived with cases of chilled Bud Light. The normally placid Merle Arp, a serious beer drinker, exploded. Reminding the untenured officer that we were in Germany, a nation famous for its fine beers, he snarled, "Be back here in 20 minutes with real beer or your career will suffer. Get moving!" The Bud Light was vanished and the officer sped back to the commissary. With several minutes to spare, the breathless JOT returned with cooled cases of some of the fatherland's best brews. I lost a ten DM bet to a German colleague that he would not make the deadline.

Q: Did you have any cultural adjustments you had to make in Frankfurt after your transfer from Mexico City?

JOHNSON: I had to get used to a much more rapid pace of life. For example, shortly after I arrived Horst Richter my Program Manager and I invited two senior political scientists to lunch at a gasthaus just off the Fressgasse. We had a nice lunch and just as I thought we were getting into the real substance of our meeting, one of the academics looked at his watch and reminded his colleague of another obligation. They stood up, shook hands with Horst and me and left. I looked at Horst and asked, "What did I do wrong?"

"You didn't do anything wrong," he replied, "we had a very useful exchange of ideas with those men."

"But they left after just an hour," I protested.

"What did you expect?" Horst responded.

Then I realized I was back in Germany and the long lunches of Mexico were for me a thing of the past. I missed how Mexicans took time for people.

In fact one of the big differences between Germany and Mexico was the openness of Mexican schedules. Sometimes in the embassy we received word on very short notice that an important US lawmaker or trade delegation would be arriving in the country. If the Mexicans were interested, they made time to see the visitors. On the other hand, it was insulting to Germans to ask them to disrupt their schedules to receive even important visitors. Mexicans are spontaneous, sometimes to the point of being chaotic, where as the Germans are deliberate to the point of being inflexible. One thing that is for sure, it is a lot easier to know where you stand with a German than with a Mexican. Masks play an important role in Mexican culture for a good reason.

Q: Isn't Frankfurt rather rainy and grey?

JOHNSON: It is sunnier than Berlin or Brussels and besides Carolyn comes from Oregon so she felt right at home. Our large back yard had to be mowed regularly which gave our boys another means of working off their boundless energy.

Let me interject an interesting story here. Soon after we arrived in Frankfurt, I attended a function at the Rathaus. A somewhat elderly woman approached me and introduced herself as a member of the city council. "I understand you went to Union College," she said.

"Yes, how do you know about Union?" I asked.

"Well, did you ever study under Professor Hans Heinebach?" the politician continued.

"Yes," I said, "He was my German professor."

"He and I were once in love," she replied in a low voice.

I was shocked by her candor. "When was that?" I stammered.

"In the 30s. He was graduate student at the University of Mainz. Hans completed his doctorate and fled the Nazis," she continued. "Then the war came and by 1945 we had gone our separate ways."

There were no tears in her eyes, only that look of resignation I had seen so often when Germans talked about the war.

I told her that Heinebach had been a fine teacher and was admired by everyone who knew him. Soon after he retired from Union he began receiving sizeable annuity checks from the German government. In response to his inquiry, the embassy in Washington informed him that in as much as he had completed all the requirements to be a university professor, and that had it not been for the criminal policies of the National Socialist regime, it is assumed that he would have had a career as a professor. Accordingly under German law, he was due a full annuity. Unfortunately Hans Heinebach died only a few years after he retired. I wanted to ask her if she had Professor Heinebach had met after the war, but I sensed the subject was too still sensitive.

Q: Who did you work for as Branch Public Affairs Officer?

JOHNSON: Good question. I served two masters: the Consul General in Frankfurt and the CPAO (Country Public Affairs Officer) at the US Embassy in Bonn. Bill Bodde and his successor, Alex Rattray, were both very demanding but fair. As far as they were concerned, my first loyalty was to the consulate general. I worked for three CPAOs: Phil Arnold, Tom Tuch and Terry Catherman. Phil was not interested in Germany and did not stay in Bonn long. Tom and Terry were old German hands. Tom was actually a Jewish ï¿½migrï¿½ who had returned to the fatherland with an M-1 on his shoulder and had served as a junior officer in Frankfurt. Terry had been a predecessor in Heidelberg and had been PAO in a the US Mission Berlin when I was in Heidelberg. They were both very supportive and gave me free reign to develop programs, including working with the US and German military.

Q: Did you ever receive orders from the CPAO that conflicted with instructions from the CG?

JOHNSON: No, however on at least one occasion I was told not to talk to my USIA superiors regarding sensitive activities in Frankfurt. Also both Bill Bodde and Alex Rattray wanted to engage peace groups actively, which USIA Bonn was reluctant to do. When I found myself in conflict with Bonn it was usually with Tom's and Terry's deputy or with the USIA administrative officer who was so ill that he could no longer do his job.

Sometimes there were tensions between the Press Attachï¿½ and me. Our territories overlapped and I attempted to exert primacy over relations with the Frankfurt media. However tensions never reached a point where either the Embassy or the Consulate General became involved.

Q: So you revived your interest in cooperating with the US military in Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: I spent a great deal of time with Army and Air Force officers planning civil-military affairs programs and helping my counterparts in uniform deal with the German media. I worked closely with Bill Bodde, who had served in West Berlin and Bonn and had an excellent grasp of political military issues. Periodically Bill, Merle and I lunched with senior Army and Air Force officers. They briefed us on what they doing and how it might impact the politics, economy or public opinion of the consular district (Hessen, Rheinland-Pfalz and the Saarland). We offered them advice and provided them with an analysis of upcoming state and local elections and trends in the economy and public perception of the military. I also assisted the public affairs officers at V Corps HQ and the major bases deal with the German and international media.

Q: What bases are you referring to?

JOHNSON: Our most frequent contacts were with the V Corps HQ which was only a few blocks from the consulate general and the Amerika Haus, and with Rhein Main Air Base which shared runway with the Frankfurt Airport. We were also in contact with army and air bases in Kaiserslautern, Ramstein, Bitburg, Spangdahlem, Wiesbaden, Giessen and Mainz.

I helped V Corps handle the media regarding a walk-in defector from a Communist country in Asia. On another occasion an US Army enlisted man, who had defected to the Soviet Union with his German girl friend, returned to Frankfurt to face military justice. There was a great deal of press interest in his case because American turncoats were rare.

When the first Patriot missile system became operational in Giessen, Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger flew over for the ceremony. Although the Patriot missiles have a conventional warhead and replaced the Nike system, which had a nuclear capability, we still had to deal with peace activists, who wanted all US forces out of the country. Secretary Weinberger and the German Defense Minister Manfred Woerner held a joint press conference, which attracted more than a hundred journalists. During the Q&A Weinberger continually referred to Woerner as "Manfred" while Woerner addressed Weinberger as "Herr Minister." I thought Weinberger's staged familiarity would grate on the Germans but as one Bundeswehr (German Army) major told me, "We are used to it." At the conclusion of the press conference, the V Corps PAO hurriedly handed me the audio cassette of the press conference and said, "Do me a favor, Tom. Transcribe this and send the fax to the Pentagon." My secretary and I no problem translating Woerners's German into English, but figuring out Weinberger's jumbled jargon was a different matter. I called the Pentagon, where a nameless colonel told me wearily, "Sir, do what everyone else does: complete his sentences for him."

During my four years in Frankfurt there were three terrorist bombing. One at the Frankfurt civilian airport, which we suspect was a device that exploded prematurely. Body parts were strewn everywhere. Some hung off light fixtures. There were no American casualties.

Another bomb exploded at the PX on a snowy Sunday afternoon. Although there were a lot of shoppers in the area and there was a lot of property damage, there no injuries. Carolyn and Suzanne had just returned home from the PX when the blast occurred.

A bomb in the parking lot of the base headquarters at Rhein-Main Airbase killed two and injured several. The device completely demolished a car and dug a hole a foot deep in the macadam. I spend most of that day shepherding TV camera teams through the blast area.

During the mid-80s wounded Afghans were flown to Rhein Main Air Base and treated in German hospitals. I would have liked to have publicized the humanitarian relief effort which our Air Force supported, however it was decided to keep a low profile on the operation. In retrospect, I wish we had gone public on the plight of the wounded Afghans.

One morning an officer at Rhein Main Air Base called me with the startling news, "We have found poisonous gas on base."

"I will be right out," I replied.

"Don't hurry, its German gas," he chimed in cheerfully.

"That's worse," I continued. "I am on my way."

"Take your time it has probably been here since 1918," he said reassuringly.

"1918?" I asked now totally confused.

It seems that at the end of the First World War some German soldiers did not want to be bothered with the paperwork of turning in a quantity of artillery shells containing mustard gas and so they buried it at the edge of their base which once occupied land that later was part of the Rhein Main Air Base. Nearly 70 years later the shells had corroded sufficiently to allow enough gas to escape that someone noticed the smell and the dead grass. The Consulate General and the Air Force decided that the gas was still German property and thus the Bundeswehr was called in to remove it along with contaminated soil. Only a short article appeared in the weekly news magazine Der Spiegel. Had the US Army taken the lead in digging up the shells, it is likely that some German reporters would have falsely linked the gas to our stores of aging chemical weapons.

While we are on the subject of poisonous gas, in 1987 or '88 the United States and Soviet Union finally agreed to destroy their chemical weapons. German peace activists had been campaigning for years for the US to get its chemical weapons out of Germany. As I recall, nearly all the shells and bombs were stored at a depot outside Fischbach, a town in the western Rheinland-Pfalz. Because of both technical and logistical problems poisonous gas was no longer regarded by our military planners as a very useful military option. Many of the warheads were older than the GIs assigned to fire them. Like nuclear weapons systems, chemical weapons were more a political tool than a military weapon. When we secretively removed the chemical weapons from Fischbach, the Germans were dismayed that the US Army announced the closure of the facility and job cuts among German staff. Fischbach was so typical of our civil-military relations in the FRG. The Germans wanted our forces to vacate facilities, particularly those in the town centers, and yet maintain the same level of employment of the German work force. In 1985 the US military was the second largest employer in West Germany. Only the bloated bureaucracy of the Bundespost (postal system) handed out more paychecks.

During my tenure in Frankfurt I helped our military deal with journalists covering the release of several groups of hostages from the Middle East, including a cruise ship and some commercial flights. The Rhein Main Air Base and the Consulate General worked out a well-rehearsed scenario for moving hostages and the press while balancing the right of the hostages to privacy and the right of the media to coverage. In most cases USAF buses moved the hostages to military hospitals in either Wiesbaden or Frankfurt. Late one dreary night I was standing with a group of reporters waiting for plane to come with several former hostages when I heard a report say to no one in particular, "Being a foreign correspondent is like being a maitre d' in a fine restaurant. You get to meet so many famous people under such humiliating circumstances."

Washington of course got involved in receiving and processing the hostages. The response teams from State and Department of Defense included a brash Public Affairs Advisor who I crossed swords with on several occasions. While acknowledging the legitimate role of Washington in dealing with the press, I was not about to give up my role as the public affairs representative of USIA Germany.

On February 11, 1986 the Soviet dissident Anatoly Sharansky walked across the Glienicke Bridge from Potsdam to West Berlin to freedom. Ambassador Richard Burt met him half way across the span and led him to a limo which sped him to a waiting aircraft that flew him to Rhein Main Air Base, where he was reunited with his wife. Although I don't believe we told the press, the release was actually a prisoner swap: one Russian dissident for two Czech spies. The venerable Frank Meehan, our ambassador in East Berlin, was instrumental in making arrangements for the swap. The Czech spies Karl and Hanna Koecher, naturalized US citizens, had been flown to Rhein Main Air Base the day and before were being held in the base stockade (jail) until Sharansky landed in Frankfurt. Karl had been a translator and analyst at the CIA. Hanna had been his very willing assistant in the conspiracy. At the last minute Hanna, indignant regarding the quality of her accommodations on base, balked. Bill Bodde, who was not about to let anyone ruin the swap, was ready with Plan B. He had the consular officer, whose role it was to take the oaths from the spies renouncing their US citizenship, place a call to a prominent attorney in East Berlin who spoke to Hanna convincingly. (Italics mine) According to Bill, the Czechs "meekly renounced their citizenship."

Q: Did the media know about the swap?

JOHNSON: I don't know. Swaps were almost routine during the cold war, so had they gotten wind of it, I doubt it would have been much of a story. Anatoly Sharansky was such an important figure that the release of the Czechs was a tiny footnote to a very dramatic story.

Q: What was your impression of the level of political sophistication among your military counterparts?

JOHNSON: As I think I said earlier in the interview, Army and Air Force officers were very cautious in dealing with political issues. Most of the flag grade officers (generals) had attended a civilian graduate school or the National War College, which exposed them to geo-political problems in a substantive manner. LTG Sam Wetzel was the V Corps commander when I arrived in Frankfurt. Wetzel spoke fair German and had excellent contacts in Frankfurt. He was replaced by Colin Powell, who had just served for several years as Deputy National Security Advisor to the President. I attended Powell's change of command ceremony at V Corps HQ. Powell opened his remarks with a short pep talk to the troops and then he said, "Now I would like to say a few words to our German hosts." He spoke for about ten or fifteen minutes in excellent German. I was sitting between the mayors of Giessen and Marburg, both of whom were greatly impressed by Powell's command of German and the sincerity of his remarks. Unfortunately after about six months at V Corps, Powell was recalled to the White House. When he left Frankfurt he told Bill Bodde and me that he thought his military career was over. Of course he got his fourth star while he was Reagan's last National Security Adviser. When he became Secretary of State he brought to that position a genuine concern for the welfare of his subordinates.

Incidentally in 2004 I was talking to Secretary Powell in the State Department and I reminded him of his change of command ceremony in Frankfurt. I asked him if he still spoke German. He replied that he regretted that he had been so busy in the intervening years that his command of the language had deteriorated badly.

Q: How about the Air Force officers?

JOHNSON: The highest ranking Air Force officers in the consular district were colonels. They were very competent and eager to work with us at the Consulate General. Overall the Air Force had fewer problems with the Germans than the Army.

Q: Why?

JOHNSON: There were many reasons. The Air Force had fewer facilities and none of their bases were in cities, although some, such as Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, were on the outskirts of major cities. Except for low flying airplanes, Germans had few complaints about the USAF. On the other hand, slow moving Army convoys often disrupted highway traffic. Soldiers were much more likely to get into trouble with the police than airmen. Maneuvers caused considerable damage to farm land and roads.

Sometimes the Army would do dumb things. For example, every time there was a ceremony on the lawn of V Corps HQ, the Army fired off 75 mm pack howitzers which rattled the windows of German apartments all around the base and set off car alarms. I suggested that the Army reduce the noise by cutting back on the amount of gun powder in blank shells. No, I was informed, tradition called for a loud report.

If I may return to aircraft noise one day I was driving along a winding country road in the Pfalz when I had a premonition of an emergency. Just as I gripped the steering wheel of my car, two fighter bombers roared over me literally at treetop level. My window was open and I swear I could feel the exhaust. I pulled off the road. I was shaking. German villages were routinely subjected to simulated attacks by US, German and Canadian fighter bombers. It was a price that Germans paid for being in the front line of the cold war.

Q: Did the advent of simulators lessen the intrusiveness of the military on the civilian population?

JOHNSON: Good question. Yes and no. I think what simulators did was to increase the amount of realistic training that could be accomplished indoors more than diminish training outdoors. For example, pilots continued to fly low level missions along Germany's roads and valleys while at the same time spending additional hours in flight simulators. Tankers honed their skills between live firing exercises on simulators. The percentage of tankers who qualified as "expert" increased by more than 50% thanks to the practice on simulators. Pilots told me they were more confident flyers and more accurate bombers because of the time they spent on simulators. Many of the younger soldiers and flyers grew up on computer games, which allowed them to readily adapt to simulator training.

Q: Did you ever try using a simulator?

JOHNSON: I am not very coordinated and do not belong to the computer game generation, and thus I performed poorly on electronic games and simulators. I had a very hard time fitting my 6'2" frame into a tank simulator and was quickly killed by the enemy. Death in the simulator was a loud bang and a red light, very disappointing theologically.

"Who do you think?!" admonished the major escorting me.

After a long pause, I ventured, "The Chinese?"

"The National Peoples' Army!" he announced proudly.

A couple years later the major called to tell me that the old hydraulic simulator was being replaced by a much smaller and more advanced electronic simulator. He asked me if I would like panel as a keepsake. I declined, a decision I later regretted. I wish I had accepted a large panel and cut it up into pieces to give to friends. The readiness of the PLA to help the Americans prepare to defend themselves against the Soviets said volumes about the Cold War.

Q: Were you in Frankfurt during the deployment of the medium range missiles?

JOHNSON: Yes, that was the last round of the cold war. The Soviets tried to tip the strategic balance of power by deploying their SS-20 system, a highly mobile medium range ballistic missile. NATO responded with Pershing 2 (P-2) and ground launched cruise missiles (GLCMs). I don't recall the number of P-2s and GLCMs that were deployed in the FRG, but I spoke to a number of German audiences on the unfortunate necessity of the deployment. There was of course a lot of resistance by Germans to deployment by of the P-2s and GLCMs, particularly by peace activists and students.

Q: Did USIA and the US military develop a coordinated public affairs strategy prior to the deployment of the missiles?

JOHNSON: Yes. USIA worked very closely with Army and Air Force civil affairs and public affairs officers. Of course political-military affairs officers from our embassy in Bonn were involved in the discussions, most of which took place at EUCOM HQ in Stuttgart and at the embassy.

Q: Did you ever see one of the missiles?

JOHNSON: The Consul General, and I am not sure if it was Bill Bodde or his successor Alex Rattray, and I visited the GLCM facility on an air base north of Mainz. We were ushered into a large bunker where the missiles were kept in airtight tubes. Our host, an Air Force colonel, briefed us on the delivery system, although not the warhead since none of us had a Q clearance for nuclear secrets, nor a need to know. While we were touring the facility the CG and I were followed by armed security guards. The message was clear: "Don't touch anything."

Q: How long did the missiles remain in Germany?

JOHNSON: Not long at all. In December 1987 the Soviets agreed to withdraw their SS-20s from Eastern Europe if we would take our P-2s and GLCMs out of Western Europe. The dismantling process ushered in another chapter of USIA-US military cooperation. After trying to convince the Germans that the deployment of the missiles was a good idea, we announced that mission had been accomplished and that the missiles could be safely withdrawn, which was an easy sell.

When the first Soviet inspection team arrived at Rhein-Main Air Base, more than a hundred journalists showed up to cover the big story. The Russians were technicians and did not give interviews to the reporters. As a result, the story quickly faded in the media. One amusing incident, concerns the first night the Soviets were at Rhein Main. The USAF put them in bachelor officers' quarters and provided a buffet dinner. Some of the Russians had never seen a salad bar and were particularly mystified by little crumbly red lumps (bacon bits). Particularly perplexing to them was the intelligence that bacon bits contained no bacon but were made from soy beans. "Wat? No oink, oink?" After caucusing and some hesitant tasting, the Russians declared that bacon bits were really quite tasty and no doubt good for you.

The agreement to withdraw and eventually destroy the medium range weapons concerned only the missiles and not the war heads nor the launch control systems. Our technicians covered the launch control consoles with thick brown paper so the Soviets would not realize that much of the equipment was available in Radio Shack and in other retail outlets.

Q: Did the German and American military public affairs officers cooperate well?

JOHNSON: The Germans PAOs were very eager to work with their US counterparts and the Americans were equally intent on collaborating with the Germans. Because of the lack of language training provided the American officers, the dialogue was almost always carried out in English. I organized quarterly meetings at the Amerika Haus of German and American military public affairs officers. The Consul General, embassy officers and political scientists spoke at the gathering to which I also invited German Army Jugendoffiziere (Youth Officers) who specialized in community outreach to youthful audiences. Most Jugendoffiziere were first lieutenants and captains. I developed a very cordial relationship with the Jugendoffiziere and often invited them to programs at the Amerika Haus and to social occasions at my home.

Before we leave the subject of civil-military affairs, I want to state that it was a great pleasure to work with the US and German officers. In retrospect I think it is clear that the US armed forces and our allies successfully deterred the Soviets from temptation to embark on military expansion. Meanwhile the political and economic system, upon which the Soviet Union and the other East Block nations was based, decayed until the USSR collapsed and the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. I don't want to sound hawkish- quite to the contrary. I believe in the long run, I contend ideals and not weaponry determined the outcome of the Cold War.

Q: What was the press like?

JOHNSON: Germany had two state owned television networks. One was in Mainz, which was very near Frankfurt. I had good access to it because I was friends with an anchormen of an evening TV newscasts. We had studied journalism at the same time at the Free University. Through him I was able to get the network to participate in a number of USIA WorldNets, a major coup for the Agency. My work with the network also reunited me with a friend from Prague, who had left his homeland in 1968 and had become a successful producer of documentaries.

Germany's leading conservative newspaper was the Frankfurter Allgemeine (FAZ) and the country's most influential left of center newspaper was the Frankfurter Rundschau, so I spent a lot of time with both of them. The head of the America desk at the Frankfurter Allgemeine, and I continue to be very good friends. He's now in Berlin where he is a senior editor for a German radio network. The conservative tabloid Bildzeitung and the left of center Rundschau were printed on the same presses.

I developed excellent ties to Hessen Radio (HR), which incidentally was housed in a suspiciously round building, which had been constructed after WW II to house the Bundestag, the German parliament. However Konrad Adenauer, West Germany's first post-war chancellor, vetoed Frankfurt, a bastion of the Social Democrats, as the capital. He did not want to give up his rose garden nor be too far from Cologne where he had been Lord Mayor before being ousted by the Nazis, thus the quiet university town of Bonn became West Germany's capital.

One of the senior reporters at Hessen Radio became a close friend. He was active in the American Field Service student exchange program and founded the partnership between Hessen and Wisconsin. On a couple of occasions I participated in a call-in show devoted to US-German relations. I think I was the only USIA officer to take part in call-in programs, which could be very contentious. On more than one occasion I had to respond creatively to questions regarding our military presence, for example, "Why do convoys move so slowly?" Unfortunately none of our Army or Air Force public affairs officers I knew had sufficient German to go on live radio.

Speaking of civil-military relations, Hessen Radio was located directly next to AFN Frankfurt. The two organizations worked very harmoniously with one another. For example, when HR needed a piece of music from AFN Frankfurt's vast record library, AFN would play the work at given time so HR could record it for its collection. Copyright law forbad AFN from simply making a copy for HR. The German station did a lot of favors for AFN, including building sets for its TV news studio.

Q: Could Germans watch AFN TV?

JOHNSON: Not unless they had the right equipment which few of them did. I am no technician, but there was something about the antenna and perhaps AFN was using NTSC while Germans use the PAL system. We got AFN TV at our home on cable but our TV could receive both PAL and NTSC. Weekday evenings I watched the opening monologue of Johnny Carson Show. Carson's jokes told me what was important in the United States.

Your question regarding German viewing habits raises a ticklish matter concerning the piracy of American TV programs by the German networks. Remember the hit series "Dallas"? Well, the Germans picked up the programs from AFN TV and broadcast them without dubbing to audiences across the FRG. The owners of the rights to that series threatened to stop providing it to AFN unless the Germans stopped pirating the shows. The ambassador came to Frankfurt and we met with top German officials and German network ceased airing the programs in English. Guess who got a spate of angry letters from German viewers? I responded candidly and explained that the practice by the German networks of taping "Dallas" off AFN has been a violation of copyright law. Fortunately most Germans respect law.

Speaking of German respect for law, I was told by a security expert that the reason USAREUR delayed putting up barriers in front of it headquarters in Heidelberg was that the street directly opposite the entrance was one way and no German terrorist would think of driving the wrong way a one-way street. I suspect that the story was apocryphal, but I learned a long time ago that a tale does not have to be factual to be true.

Q: How would you compare the German press to the Mexican press?

JOHNSON: No comparison. No comparison. First, the German press was not in anybody's pocket, and secondly, a much greater degree of professionalism among German reporters. Unlike Mexico, Germany has a completely free press and newsmen do not fear of intimidation. Of course another huge difference between the media in Mexico and Germany was the infinitely superior technical quality and depth of resources of the German media.

Q: Were there many foreign correspondents in Frankfurt.

JOHNSON: Because of its airport Frankfurt provided the base of operations for at least a dozen American reporters, including CNN.

Q: When you were a Student Affairs Officer in Asuncion I assume that you did some political reporting. Did you write any political reports in Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: I attended the election night festivities in Saarbrucken in 1985 and wrote the reporting cable. Oskar Lafontaine, the Social Democratic Lord Mayor of Saarbrucken unexpectedly won the election for Minister-President (governor) of the Saarland. To learn what may have tipped the scales for him, we would have to read my telegram. I was at the SPD headquarters where there was a hell of a party. I followed Lafontaine into a hallway where the press was waiting. Suddenly a man emerged from the crowd and plastered the governor-elect with a pie. The assailant was a member of the Green Party. I suspect the whole event was a well staged publicity stunt. Although I had to get up at an ungodly hour the next morning to catch my train back to Frankfurt, I had fun writing the cable.

A few weeks later Bill Bodde and I had lunch with Lafontaine. As I recall, we discussed primarily political and military issues. We agreed to disagree on my subjects. Lafontaine later ran unsuccessfully for chancellor against Helmut Kohl.

Q: Did you spend a lot of time at the airport meeting visiting firemen?

JOHNSON: Yes, and it seemed that visitors only arrived on weekends. Teddy Kennedy and his entourage swept through early one Saturday morning. I was detailed to go out to the airport to meet General Vernon Walters, who was a sort of ambassador-at-large. I met his plane and escorted him to the VIP lounge. I asked him if he had any classified cables he wanted me to take to the Consulate General. He shook his head. After a while he frowned, "I see you are eyeing my briefcase."

"No, not really," I responded defensively."But you keep looking at it," the general admonished. "Do you know what is inside? State secrets, right?"

"I wouldn't even venture a guess," I replied hesitantly.

"Go ahead, open it," he said with a smile.

"I can't do that," I asserted.

"No seriously, open it," Walters order.

I popped the brass latches on the case and survey several note books and pens and underneath them perhaps a dozen chocolate bars.

"Swiss chocolate, Mr. Johnson, the best," he beamed, "Let's have one."

I don't usually eat chocolate, but he was right. It was very good.

On another occasion I received a cable asking me to meet then Senator Al Gore who wanted to talk to a senior newsman. Dr. Michael Groth, America Desk editor at the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and I met the senator as he got off his plane and adjourned to the VIP lounge. I don't remember what Senator Gore had to impart to Groth, but after the reporter left, Gore and I talked amiably about Germany. After about a half hour the senator asked, "Do you have a family?"

"Yes, a very supportive wife," I responded, "and three active children."

"I can take care of myself," the senator assured me. "Please go be with your family."Needless to say, I voted for Al Gore in 2000.

Sometimes politicians just showed up. A congressman appeared in Frankfurt one Saturday. I think his name was Moffett. I don't believe the Consulate General hareceived a heads up from Washington. I must have been duty officer, so I went to his hotel to see if I could be of assistance. The lawmaker said he had attended a meeting somewhere else in Germany and had a day to kill in Frankfurt before flying back to Washington. I took him through the banking district and into some stores. We visited a silent Amerika Haus and talked about foreign affairs. Then he asked me, "Do you know anything about Heidelberg?"

I told him I had served there for four years. "How far away is it?" he asked."About an hour's drive," I responded.

"Will you take me to Heidelberg?" he asked with a big grin. "I'll buy dinner."

Soon we were dodging BMWs and Mercedes on the Autobahn and by late afternoon we were in the old city. Moffett walked as fast as he talked. We hiked up to the castle and had a glass of Riesling at the Weinstube. Later I showed him around the university and we adjourned for supper at the "Hackteufel," my favorite Gasthaus. We had a sumptuous meal. It was a thoroughly enjoyable outing and profitable for both of us. The congressman sent me a very gracious thank you note from Washington. I mailed him a Heidelberg University sweat shirt which he promptly reimbursed me for. We stayed in touch for several years after he left politics.

Q: Of course, the issue of the cruise missiles and the Pershing missiles was on the front page all during this time, and this was in response to the Soviet SS-20, but the Germans seem to be able to produce costumed mobs, demonstrating against things all the time. Did you find this was something you had to deal with?

JOHNSON: There were many demonstrations against the US. We really caught hell when we attacked Libya. However compared to Heidelberg in the early 70s, Frankfurt was fairly tame. I used to speak to peace groups to explain our position, which put me at odds with some of my bosses in Bonn, who had a let's-keep-a-low-profile-and-maybe-it-will-blow-over position on confronting our critics. I wanted to go out and debate the Soviets. Eventually I ignored the admonitions from Bonn and found the Soviets weren't as formidable as everybody thought they were. They had a lot of weaknesses. One thing I loved to dwell on was that while in the United States we have many shortcomings, we do not imprison anybody for refusing to serve in the military. Of course, the Soviets had no answer to that. I also pointed out that the United States, for all its shortcomings, was a democratic society which did not imprison critics in mental hospitals. I also noted that our deployment of the Pershing 2s and the ground launched cruise missiles was in response to the deployment of the SS-20s. So usually I came out pretty well, although I got roughed up verbally on more than one occasion. One thing I learned about speaking to German audiences: be very sure of even the most insignificant facts in your presentation. Even a verbal typo or a mispronunciation of a name can bring the wrath of the audience down on your head.

Q: How about demonstrations not directed at the United States? Were there other objects of ire for angry youth and workers? I watch French TV here in Fairfax County. You look at their demonstrations, and they seem to be awfully cut and dried and almost pro forma. These demonstrations, how serious were they?

JOHNSON: The worse anti-government demonstrations I experienced concerned the cutting down of trees to build an additional runway at the Frankfurt Airport. A policeman was killed. In Frankfurt and other large cities their existed a hard core of extremists society dubbed "chaotics". Some were skinheads. I suspect most were anarchists who were neither Left nor Right. They were simply violent. Incidentally while most skinheads were anti-immigrant, others were openly pro-immigrant.

Q: Was the Amerika Haus attacked by these extremists while you were there?

JOHNSON: No. There were fewer anti-US demonstrations in the 1980s than in the 1970s. I had my share of bomb threats, but only one bomb. Upon returning from a quick trip to Bonn, I found the Haus full of German policemen and their bomb squad. It seems terrorists had placed a sizeable incendiary device against an outside wall in the garden. My well meaning but not very bright janitor had noticed the package, and deeming it unsightly, brought it inside the Amerika Haus. Another member of my staff thought the parcel was suspicious and called the police.

The bomb squad removed the device and exploded it at their facility. The German police surmised that the bomb had been made by the same terrorists whose killed several people at the Frankfurt Airport.

Q: You must have been furious with your janitor. Did you fire him?

JOHNSON: No. I was furious with myself. I had failed to realize that the janitor was as much a part of house security as the guards who sat at the front desk and screened visitors. I instituted security briefings for the entire staff, including the janitor. The Consulate General held security seminars in the auditorium of the Amerika Haus. In addition to films and lectures, diplomatic security officers demonstrated repelling methods and instructed American staff in the use of firearms. I made sure the auditorium door was shut tightly before the instructor brought out the Berettas and the Uzis.

Q: Was your official vehicle armored?

JOHNSON: Yes, I had armored doors but no armor on the floor and the windows were normal glass. My limo by the way was a big Plymouth station wagon which was in declining health. I asked Bonn for a replacement several times but without luck. One day I drove out to a US military junk yard to see if I could find a replacement hub cap. I parked the station wagon near the entrance and went off on my quest. When I returned with my prize in hand I found the yard foreman unscrewing the consular plates from my vehicle. "What are doing?" I asked.

"You're leaving this piece of crap here, aren't you?" he responded.

"No, damn it, that is my official car," I confessed.

As I drove away I could see the foreman through the blue exhaust still shaking his head in disbelief.

Q: Were there other emergencies at the Haus?

JOHNSON: No bombs but one night I received a call from my contract security guard to come to the Haus regarding a telephone threat. He said he had already called the V Corps bomb squad. In the few minutes it took me to get to the Haus, a military policeman had arrived with a cocker spaniel bomb sniffing dog. My contract guard had locked, so he thought, his German shepherd in an upstairs office. Unfortunately the German shepherd hit a flat door latch and bolted into the hall intent upon having the cocker spaniel for dinner. The MP jumped in front of his little dog and was bitten on the hand by the German shepherd. No bomb was found, the wounded soldier departed for the hospital and I had words with my contract guard. The next day I called the soldier's commanding officer and apologized. "What can I do to make things right?" I asked.

"A fifth of Southern Comfort would definitely lessen the pain," the captain responded.I got my graphic artist to fashion a medal which we affixed along with a note of thanks to a half gallon of Southern Comfort and delivered it the soldier's barracks.

Q: Did you have other false alarms?

JOHNSON: Our home had red buttons in every major room. One push of the button dispatched a carload of German police to our residence. I warned the children never to touch or even play near the buttons. However one day the boys were roughhousing with some friends and someone was shoved against an alarm button. The police arrived promptly at our front gate. Carolyn explained that it was a false alarm and apologized for the accident.

Q: Did your house have a "safe haven" room?

JOHNSON: Yes, it was in the basement and had a thick steel door. Unfortunately once inside, there was no way to communicate with the outside world.

Q: Did you receive any threatening mail?

JOHNSON: One young man who lived outside our consular district wrote me annually. His letters always began with "Hoch vereherter Herr Konsul" (highly honored Mr. Consul) and ended "Hocachtungsvoll" (very respectfully yours) and his full name. Sandwiched in between the salutation and the closing would be two pages of diatribe against the United States. I assumed the guy was a nut but had the authorities check him out and learned that he had a gun permit. I suggested that the police consider disarming him, but I don't know if they did so.

Q: Did the Consul General have a bodyguard?

JOHNSON: Yes. Several German plain clothes officers traveled with him wherever he went. One night someone threw a Molotov cocktail at his residence. The only victim of the attack was a small tree. I noted to the press that radicals had contributed to "Waldsterben" (forest death), a hot button issue in Germany. On another occasion, Bill Bodde had to embark on an impromptu vacation to Switzerland in response to a warning.

Actually the Consul General who really had to be careful was the Turkish CG. Apparently among the 32,000 Turks residing in Frankfurt there were Kurd and Armenian extremists. Turkish security officers surrounded the poor fellow. Unlike the German policemen who shadowed Bill Bodde and Alex Rattray, the Turkish bodyguards enjoyed the cocktails at receptions. I knew if someone popped a balloon, I would hit the floor.

One amusing story about security, the State Department installed a barrier at the entrance to the Consulate General that lifted up and was strong enough to stop a tank. Bill Bodde had received a new stretch Ford armored sedan only a few days before. Just as the vehicle was entering the compound the guard accidentally hit the raise button. The barrier emerged from the pavement. The big sedan was lifted off the pavement bending its frame: a total loss.

Q: Let's talk about the universities in your consular district.

JOHNSON: I concerned myself with four universities: Frankfurt, Mainz, Giessen and Marburg. All four had major American Studies institutes to which I provided speakers. Frankfurt has an excellent department of economics, which I worked very closely with. Bill Bodde suggested that we get the Frankfurt Chamber of Commerce to pay for a series of short-term lectureships by American professors of business. The university recruited the lecturers and provided them quarters in its spacious guest house and thus for three years we enriched the curriculum of the university and offered a top flight lectures at the chamber at virtually no cost of the US Government. It was a tremendously successful program.

I worked very closely with the Institute for Peace and Conflict Research, a major think tank at the University of Frankfurt and provided it with a steady stream of speakers, both academics and senior diplomats.

Q: Frankfurt is well known for its trade fairs. How much did you or the Consul General concern yourself with these trade fairs?

JOHNSON: We had an excellent officer from the Department of Commerce. Another officer headed the US Tourism Office. However most of the trade shows were fairly specialized such as the furriers' show. The one fair that we went all out for was the annual international book fair, during which more than half of all international book deals were closed. I was point man for the large USIA exhibit and facilitated the exhibit of the Government Printing Office. Imagine more than a million square feet of displays of books in every conceivable language. Even the Albanians had a booth. The Consul General offered a reception to support American publishers. At the end of the fair I received dozens of the newest titles from appreciative exhibitors. Every September this book nut went to heaven for four hectic days.

Q: Were you visited by famous writers?

JOHNSON: Joyce Carol Oats spent several days in Frankfurt. Carolyn and I drove down to Heidelberg to pick her up. She spoke at the Amerika Haus to a large audience. Later Alex Rattray offered a dinner in her honor. Arthur Miller engaged in a long and very productive dialogue with students and faculty at the University of Frankfurt and then was guest of honor at a dinner at our home. Historian/journalist Harrison Salisbury spoke at the Amerika Haus and later in our living room on most recent work The Long March which concerned the epic trek in China. Time magazine reporter Strobe Talbot talked at the Amerika Haus to a large audience of journalists, military officers and political scientist about his book Deadly Gambits a very thoughtful analysis of the arms race and disarmament. Talbot later became Deputy Secretary of State under Clinton. I really enjoyed programming and breaking bread with Oats, Miller, Salisbury and Talbot. They were unfailingly considerate and cooperative. Timid souls in the US Embassy in Bonn questioned the propriety my inviting Strobe Talbot, a critic of the Reagan administration, to speak at the Amerika Haus and be the guest of honor at a large dinner at my home. However a few months later Richard Burt became US Ambassador to Bonn. Burt had been Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and had worked with Talbot on his book. My critics shut up.

Many lesser known writers visited Frankfurt while I was there, including Wolfgang Leonhard, whose book The Revolution Deserts Her Childreis a stunning portrayal of Stalinist Russian and the early days of the German Democratic Republic. Leonhard was born in Germany during the Weimar Republic and emigrated to the Soviet Union with his mother in 1933. He was raised in elite school for Communist cadre and arrived in East Berlin with Walter Ulbricht where he organized Communist youth until his disillusionment with Marxism-Leninism. He defected to Yugoslavia and later to the United States where he became a professor at Yale. He spoke before a large audience at the Amerika Haus. Afterwards I offered a dinner in his honor at my home. As a grad student he was one of my heroes and it was honor to have him in our home.

Q: Sounds like you did a lot of entertaining at home.

JOHNSON: Yes, I programmed at least half of all the speakers USIA Bonn provided me at my home. Fortunately the Amerika Haus received more than $10,000 a year from renting space to a commercial English teaching company and I was able to use most of that money to pay for food, beverages and waiters. There were several advantages of programming in my residence rather than at the Amerika Haus. Because the programs included a buffet dinner the audience did not have to rush back to work as they would with a program during the work day. The more leisurely pace of the event allowed a longer question and answer period following the talk and permitted me, the USIA staff and officers from the Consulate General to have more substantive contact with the German guests. Because there was ample parking in my neighborhood it was easier for busy academics, business executives, journalists and labor union officials to attend programs. Germans liked coming to an American home and eating American food, although I of course served German wine.

Q: Give me some examples of programs you held at your residence.

JOHNSON: Since counter-terrorism is in vogue nowadays, I programmed Paul Bremer, then counter-terrorism at the State Department and later ambassador to Iraq to talk on terrorism as a form of informal warfare. The following evening Jean Gerard, our ambassador to UNESCO in Paris spoke in my living room on "Do Some Organizations Foster an Atmosphere Conducive to Terrorism?" The response to both programs was excellent with more than 60 invited guests attending each event. Bremer and Gerard were both first-rate speakers. Deeply conservative but conciliatory, Gerard handled critics in the audience deftly A few months later she returned to Frankfurt at my invitation to speak at a seminar we cosponsored with the daily Frankfurter Rundschau. The all-day seminar was devoted to the "new information order," a subject that has mercifully disappeared from the world stage.

I programmed three or four speakers a month at my home. In addition I hosted numerous dinners and receptions for speakers following their presentations at other venues, including the Amerika Haus. Incidentally one such dinner was with Albert Speer's son who is a professor of urban planning at the University of Kaiserslautern. I showed him the book of his dad's memoirs signed by the author. He was pleased that Carolyn and I had known his parents.

In November 1988 my staff convinced me to have an "Election Breakfast" the day after the presidential election in the US. We invited German political scientists, business executives, military officers, labor union officials and colleagues from the Consulate General to my home for the election returns starting at 5:00 a.m., 11:00 p.m. EST. More than a 60 guests showed up. My sons greeted them at the gate with paper hats and election material. The event received a lot of coverage in the media and was a great success. The local tabloid ran a picture of our daughter Suzanne titled "She Attended Election Breakfast in Her Nightgown".

Q: Sounds like you had a nice house. What other events did you hold there?

JOHNSON: Yes, my residence was a sprawling ranch house with a large living room and cozy dining room. In the back there was a spacious patio and yard, a great place for cookouts.

Carolyn and I worked closely with the American Field Service student exchange program and hosted an annual American-style breakfast complete with pancakes, maple syrup, bacon and eggs for 75 or 80 German returnees. We also provided former 50 to 60 Fulbrighters with a Thanksgiving dinner every November. I borrowed extra Weber grills from the Marine security detachment assigned to the Consulate General so I could cook five turkeys and hams. Colleagues from the Consulate General helped out preparing sweet potatoes and apple pies in their ovens. Both the AFS breakfasts and the Fulbright Thanksgiving dinners were a lot of work but thoroughly enjoyable. Our three children helped with serving the food.

Q: Did you host many dinner parties?

JOHNSON: We had at least two dinner parties a month usually for eight people but sometimes for up to 20. We really enjoyed entertaining and I think we excelled at bringing colleagues from the Consulate General together with Germans from the diverse backgrounds. Sometimes it was fun to just watch a vice president from one of Frankfurt's big banks spar with a labor union official. On several occasions Germans told me that our home was the only place they had substantive contact with countrymen from other social strata.

If I may, back to the subject of the former Fulbrighters, one day several young professionals who had studied in the US on Fulbright scholarships asked me if I would help found an alumni association. Over the next few months we held several meetings and established incorporated club. We put on a one-day seminar, which the Fulbrighters dubbed a pow wow which attracted former Fulbrighters from all over Germany. The club is still going strong, and last I heard, my name is still on its letterhead as an adviser.

Q: Did you belong to professional clubs while you were in Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: Rotary never approached me, and that was probably good. However one day the political officer and I received invitations to meet with representatives of a Lions Club. I accepted their invitation to apply for membership and was accepted. The political officer begged off. The Lions Club met at the exclusive Society for Business, Industry and Science across the street from the Consulate General. I soon realized why Lions wanted me as a member. Having a Herr Konsul in their ranks added to the club's standing and I quickly became "Mr. Visa" for the club. I didn't mind occasional calls to facilitate visas, although I resented demands for a formal apology from an irate Lion whose daughter was refused entry to the United States on a tourist visa after she told the immigration officer that she planned to work during her stay.

The club board asked me to be club president. I begged off. I was working 60 hour weeks and while my German was quite fluent I never mastered the rhetorical skills that educated Germans expect from a club president or a politician. I recall being asked to speak to a large audience of German Fulbrighters at a reception in the Frankfurt Rathaus. I was under a lot of pressure from USIA to complete a project and I asked Horst Richter, my Program Manager, to write the remarks. He presented me with a wonderfully clever speech full of rhetorical flourishes. I thanked him for his effort but declined to use the text. The Germans would have known that I was giving a canned presentation that no American would have written. I managed to close my door for a few hours and wrote a simple, factual and direct talk that was well received.

Q: Was your membership in Lions useful to you?

JOHNSON: Absolutely. Lions provided me with many helpful contacts in business and industry. As the only American in the club I was privy to inside information regarding German politics and society. On several occasions I was cautioned not to repeat things I heard at the luncheons and I respected the obligation for confidentiality. After we returned to the United States, we hosted the daughter of a Frankfurt Lion for several months. We are still in touch with her.

Q: Did you have much official travel while you were in Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: Two trips come to mind. I was detailed to handle credentialing at the Eduard Shevardnadze-Shultz meeting in Geneva during the Mutually Balanced Forces Reduction Talks. It was a pleasant respite and a chance to visit with Chris Henze, a Foreign Service classmate, who was PAO in Geneva.

I also rode shotgun on a supply convoy from Helsinki to Moscow. The head of the diplomatic courier office was complaining one day during a meeting at the Consulate General how hard his couriers worked. When he bet that none of us officers would do a courier run, I called his bluff and was duly commissioned a courier for one trip. I flew to Helsinki and the following day three Americans and a Finnish driver set out for Moscow in convoy consisting of ten ton truck loaded with supplies for the Consulate General in Leningrad and construction material for the Embassy in Moscow and a motor home chase car. We allowed Soviet border guards to inspect enter the cargo bay to count the crates and permitted their German shepherd to sniff the boxes. Later we bounced along the washboard road to Leningrad at the perilous speed of 40 mph. After a brief stop at the Consulate General in Leningrad we drove until midnight when we pulled off the road for a few hours of sleep. The two professional couriers guarded the truck while I slept. At 6:30 we were back on the road dodging pot holes. We arrived in Moscow mid-afternoon. I stayed with PAO for several days during which I toured the Soviet capital. I provided the Foreign Service Journal with an account of my trip, which appeared in the October 1989 issue.

Q: Did you ever offer to be a courier again?

JOHNSON: No. It is a hard life with a lot of lifting heavy boxes. Many couriers suffered back injuries. There was also a lot of waiting around airports and many hours spent aloft. Incidentally I knew one courier who used his time flying around the world profitably. He read the "Wall Street Journal," "Barons" and other publications and then bought and sold stocks profitably. Over a period of about twenty years his investments made him a great deal of money.

Of course when the public thinks of diplomatic couriers they conger up pictures of men in trench coats sitting in stuffy compartments on the Orient Express with attachï¿½ cases handcuffed to their wrists. I am told that the process of manacling bags to couriers ended some years ago when an airliner made a crash landing at sea, a courier jumped for a life boat, missed it and was dragged to a watery grave by an attachï¿½ case.

Q: Were you able to take a leisurely home leave while you were in Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: I am not sure how leisurely it was but I am sure I took off a month. Our home leave address caused a little bit of confusion in Washington. I received a phone call from a civil servant in personnel. "Mr. Johnson, am I correct that you are in Frankfurt, Germany and you want to go to Frankfurt, Michigan?"

"Yes, but the town in Michigan is spelled with an "o" rather than a "u", I remarked.

"Oh, well that's no problem, Sir." She continued, "Is there anything else I can do for you while I am on the line?"

"Well, could we get diversionary travel on our way to Michigan?" I asked.

"Where might that be?" replied the clerk.

"Frankfort." I announced.

"Are you pulling my chain, Sir?" she asked hesitantly.

"No." I said, "My family has farm land outside of Frankfort, Kentucky and it has been a long time since any of us have checked on it. (Long silence) Are you still there?"

"Yeah. Yeah," came a weary reply. "I suppose we can do that, but please send me that in a cable, because they are not going to believe me otherwise."Unfortunately there was not time for me to have consultation in Washington and spend a reasonable amount of time with my family in Michigan and Carolyn's in Oregon and also visit Kentucky, so USIA never issued the travel orders with three Frankforts/Frankfurts.

When I was an inspector I once spent fifteen minutes explaining the International Date Line to a clerk. She had a hard time understanding how I could leave Suva on a Wednesday, arrive in Honolulu on a Tuesday and catch a flight a few hours later to Tokyo which got me to the Japanese capital on a Wednesday- all in one day.

Q: How did your family like life in Frankfurt, Germany, that is?

JOHNSON: They loved it. Our children went to the prestigious International School at Oberursel, just north of Frankfurt. Carolyn was den mother to Suzanne's brownie scout troop and was so active in the women's club of the consulate general that I was known among the staff as "Carolyn Johnson's husband", which I took as a high compliment. Of course we took full advantage of Frankfurt's location and traveled widely to France, Austria, Italy and Czechoslovakia. During a visit to the British Channel Islands we toured fortifications the father of a German friend had designed during World War II. The kids learned to ski in Austria. It was a wonderful assignment.

Incidentally my sons Patrick and Erik were active in Boy Scouts. I went on a couple of camping trips with them. A few weeks prior to a national jamboree, the scout master called me and asked me if I could pull some strings in V Corps HQ to get a bus to take the scout troop and a German troop to the jamboree. I called a colonel in Transportation and convinced him that by providing a bus and driver he would contribute mightily to the improvement of German-American relations. We told our scouts that we would pick up the German scouts at a church in a nearby town. I mentioned in passing that German scout troupes were generally divided along religious lines, Catholic and Protestant, and that the Germans we would be camping with were Protestants. Our boys nodded and mumbled their consent. When we pulled up to the church, our troupe let out a collective gasp, "Girls?! We are not camping with girls! No way!"

"I'm sorry I forgot to mention that this is a co-ed troupe and, yes, you will camp with girls," I announced sternly. The scout master threatened any scout who was rude to a girl with expulsion..

About half the German scouts were boys. The Germans were excited about riding on a big American bus and tried to engage the shy Americans in conversation. Fortunately the trip was short. Some of our boys pretended to sleep. Others responded reluctantly to the effort by the Germans to break the ice.

When we arrived at the jamboree we could hear a steady rumble which sounded as if we were at the foot of huge hydroelectric dam. Then I realized it was the collective bedlam from several thousand children. As soon as the German girls showed their mettle in sports our scouts accepted them as equals. The weekend was a great success.

Q: But back to the Soviet Union, did you have any contact with Russians in Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: There was a Soviet military mission near Frankfurt, a relic of the occupation. The Soviets maintained a mission to the British in Gelsenkirchen and one to the French in Baden Baden. The western allies had missions in Potsdam. The Russian officers based in Frankfurt dropped by the Amerika Haus library occasionally to read the latest aviation and technical journals. Sometimes they were in uniform. My librarians treated them like anyone else. One day I invited a colonel to have coffee with me in my office. During the course of our conversation, he said to me rather wistfully, "The Cold War is coming to an end. One day we will look back on our rivalry with nostalgia."

Q: By the time you were there, Reagan was moving into his second term. At that point he had sort of shed his almost cowboy image, things were really moving along with Gorbachev and all. Were the Germans responding to this? What was their attitude?

JOHNSON: The Germans are class and job conscious, and the idea that someone who had been an actor - who they considered not a very good actor - would become President was inconceivable. Although Reagan was a great communicator most Germans did not like his conservative ideology. The most popular thing that Reagan did in Germany was the president's least popular action in the United States. The year was 1985. Helmut Kohl had returned from a fence mending trip to France where he stood hand in hand with Mitterrand at Verdun where their fathers had faced each other across the barbed wire and shell holes during the mindless slaughter of the battle of Verdun. Kohl wanted desperately to have a similar reconciliation with the Americans and it was to be in the sleepy town of Bitburg, which was in the Frankfurt consular district. The US Air Force had a major air base just outside Bitburg. I was assigned as the primary site officer for USIA.

I had never been to Bitburg. I called the Public Affairs Officer at the air base, a Luxembourg national, and told her I would soon be visiting her to discuss preparations for the president's visit. I made my way to the base along foggy, winding roads and met with the public affairs officer, the wing commander and the base commander. They told me that a presidential advance team which included Michael Deaver had preceded me. I drove over to the cemetery where Reagan was scheduled to lay a wreath to look at access and a holding area for the press. Snow covered most of the tomb stones. I asked the caretaker if anyone whose presence might embarrass the President was buried in the cemetery. He responded that the people interred were mostly townspeople, many of whom had been killed in the air raids on the city during the Battle of the Bulge in December of 1944 and January 1945. Bitburg was on the southern flank of the offensive. I assumed that there were SS buried in the cemetery. SS were buried in most German cemeteries. I determined that the highest ranking SS officer was a lieutenant, many were draftees and the average age was about nineteen. These were kids thrown into the battle. There were no remains of war criminals in Bitburg's sandy soil.

One of our Air Force officers had told Deaver about the presence of SS in the cemetery. Deaver reportedly replied, "Let me worry about the president's schedule." Once the American media latched on to the presence of SS there was a feeding frenzy which exhibited the worst qualities of a sensationalistic press in the United States. The Jewish community and the American Legion were soon up in arms. I lost more sleep because of the president's trip to Bitburg than any other problem I confronted during my career. I unfairly blamed myself for not warning the embassy about the presence of SS in the cemetery. I guess I wanted to be a hero. Actually nothing I could have done would have made any difference. The die was cast. Kohl had called Reagan and told him his government would fall if he canceled the stop. Reagan had given the German chancellor his word and, to his credit, he ignored pleas from wife and influential advisors and went through with the trip as planned, although a face saving visit to the memorial at Bergen Belsen concentration camp was added to his program.

In his book A Different Drummer- My Thirty Years with Ronald Reagan Deaver takes responsibility for the problems associated with the visit. But to get back to the visit, the time allotted for the stop at the cemetery kept getting shorter and shorter. One of the Secret Service agents did a mock up tee shirt which showed the Presidential limousine going by the gates to the cemetery and a wreath flying out the window. It said "Bitburg Wreath Toss". The agent thought about the effect of the cartoon might have on his career and the tee shirt disappeared.

During a planning session I had suggested that Mrs. Reagan place flowers on the graves of the family Schneider, a father and mother and four children, who had been killed in the bombing. Unfortunately the graves were immediately in front the journalists and we could not risk unruly reporters shouting questions at the first lady who was under a great deal of strain. I am confident that Germans would have greatly appreciated it if Mrs. Reagan had shown her awareness of the terrible price the civilian populace paid during the war.

We were besieged by sensation-seeking American newsmen. For example, Newsweek had different covers on its U.S. and its international edition. The international edition cover showed just a grave of a SS soldier, while the U.S. edition had the grave of the SS soldier with the German flag, which the photographer borrowed from city hall under false pretenses and place on the grave. One US newscast producer called Bitburg mayor Theo Hallet at home, and when Frau Hallet informed the caller that the mayor had retired for the night, the executive threatened to make life difficult for him unless he returned the call the next day. During an interview with a US newsman, the mayor stepped out of his office. When he returned, he found the reporter going through his desk. Finally I filled in as the mayor's public affairs adviser until the Chancellor Kohl's office could provide some one.

One night shortly before the visit, several German officials and I were having dinner at the pub belonging to the brewery. I noticed several American Jews sitting at another table. I went over and introduced myself and invited them to sit with the officials and me. Perhaps tired of one another's company, they accepted. I asked what their principle complaint regarding the visit was. The spokesman for the group responded, "It is the cancellation of visit to Dachau. We understand it had been on the president's schedule. It should have stayed on his schedule."

"So it is not the wreath laying at the Bitburg cemetery," I persisted.

"Of course we don't like that, but we wanted him to go Dachau," he replied.

By the time we parted there had been some much need reconciliation between the Americans on one hand and my German colleagues and me on the other.

I was tied up with preparations when I received a call from a Frankfurt reporter who had learned of a classified exercise that was to take place at a air base not far from Bitburg. I was afraid if he ran the story German peace groups might make a difficult situation ever more complicated. I admitted to him that he had his facts right but convinced him not to run his story with the understanding that I would make it up to him with an exclusive on an even better story.

Q: He did not print the story and you kept your word, right?

JOHNSON: Correct. One bit of comic relief: a few days before the President's visit a Canadian fighter bomber was circling Bitburg Air Base when the pilot threw the wrong switch and dropped his belly tank which sailed gracefully down and landed perfectly on the roof a rental car signed out to one of our flyers. Fortunately no one was in the sedan. Unfortunately the Canadian's commanding officer got the news on AFN.

But back to serious things, on the morning of the visit a White House staffer and I headed to the cemetery along with about 50 journalists. The German police allowed the newsmen to proceed but stopped the White House official and me. The German police refused to recognize our escort passes. The White House advance man was a former campaign worker and very full of his own importance. I told him we had plenty of time and drove back to the Secret Service post on the air base. The German police detained the political hack. To my intense regret, they released him. Meanwhile after one call from the Secret Service, I was on my way to the cemetery.

When I arrived at the cemetery I found that American TV networks had taped their cables to stone crosses. Incensed, I tore the cables off the crosses. Soon the technicians were yelling at me that their contacts might short out on the bare ground. I responded that I didn't care about their contacts or their feeds, and reminded them that they were in a cemetery not a union hall. German reporters were stunned by the conduct of the American TV crews.

The visit to the cemetery went smoothly. The President arrived with retired Army General Matthew B. Ridgeway. Chancellor Kohl was accompanied by former Luftwaffe General Steinhoff. Kohl and Reagan walked up to the monument and stood solemnly while Steinhoff and Ridgeway placed the wreath at the foot of the monument. A Bundeswehr bugler blew some notes on his instrument.

Reagan walked to the front of the cemetery, turned left toward the journalists with the monument to his right. His head slightly bowed. His hand toward the public was relaxed, while his hand toward the monument was white knuckled. If a journalist had asked me a question at the time, I am afraid I would have broken down crying. The strain of preparations and confrontations with the American reporters had been enormous and I felt completely drained. I felt great pain and a sense of relief.

Following his visit Reagan's standing was higher in Germany than any other time in his presidency. He had given the chancellor his promise and had stood by his word in spite of tremendous pressure to opt out of the visit to the Bitburg cemetery. A few years earlier Jimmy Carter had pressured Chancellor Helmut Schmidt into accepting deployment in the FRG of the neutron bomb and then Carter canceled production of the weapon. While the German government did not want another nuclear weapon system on the German territory, they had agreed to accept it and were incensed by the flip flop of the US president. I gather that Schmidt never forgave Carter.

Q: How did the citizenry of Bitburg feel about Americans after Reagan's visit?

JOHNSON: They understood the difference between press opinion and public opinion. The Bitburgers loved the US Air Force, which was the largest employer in the county. Many of the locals built houses and apartments for the Americans to rent and about one in ten had a relative in the United States. Business and political leaders of the city met quarterly with officers from the base to discuss civil-military relations. On one occasion the director of the brewery lamented that the Greens on the city council were pressuring him to build a tall smoke stack. The environmentalist party claimed that the smoke stack was needed to vent steam from an addition to the brewery. The Americans voiced concern about having to contend with another obstacle near their flight path. Then someone suggested running a pipe under the road from the brewery to some barracks recently vacated by the French army. A Patriot battalion was due to take over the barracks. The heating system needed to be upgraded and additional steam would be welcome. So one night the street between the barracks and the brewery was closed for few hours and the pipe was laid which made everyone happy, including the Greens. Of course there was a rumor that there was a second pipe for beer.

Q: How did the citizenry feel about having a US Army detachment assigned to Bitburg?

JOHNSON: There was concern that soldiers would bring bar brawls and drugs to Bitburg. However the issue died when the assignment of the Patriot battalion was canceled.

The last time I visited Bitburg was in about 1995. The base was on the Pentagon's cut list and I was given a petition containing the signatures of thousands of German residents asking Washington to keep the base open. The petition did no good. After all whose congressional district is Bitburg in?

Q: Reagan also visited Berlin while you were there. How did that visit go?

JOHNSON: Very well indeed. I was detailed to handle the press at Tempelhof Airport, which he flew into and departed from. He spoke to hundreds of invited guests in the cavernous ticking hall. I gave a live TV interview regarding preparations for the visit. The highlight of his visit to Berlin occurred at the wall where he said, "Mr. Gorbachev tear down this wall!" The Berliners knew it was bull but they loved it.

A few days before Reagan's visit Mathias Rust, a German teenager, embarrassed the Soviet military by flying a light plane from Helsinki and landing it on Red Square. The Germans, particularly the Berliners, thought the prank was uproariously funny. The hottest selling item in Berlin was a tee shirt showing a Piper Cub with a German flag painted on its tail parked in front of the Kremlin. Beneath the sketch were words to the effect Celebrating the Opening of the International Airport Red Square.

Q: Did you get to Berlin very often from Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: Maybe once a year. It was a six or seven hour drive, although any time I wanted, I could go on the US military duty trains which traveled to Berlin and back every night. The trains left a dedicated siding in the Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof (main train station) at about 6:00 p.m. and arrived in a special siding Berlin Lichtenberg at about 7:00. The return train followed a similar schedule. There was no cost to travelers. The French and British also had duty trains leaving from Baden Baden anl believe- Gelsenkirchen respectively. I never took one of their trains but can attest to the fact that, although the US trains supposedly had sleeping compartments, passengers had to be very tired to get much sleep. Entering and leaving East Germany the trains changed engines, with lots of jolts and noise, moreover the Soviet KGB guards manning the check points going in and out of the GDR did a lot of shouting.

I attended several meetings in Berlin while I was assigned to Heidelberg and Frankfurt. To keep costs down USIA required some of us to travel by duty train. My colleagues in Hamburg and Munich were permitted to fly. One night returning to Frankfurt I shared a compartment with an Army intelligence officer. Neither one of us could sleep so we were swapping "war stories". I asked him if the Reds had ever hoodwinked him. He grinned broadly and asked me I had ever heard of Peenemuende.

"Of course, that's where the Germans developed the V-2," I said. "It is on the Baltic.""It is on a peninsula that for many years was off limits to foreigners," he remarked. "Well, the East Germans kept moving trucks in and out of huge warehouses they had built. We were certain that they had a major facility there. When they finally let us into the warehouses, we found they were empty and decayed. The NVA (National Peoples Army) and the Soviets completely snookered us. We wasted all sorts of time trying to get a look into those warehouses."

I mentioned to the intelligence officer that the Soviets guards on the Autobahn access routes to Berlin will swap with an American a Red Army belt buckle for a copy of Playboy. He said he of course knew about the black market in magazines and brass. "Do you know what happens to those magazines, other than the KGB soldier drooling over it?" I asked.

"You think capitalism is dead in the Soviet Union? Think again!" he chided me. "According to our sources, the soldier who receives the Playboy sells it to his NCO for at least a week's salary. The NCO sells the magazine to an NCO in another company for a big profit or a major favor. The NCO in that company "rents" the magazine to soldiers and makes his profit before selling the magazine again. For all we know the Playboy eventually makes its way to the Ministry of Defense in Moscow."

Q: While you were there had some of the menace of the Fulda Gap gone by this time?

JOHNSON: I don't think anybody expected war. NATO had sufficient nuclear and conventional forces to deter the Soviets from attacking. I led a number of tours of German journalists to Fulda and to the forward staging areas. The Germans wanted us to reduce our military presence, particularly in the urban centers such as Frankfurt and Munich. At the same time a clear majority were supportive of NATO and its peace keeping function. I had an amusing exchange with Frankfurt's member of parliament Joschka Fisher, who was very much in favor of a draw down of US forces. However he cautioned against closing American Forces Network. I told him, "When the GIs leave, so does AFN." He was not happy with my assessment. Fisher later served as foreign minister in the Social Democrat-Green coalition headed by Chancellor Schroeder.

Q: Did you do much public speaking while you were in Frankfurt?

JOHNSON: I spoke to many German military audiences on US-Soviet relations. Sometimes I was accompanied by my Program Manager Horst Richter, who talked on the Strategic Defense Initiative, SDI. I defended US policy in Central America in presentations to several audiences. I don't think I made much headway against the widespread rejection among Germans of our stand in El Salvador and Nicaragua. I gave numerous lectures on barriers to understanding between Germany and the United States, presentations that were directed to student audiences and German-American clubs. I talked on several occasions on German cultural influences on the United States and US influences on German culture. I believe I gave more lectures than any USIA officer.

One memorable audience was the officers of the famed Sixth Panzer Division, Field Marshal Rommel's old unit. Following the dinner and the Q and A, the commanding officer asked me if there was anything he could do for me. I responded that I would like to ride in a Leopard II tank. He replied that he would do better than that and asked me to be ready at 6:00 a.m. By early afternoon I was a certified tank driver. Accompanied by a fearless instructor, I took the steel monster full speed through mud holes and over barriers. Unfortunately there was no place on base to fire the machine gun or the 120 mm smooth bore cannon. I couldn't believe I was getting paid to have so much fun.

Q: What was the most persistent prejudice German hold concerning the United States?

JOHNSON: That we are "kulturlos" (uncultured.) Look at the American television programs and films export. Germans tend to have an elitist view of culture and look down on popular culture. On the other hand, Germans who have spent much time in the United States know the quality of our orchestras, schools of fine art, book stores, public radio and public television. German visitors are also impressed with our better wines and our micro-breweries. In the last analysis, I think that Germans share with their neighbors a "eurosnobism" which is the last defense of the old world which fears that it is growing obsolete. Germans also link their fear of the effects globalization may have on their standard of living. They, I believe, wrongly consider the United States to be in the vanguard of this threat.

Although Germany is one of the most modern nations in the world, I found it very interesting how fearful many Germans are of technology. I took an assistant with me to a meeting with a senior official in the teachers' union to discuss a program on utilizing computers in education. USIA Washington was ready to provide a noted expert on the subject. The union official turned us down flat. His reason: "Computers cost jobs." My assistant and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Q: In the mid-1980s did Germans still discuss World War II with you in casual conversation?

JOHNSON: Not much. While I missed the exchanges, I was very grateful that Germans rarely voiced a lament that I often heard in the 1960s and 70s, i.e. that the United States should have made a separate peace with Berlin to fight a common foe: the Soviet Union. I found it absolutely exasperating that Germans imagined that the Americans and British could ever have considered joining forces even with a Germany that that had rid itself of the Nazis to fight the Russians, who had lost 20 million soldiers and civilians. Once at a reception in Mainz several conservative businessmen raised the old charge that the US had been short-sighted not to have grasped the golden opportunity to check the Red Army before it occupied Poland, Czechoslovakia and Germany. I responded that such a pact would have been morally repugnant and politically impossible. I added that as much as I admired the courage of the members of the 20th of July conspiracy to kill Hitler, in the long run it was fortunate that they failed, because the western allies would not made a separate peace with them had they been successful in taking the reins of power. I reminded the men of the "stab in the back" lie that the Nazis and reactionaries had used during the Weimar Republic to explain away Germany's defeat in World War I. I challenged them to imagine how much harder it would have been for Germans to have established a democracy after World War II had Churchill and Roosevelt refused to negotiate a separate peace with a German government, which presumably would have had Field Marshal Rommel as chancellor.

Q: Did you write many speeches for the Consul General?

JOHNSON: Both Bill Bodde and Alex Rattray knew what they wanted to say to each audience. My input was generally limited to providing talking points. However I was with Alex Rattray en route to a speaking engagement in Koblenz when Rattray announced that he had not had time to write his speech. Fortunately I had a pad of yellow paper and we drafted his remarks in the back seat of his car while speeding down the Autobahn.

Q: You mentioned that you took the consular course before going to Frankfurt, did you have any consular duties?

JOHNSON: I can only think of one time I exercised my authority as a consul. Adolf Reuter, an elderly German came to my office one day and asked me to help him get an American pilot decorated for bravery. Reuter explained that on June 26, 1944 he had witnessed Luftwaffe fighters under his command shoot down B-24 Liberator near Vienna. The pilot, Lt. Jack Weller Smith, waited until his crew had parachuted to safety before abandoning the burning aircraft and consequently died of injuries suffered when his parachute failed to open fully before he impacted with the ground. Reuter was convinced that because Lt. Smith remained at the controls of the doomed bomber, he saved the lives of his crew. I translated Reuter's statement into English, witnessed his signature, added my own and then had the seal of the consulate general affixed to the document. I submitted the testament to the Air Force where it was corroborated by a statement from Lt. Smith's copilot. On April 17, 1986 Lt. Smith's family received the Distinguished Flying Cross at a ceremony at Bolling Air Force Base.

Incidentally one task that somehow fell to me at the consulate general was to respond to queries from American veterans. At least a dozen wrote to ask assistance in locating the German Luftwaffe base where they were interrogated after being shot down. The answer was simple: the barracks at Oberursel, which were just down the road from where our children went to school. In my responses I noted that after the war, the American Army used the base to interrogate high ranking German POWs, some of whom were tried at Nuremburg.

One autumn afternoon a German in his 60s applied for a visa at the Consulate General. The young consular officer noticed on his application form that his mother was an American. The officer asked the man, "What were you doing from 1941 to 1945?"

The man responded, "I was in the Wehrmacht.

"Where did you serve," asked the American.

"Russia and Italy," he replied.

"Who did you fight in Italy?" inquired the American.

"Mostly Americans. Why do you ask?" queried the German.

"Because since your mother was an American you would probably have been eligible for a US passport," the vice consul explained. "But since you engaged in war against the US, you have almost certainly lost American citizenship which you did not realize you had.

"Does that mean I can't go to the United States?" asked the German.

"Of course you can go to the US. I will give you a visa at no cost. Had you opted for a passport, it would have cost you $75, responded the American officer cheerfully.

Q: Speaking of consular work, were there very many Americans in German jails in the Frankfurt consular district?

JOHNSON: I can't recall any numbers, but not many. I remember a visit by a State Department colleague whose son was serving a lengthy term for heroine possession. The father told the consular officer not to extend any special courtesies to the young man.

Q: I assume that you and your colleagues all knew that the Berlin Wall was going to fall the next year?

JOHNSON: No, but there's an interesting story about that. When General Vernon Walters, who replaced Rick Burt as our ambassador in Bonn in 1988, called on Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the Foreign Minister reportedly asked him if there was anything really important he expected to occur during his tenure. Walters supposedly responded, "I'm going to see the collapse of East Germany and German reunification."Genscher looked at him and said, "How will that occur?"

Walters replied, "Gorbachev has revoked the Brezhnev Doctrine, and without it the GDR can't continue to exist much longer. The GDR will collapse because it can't exist as a separate state by itself." History soon proved the old general turned diplomat right.

Q: If you did not foresee the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the GDR, what did you think would happen to East Germany?

JOHNSON: I thought that the wall would become irrelevant. In 1987 East German authorities permitted three million GDR citizens, in addition to senior citizens, to visit the West every year. Three million, plus thousands of senior citizens, out of a population of seventeen million, that's a lot. The government of the GDR was cabling parts of East Germany to receive West German television because that was only the way to get people to stay in those regions. East Germans could subscribe to West German magazines. The GDR had changed from being a totalitarian society to an authoritarian society. The Communist regime couldn't resist the influence of the reform movements in Prague, Warsaw and in Moscow. The rigid system was crumbling. It crumbled a lot faster almost anyone anticipated. I am only sorry I was not in Berlin when the wall opened.

When I was a student I used to ask Germans when they realized that the war was lost. On trips back to Germany after the collapse of the GDR, I asked East Germans when they realized that their Communist government was doomed. I received many answers but nearly all the responses concerned the size of the anti-government demonstrations. Apparently once the protests reached a critical mass, the regime folded. An East German friend told me that he had joined a march in Dresden and when he crossed the Danube and saw protesters still crossing the bridge down river. It was then that he realized the days of the Communism in Germany were numbered. A member of the Bundestag (parliament) said that protesters in at least one city had made a deal with the Soviets that they could seek refuge in the local Red Army garrison should the police open fire on the demonstrators. Although I find this latter story hard to believe, the politician had never misled me.

Incidentally, during visits to East Berlin and to the GDR, I found it ironic that the complaint I heard most often from East Germans about West Germans was the same complaint I heard from West Germans about the Americans. The "Ossies", as East Germans were called, said that the "Wessies", the West Germans", were excessively individualistic and lived in an "elbow society" i.e. where people elbowed one another aside to achieve personal advancement. I can't count how many times West Germans told me that they were put off by what they perceived to be a predatory hire-and-fire job world in the US.

Q: You spent 12 years in Germany. How do you think Germans view the their role in the 20th century?

JOHNSON: The trauma resulting from World War II and their defeat has clearly ebbed. Germans were no longer obsessed with shame, loss and anger. Unlike the Japanese and the Austrians, the Germans confronted their past. They have abandoned nationalism and embraced a new identity as Europeans. Germans have gradually distanced themselves from the United States and criticize American consumerism and disregard for the environment. While they love American westerns and gangster films they reject our macho culture of violence. For decades they took great pride in the "Wirschaftswunder" (economic miracle) and combination of low unemployment and low inflation that continued. By the end of the 1980s Germans were increasingly concerned about their ability to work less and less while still earning fat pay checks and enjoying extremely generous social benefits. They know they are living beyond their means but apparently lack the will to do anything about it.

But returning to the legacy of the Third Reich, I don't think even today many Germans fully comprehend the long term cost of their twelve years under Hitler. Even a united Germany will never gain the standard of living and quality of life that a Germany without Hitler would have enjoyed. It is not the loss of territory but rather the loss of talent that has hurt Germany. During that the years just prior to the outbreak of World War II Germany suffered a brain drain is unparalleled in history, a loss that can never be replaced. Most of the academics, artists and scientists came to the United States. During the Third Reich and in the chaos after the war German schools and universities either stopped teaching or taught at level far beneath their potential. Look at Germany's portion of the Nobel Prizes in Physics, Chemistry and Medicine prior to and after World War II. I don't think Germany will ever completely recover from the insanity of the Third Reich.

Q: Do you feel at home in Germany?

JOHNSON: Not any more. Although I am still fluent in German and have close friends in a number of cities, Germany has changed. The Bush administration has antagonized even the conservatives, the traditional base of pro-US feeling. I'm not willing to live with the rejection an American has to accept in Germany today.

Q: In 1988 where did you go?

JOHNSON: In 1988 I went back to Washington, to Personnel.

Q: From 1988 until when were you in Washington?

JOHNSON: I came back to Washington in the summer of 1988, and I remained here until 1993. I had been a personnel officer with the DC Police Department before joining the Foreign Service. I was in charge of crossing guards and janitors, a very interesting clientele. They had wonderful problems. I thought I would be getting out of the Foreign Service in the not too distant future, so I decided take a position that might lead to a job in the private sector. I was the Area Personnel officer for Europe for USIA for two years, 1988-1990. It was a challenging position. I learned a lot about the personnel system which I wish I had known much earlier in my career, including that the system of Officer Evaluation Reports was deeply flawed. Too few rating officers were willing to criticize underperformers and weak officers thrived under the supervision of other weak officers who they did not threaten.

Q: Did you have any particular cut of the pie in Personnel, say when you first got to Washington?

JOHNSON: I briefed the new junior officers entering the Agency and my opening line was "Welcome to an organization of relatively affluent professional strangers." Foreign Service Officers were pretty well paid. Our benefit package was outstanding. At the same time we were a nomadic lot and to go native was a real bad idea.

I continued, "The sun never sets on EUR (the European Area) which was true." For USIA, EUR included Iceland, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Siberia and Canada, i.e. it circumvented the globe. I managed the largest number of positions and most resources. I've forgotten how many people I had to keep in jobs. It was at least 200 and my responsibilities kept me busy.

Q: Did the USIA parallel the State department ethos where the European Bureau was the most powerful bureau, and the personnel jobs there became sort of an enclosed area and it was hard to get into?

JOHNSON: Well, that's what virtually every bureau says; the Latin American Club, the Middle East Club, the Asian Club. Europe had two major attractions; one was it was where the Cold War was being fought most publicly and Europe had good housing, good schools and good medical care. Many officers who had served in a number of hardship posts tried to get a tour of duty in Europe. I sympathized with them. I remember I had a classmate who had served in Paris and Switzerland, and then came back to Paris and after two years changed jobs in Paris. He wanted another four years in Paris and I rejected his request out of hand. He was very unhappy, particularly when I suggested that he should apply to the African or Asian area office for his next assignment. The State Department had the same problem.

Q: How did you find the influence of principle officers? Were there people up the line trying to make sure their protï¿½gï¿½s got jobs? How important was this?

JOHNSON: Ambassadors were often able to pressure the Agency into assigning their choice of PAO, even when another officer was already well along in the assignment process. At the very top level of the Agency open assignments was a bit of a joke. A few very senior officers would switch jobs with one another as long as they had the approval of the Director of USIA. Yet overall I think it was a pretty fair system.

Q: You were there in 1988 when Charlie Wick was still Director. When the Bush I administration came in and Wick departed, was there considerable change in the Agency?

JOHNSON: Absolutely. Wick in many ways was a very dislikable person. He had a very hot temper and was abusive of his subordinates. Not even my boss Terry Catherman, who was PAO in Germany, had the courage to stand up to him. Nevertheless everyone in USIA gave Wick credit for getting the Agency unparalleled funding. Actually, it wasn't Charlie who was so close to the President, it was his wife Mary Ann who was an intimate confidant of Nancy Reagan. The night that Reagan was reelected in 1984 only two people were with the Reagans in the executive suite in the White House: Charlie and Mary Ann Wick. A succession of totally faceless directors and most of us can't even remember who they were followed Charlie Wick as Director of USIA. Colleagues would say to one another in the hall that they never thought they would miss Charlie Wick, but we did.

Q: The fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire were played in your bailiwick. How did that impact? I realize Personnel is Personnel, but it had to have had an impact. Were you shoveling people into it or what was happening?

JOHNSON: Oddly enough, Moscow wasn't always the easiest place to staff. I had an awful time finding a qualified Cultural Affairs Officer, which was a senior job. Finally I assigned someone who I hope grew in the job, because he was inadequate before he left for Moscow.

Q: Why wouldn't a tour of duty in Moscoget somebody promoted? You know, usually that's a hot spot.

JOHNSON: Well, the Soviet capital was a hot spot, but to get promoted from OC (Counselor) to MC (Minister-Counselor) you really had to be in charge of a big post. The CAO job was less attractive even than the IO (Information Officer) job. At least, in the IO job as embassy spokesman you were likely to be on television be noticed. Also the prestige of the Cultural Affairs Officers suffered in the later years of the Agency. It became much less desirable to be a CAO than an IO. The cultural sections lost more resources than the information sections. Moreover USIA experienced the retirement of an entire generation of CAOs. Coincidentally the Agency lost a great many very talented ï¿½migrï¿½s. I assume State experienced the same phenomena, although I understand more ï¿½migrï¿½s joined USIA than State. I don't think anybody could ever fill their shoes. Perhaps their time was past. The Cold War was coming to an end, and as the Cold War concluded the European area lost much of its glamour in the Foreign Service.

Q: What about communications? I'm thinking of the rise of e-mail and things of this nature. Has this impacted on you very much at that time?

JOHNSON: Well, e-mail didn't come until about the mid-nineteen nineties, but we were going over to the WANG, that first generation of business computers. When I was in Personnel we were learning new software every six months. It was the days before the mouse and so you had to figure out all the commands, but there was certainly a tremendous emphasis on technology. USIA was far ahead of State in the adoption of PCs, a process which sped the departure of some of the older officers who wouldn't adapt. After a while only very senior officers were allowed to remain aloof of the PC revolution.

Q: Do you have any stories or want to talk about some of the bureaucratic struggles? Personnel is always the place. It's good to get the stories, but also I look upon these accounts that we're recording here to be for people who may be unfamiliar with government or are just getting into it or something to understand the sort of things that go on.

JOHNSON: As already noted, I learned that the Officer Efficiency Reports were often so inflated that an entire personnel file might be garbage.

An officer's corridor reputation was usually the best means of judging his/her quality. The problem was of course that many officers were all but unknown in Washington.

In USIA assignments were discussed on Thursday afternoons. On one side of the table were the area personnel officers for Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America with positions to fill. On the other side were the Career Counselors who had officers they had to place. The Area Personnel Officers represented the interests of their respective geographic area offices while the Career Counselors had the interests of their clients at heart. They had their list and we had our list. The Director of the Foreign Service Personnel or his deputy chaired the meetings and tried to keep the dialogue civil. Needless to say, the gatherings were rarely dull.

When I arrived in Personnel, Area Personnel Officers and Career Counselors quietly decided many assignments over coffee in Roy Rodgers. When our informal vetting of assignments became notorious, the Director of Personnel ordered us to disband the swap sessions.

Soon after assuming my new duties I won the approval of the assignments committee for an assignment of an officer to a position in Europe. When I presented the decision to the Director of European Affairs and his two deputies, they were furious. Apparently the guy was a turkey. I responded, "But he has a good file."

"Screw his file. He's a schmuck! Give us someone else," shouted the deputy.

I went back to the assignments committee the next week with a candidate who had the blessing of the area and eventually got the anointed assigned to the post in question.

We were supposed to assign officers at grade to each position, but sometimes there were other considerations. One day I told the committee that I wanted to assign an officer to Hamburg who spoke German like a native but was one grade junior. A career counselor put forward somebody who was at grade, but who didn't have the language. I went up to the area and I got approval. I prevailed.

A few weeks later I was in exactly the reverse position. I had an officer who I knew from an inspection in Korea who was at grade for a position in Vienna. I argued that it was time for him to be assigned to Europe. The career counselors, of course, had a candidate who spoke German but who had never served in a hardship post. With the backing of the area, I prevailed. I won more disputes than I lost, but I lost some heart-breakers.

One Thursday I arrived at the European Area Office with several nominations I knew the Director and his deputies would not like. However I had been outvoted and each area had to accept its quota of weak officers. Dell Pendergrast, the Deputy Director for East Europe, ranted and raved but finally accepted the bad news. Cynthia Miller Fraser, a Foreign Service classmate and Deputy Director for Western Europe, although much less vociferous than Dell Pendergrast, refused to accept one of the turkeys. She pestered me for weeks and accosted me in the hall to restate her case. I never knew anybody who was so persistent.

Q: What role did the Area Director play in the assignments process?

JOHNSON: Vic Olason, a very soft spoken officer whom I had worked with in Germany, chaired the meetings but left the assignments up to his deputies. I don't recall him ever expressing a preference for one candidate or another.

Q: Was the assignments process transparent?

JOHNSON: Well very few people outside personnel understood the process. When I joined the office I found the steps very confusing. Finally I drafted an article for the USIA World, the USIA magazine, describing how assignments were made. I was very proud of my little opus; however the Director of Personnel told me not to submit it. I never understood his reasons.

Q: Did USIA have a Committee on Exceptions?

JOHNSON: Yes. The Area Personnel Officers and the Career Counselors also constituted the Committee on Exceptions. If an officer wanted to lengthen or shorten his/her tour or wanted to break an assignment he/she had not already begun, he/she had to make in writing his/her case to the Committee on Exceptions. It was a powerful committee, whose decisions were basically final. It was great fun. One time a career counselor presented the case of an officer who had just completed a year of Chinese language training and decided that she didn't want to go to China. He suggested sending her to Nigeria as recompense for breaking her assignment to China. Normally the officer would be required to resign from the Foreign Service and pay the government for cost of the language training. I happened to know the officer well. She had been one of my Junior Officer Trainees in Frankfurt. Although talented, she was irresolute. I argued against letting her off the hook. I suspected that she would back out of the Nigeria assignment. I was out voted. The day before the movers were due to pack her out, she resigned from the Foreign Service

Q: What about this particular stage because we have been documenting it in a way through this series of interviews, from the Personnel point of view, what was the status of women officers? Was there a push to get more in or had it already been pretty well accomplished? How did you view it?

JOHNSON: When I joined USIA, the Agency was doing a much better job of bringing women into the Foreign Service than State. I don't know if women were more likely to apply to USIA than State. Many of our best cultural affairs officers were women. Most librarians were women. A quarter of my USIA classmates were female. I considered them at least as talented as the men, and overall the women who remained in the Foreign Service, outranked the men at retirement. Moreover the wives of my colleagues were at least as smart as their husbands.

Q: We've all known male officers who were all right, but their wives were so supportive and good themselves that you accepted the officer because of the wife.

JOHNSON: In a way, it was a shame that in the late 1960s reference to wives was dropped from the Officer's Efficiency Report. Had that section been left it in, I might have received another promotion, because Carolyn was an outstanding Foreign Service wife. But getting back to your question, by the 1970s and 1980s, women were getting more and more of their share of positions. Jodie Lewinsohn was the first woman to be assigned as Public Affairs Officer in an important country, Sweden. Jody went on later to be PAO in Rome and then European Area Director. She was a formidable officer for whom I had great respect.

Q: Did you feel any pressure? How did it work for minorities?

JOHNSON: There was a sincere effort to find qualified minorities in the 1980s. Two of the problems, of course, were that Foreign Service pay lagged behind that of the private sector and that it often took so long to get a security clearance many officers accepted other job offers.

Q: As Area Personnel Officer for Europe you must have been a popular guy.

JOHNSON: I was amused at how nice some people were. One colleague offered to "take care of me" if I would get him the assignment of his choice. I took care of him but not in the way he wanted.

Q: Did you travel much as a personnel officer?

JOHNSON: I knew most of my posts from my years in Germany. However when someone in the Office of Security suggested that officers in Eastern Europe should write a memorandum of conversation on every contact with a local, I saw my chance to get travel money. I volunteered to run the proposition by our colleagues in Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. The Agency allowed me to add Greece and Turkey to my itinerary. Needless to say, the officers responded that the obligation to write a "memcon" after every conversation would constitute a terrible burden. I added my agreement in a memo and the idea was shelved.

While I was Sofia I had lunch with several embassy colleagues. When we were leaving the restaurant one of the officers asked the doorman to hail us a cab. The doorman ignored us. Soon another colleague came out of the men's room and asked about the status of the cab. "The doorman is no damned help at all," I remarked whereupon the officer marched up to the doorman and proceeded to shout at him. The doorman snapped to attention and ran into street where he flagged down a cab. I asked the officer what he had said to the doorman. "Oh, I crewed him out in Russian and he assumed I was a Soviet," the officer explained. He added, "Bulgarians are used to taking orders if given in Russian."

Incidentally one officer at that lunch was the PAO John Menzies. John, a soft-spoken Mormon, played a very laudable role in helping to bring an end to the civil war in Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s. He was our ambassador in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the time.

Q: How did the rest of your trip go?

JOHNSON: I learned a lot about conditions at the posts and was able to solve a dispute between two colleagues. In my free time, which included Easter weekend, I toured Athens and the Hittite ruins outside Ankara. While in the Turkish capital, I met a Colonel Mung, the Chinese military attachï¿½, at a diplomatic reception. He told me that unfortunately his first contact with Americans had been in Korea where he had served as a volunteer in the Peoples Liberation Army. I asked Colonel Mung if he had participated in the human wave assaults on the US positions. He nodded gravely, "Yes, it was a very costly tactic. I lost many friends there."

Q: How did the Foreign Service Reform Act of 1980 affect USIA?

JOHNSON: The act was a disaster for the Agency. In 1989 I was named to a panel of about eight officers to compare the officer corps of USIA and State. Whereas the distribution of rank within USIA reflected a restrained promotion system, in State there were far too many senior officers, and most egregious, there were more career-counselorthan counselors. The act called for up-or-out, whereby officers were continually pushed to be promoted or face retirement for time in class. In USIA we lost a lot of very able officers who were very competent as cultural affairs or information officers, but who did not want to be public affairs officers who spent much of their time dealing with administrative problems and with the whims of the ambassador and Washington.

As already noted, in 1981 I had put my family before my career and had turned down a PAO assignment to a country with poor schools and a non-existent health care. Nine years later, perhaps the decision caught up with me. In about 1990, the Director of Personnel informed me that I would be retired on September 30th of that year. He said he was sorry to lose me but that it was an exceptionally lean year for promotions and that only twelve of the more than 130 officers in my grade had made the list.

Q: How did you feel about being forced out?

JOHNSON: I was very unhappy. I decided to go back to Berlin to be with some friends from my student days and possibly find a job in Germany. The job never materialized, in part because I decided I didn't want to live in Germany again. On October 2, 1990 I visited a friend in our embassy in East Berlin. The ambassador was going through the building saying goodbye to his staff because the following day was unification day for the Federal Republic and German Democratic Republic and he was going to be out of a job. Actually his career was far from over.

The night of unification my friends and I stood at the Brandenburg Gate. As the fireworks boomed overhead and an orchestra played the Bach I noticed a young man, perhaps in his 30s, standing next to me. While his little boy's face was aglow with delight, tears were running down the father's cheeks. Although I would have loved to have known what the man was thinking, reunification was an intensely emotional and private moment for everyone in the huge crowd so I looked away.

Q: What happened when you returned to the US?

JOHNSON: I received a call from USIA asking me to work in the Operations Center sifting through thousands of cables and writing items for inclusion in a summary for the Director of USIA. It was shift work, either 3:30 to 11:30 pm or 11:30 pm to 7:30 am. Duty there was rather dull, although the cables I scanned gave me some excellent insights into what was happening in the world. Fortunately I had a well developed brain stem from my days of shelving books at the Library of Congress, so I could leaf through thousands of cables and spot the very few which required action. I was also lucky that I never missed anything important. One watch officer was nearly fired for not noticing a time sensitive cable he should have acted upon. Several times another watch officer was unable work, which meant I spent 16 hours behind the horseshoe shaped desk. Often we would spot breaking news at the USIA Op Center before our colleagues at the State Op Center did and we phoned them with a heads up. Occasionally we dealt with the White House and Treasury operation centers.

Q: Where you in the Operations Center during the Gulf War when Iraq invaded Kuwait?

JOHNSON: Yes, the op center was a great place to follow the war. It was a little like my experience as a JOT when I was in the op center the night the North Koreans captured the USS Pueblo.

Q: On a typical shift were you busy all evening or night?

JOHNSON: The first hour or so was filled with checking systems and routine work, then there was often time to read a book, or if you were on duty in the wee hours, take a nap or watch a film. As long as one person kept up with the paper flow and monitored the TV showing the news channels, the other person could chill out or clean up the tasks left by the day shift.

Q: How often did you call someone in the middle of the night?

JOHNSON: Not often and when I did, it was for a good reason. The reaction of most officers was, "You poor bastard, do you have do this every night?"

Q: How was working the night shift on inner clock?

JOHNSON: I fought to stay awake driving home. One morning on my way home I woke up a stop light with traffic streaming past me. On another occasion I feel asleep at the breakfast table with my mouth full of food. I bedded down in our basement guest room after breakfast and slept soundly for several hours and then fitfully for several hours more. After five or six nights of the grave yard shift I was a mess.

The real risk of working in the op center was the lack of hygiene. We had some real pigs on the staff who left half eaten food lying around and greasy coffee cups perched on shelves. The microwave oven was crusted with spilled drinks and spattered food. When opening the refrigerator, you had stand behind the door or something would grab you and pull you inside.

Q: You did not want to work days?

JOHNSON: No. The Operations Center was bedlam during the day- too many supervisors and a smattering of officious bureaucrats demanding missing cables. Screw that! My stint as a watch officer helped me understand the travails our sons endured. Erik, a policeman in Roanoke, worked the grave yard shift and his brother Patrick, had the late shift as a support tech for an IT company.

Q: Did you receive extra pay for working nights and weekends?

JOHNSON: No. We were told we were already earning enough and that only junior officers were eligible for the differential- typical Agency cheapness.

Q: How long did you remain in the USIA op center?

JOHNSON: One night in January 1993 I was on duty in the op center when I got a call from Bill Bodde, my former CG in Frankfurt. I knew he would be leaving soon for Singapore to be the Executive Director of APEC. He said, "I want you to be my Public Affairs Director. We're opening up the Secretariat."

I replied, "Thank you, Bill. It certainly a very attractive offer and let me ask Carolyn.

His response was, "Do you want the job?"

To which I replied, "I think I ought to run this past Carolyn."

Bill said, "You're not listening."

So I rejoined, "You cleared with her already?"

Bill said, "Right!"

When I got home a little after midnight I said softly to the lump in the bed, "Carolyn, You've been talking to Bill Bodde?"

There was a sleepy, "Yes. You hate the Operations Center, so take the job. It is only to the end of the year."

There was one problem: another officer had already been assigned to the position. The Director of Personnel was reluctant to undo his assignment, but Bill Bodde wanted me and Bill had a little talk with the other guy who graciously asked to be released from the assignment. Bill Bodde could threaten to break a person's legs while still smiling.

Since Carolyn had a full time position as a foreign language teacher at a middle school, it was agreed I would go to Singapore alone. The hefty separate maintenance allowance added a tidy sum to my pay checks.

A couple weeks after contacting me Bill Bodde and I were in Williamsburg for a three day Senior Officials Meeting (SOM). Then he and I flew to Singapore. Traveling with Bill Bodde was always a pleasure. He is a man of unlimited charm and inexhaustible chutzpah. His persuasive powers at the check-in counter got us upgraded to first class.

Bill and I were the first Americans to be assigned to the diplomatic staff of the Secretariat which was just moving into a beautiful suite of offices overlooking Sentosa Island. Bill's deputy was an Indonesian professor of economics. Taiwan (Chinese Taipei in APEC), Hong Kong, the PRC, the Republic of Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada seconded diplomats to the Secretariat. Each of us was responsible for a section or several working groups. More about that later. We established the No-Better-Offer-Lunch-Club, e.g. we'd go out to lunch every day together, unless you got a better offer from somewhere else. It was great comradery.

Q: Did you talk about politics?

JOHNSON: Nothing serious. I was careful not to involve myself in matters related to Taipei and Beijing. We made a lot of wise cracks about what was happening in one another's countries. There were the usual historical asides. For example I said to my PRC colleague one day as we were walking to lunch, "You know, China caused World War II."

"How?" he replied.

I responded, "After Japan invaded China the US imposed trade sanctions and the Japanese attacked the US to get us out of the way, which started the world war."

From behind me I heard, my Japanese colleague say, "I think that was meant for me."It was, but no offense was intended and none was taken.

Q: APEC stood for what?

JOHNSON: Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation. It's called the APEC forum.

Q: Let's go back a bit. Could you explain what APEC was and what it was doing and the sort of things we were interested in?

JOHNSON: APEC was founded in Canberra in November 1989 to reduce trade barriers. It was probably Australia's idea more than anyone's. The date coincided with a much more newsworthy event in Germany: the opening of the Berlin Wall. In the late 1980s Australia and New Zealand were feeling forsaken by the UK when London joined the European Common Market. Meanwhile Australia, already a regional power, was seeking to increase its influence and prestige in Asia. Canberra approached Tokyo in the hope of developing an all-Asian free trade area, or at least to reduce trade barriers. Initially Australia was not enthusiastic about the United States being a member of the organization because our economy was so large. The Japanese reminded the Australians that the US was its number one export market and it would not join an organization aimed a liberalizing trade which excluded the United States. Canberra caved in and invited Washington to be a founding member of APEC.

The Senior Officials of APEC divided up responsibilities into working groups to do such things as facilitate travel by business executives, reduce barriers to foreign investment, standardize tests so that consumer products that would be accepted in one country would be accepted in other countries, develop alternatives to fossil fuels, and foster the growth of small and medium size enterprises. Because the United States had open markets compared to most countries in Asia, APEC offered Washington the opportunity to gain equal treatment.

Q: Please name the countries that were members of APEC in while you were assigned to the Secretariat.

JOHNSON: Australia, Brunei, Canada, China, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan), Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and the United States. After I left in July 1994, Chile was admitted in November of that year and Russia, Peru and Vietnam in November 1998.

Q: Is APEC a trade bloc

JOHNSON: No. Nor does it seek to achieve the sort of economic and political integration that the EU has accomplished.

Q: You mentioned the Senior Officials. Who were they?

JOHNSON: Mostly sub-cabinet officials and senior diplomats. They were in effect our board of directors.

Q: Who headed the Secretariat and how long was his/her term of office?

JOHNSON: The chief executive was the Executive Director. Bill Bodde was the first Executive Director. The post rotated among the economies on a yearly basis.

Q: What language or languages were used at APEC meetings?

JOHNSON: English was the agreed upon language, although in some situations translators may have been used.

Q: What was your office space like?

JOHNSON: The Singaporeans provided the Secretariat with an entire floor of a modern office building overlooking the harbor. I could see the famous British fort from my window. It was such a fabulous view that I probably spent more time gazing out the floor- to-ceiling window than I should have. After I left APEC the Secretariat expanded onto the floor below and eventually moved out to a new building on the campus of the university.

Q: How were decisions reach in APEC?

JOHNSON: By consensus. And by that I mean not every member had to be equally enthusiastic about every decision. Consensus was important in the Secretariat, even in the most mundane things. One day it was agreed (consensus) that the entire staff would have lunch at the cafeteria in our building. I hated the food at the cafeteria and announced I was going next door to a better place. Several colleagues sheepishly joined me, but I realized my assertiveness had irritated several Asian colleagues. The next time the staff reached a consensus to go somewhere, I went along quietly.

Q: How would you rate the enthusiasm of the member economies regarding APEC's new agenda?

JOHNSON: If you don't mind, I will quote from Bill Bodde's book View From the 19th Floor-Reflections of the First APEC Executive Director. "Most enthusiastic about institution building in APEC are: Australia, Canada, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore and the United States. In the middle, from hedged to reluctant support are: China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Chinese Taipei, Thailand, Hong Kong and Brunei. Resisting all efforts toward APEC institution building is: Malaysia."

Q: What were you doing? What did your job consist of?

JOHNSON: I was in charge of media relations and protocol. APEC was very newsworthy. I spent a lot of time with the foreign and Singaporean press. I was building a paper free library, so users could consult our documents online. I also created a modest publications program and wrote speeches for the Executive Director. I occasionally wrote items for him for the media, a magazine article for example. I edited reports by colleagues for inclusion in publications and larger reports.

I received visiting delegations, guided them around the Secretariat and arranged for them to meet staff. I was in charge of planning representational events. Sometimes I had a little fun with visitors from distant countries. After noting that looking south from our suite one could see into the southern hemisphere, and then I would raise my arm about 60 degrees and point out the equator. "See the faint green line across the sky?" I would ask. A few people took me seriously.

Q: Tell me about your editing the work of your fellow diplomats assigned to the Secretariat?

JOHNSON: Sometimes editing was a touchy issue. It was actually easier to edit the work of my Korean and Japanese than my Canadian and Australian colleague. Neither of the former was completely at home in English, so I could say to them, "Do you mind if I rephrase your submission so it reads....."

They would respond, "By all means. Just don't change the intent of what I say." On the other hand, I received a text from my Australian colleague that started with a sentence which ran eleven lines. I persuaded her that not everyone was a fan of Thomas Wolfe and that I needed to break up her sentences. Some of the prose of the Canadian was so convoluted that it was incomprehensible.

Q: Who was your boss in Washington?

JOHNSON: Bill Bodde and I worked for Sandy Kristoff, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the East Asia and Pacific Bureau (EAP), but our more immediate boss in Washington was Phil Lincoln, Director of the Office of Economic Policy in EAP. Sandy was a hard-charging tough negotiator. She commanded great respect by everyone who knew her. Later she served in the White House for the National Security Counsel and then moved to New York Life as a vice president. Phil Lincoln was a soft-spoken China hand. He would call up occasionally and say, "If it's not too much trouble, could you do this for me." Phil was a wonderful guy who was killed in a traffic accident in China.

Q: How long did it take you to get used to the climate?

JOHNSON: Because of its proximity to the equator, Singapore does not have seasons. The temperature is in the mid 80s to low 90s every day. After a week or so your inner thermostat adjusts to the heat and humidity. Fortunately there is often a sea breeze. Paraguay was a lot hotter. Although it sounds paradoxical, it was easy to catch a cold in Singapore. Banks, shopping centers and particularly supermarkets way over-used air conditioning, so it was easy to get a chill. I often carried a cotton sweater with me.

Q: Was the social system over controlling?

JOHNSON: There was enforced savings and no real poverty. There were no homeless and no beggars. Singaporeans accepted a lot of government intervention in their lives for what they believed was the common good. You could get fined if you let water stand around potted plants because the water was a breeding ground for mosquitoes which carried malaria and dengue fever. I applauded the prohibition on the sale of chewing gum. One of the best selling tee shirts in Singaporean stores had in big letters across the front: Singapore is a Fine City and listed all the things one could be fined for. One day a colleague came into the office steaming mad. "What's wrong," I asked.

"This man was such a pig!" she sputtered.

"Did he throw a bag of garbage out the window?" I asked.

"No," came the reply.

"I suppose he tossed a newspaper onto the street and walked away," I ventured.

"No," she snorted. "He threw a cigarette butt out his car window!"

"You are quite right to be so offended," I rejoined. "That's the end of civilization as we know it."

Q: What your schedule like?

JOHNSON: We worked as many hours as necessary and took time off as it was available. It was not a high pressure job. We were twelve hours ahead of Washington which meant that Bill and I usually called the Department from our apartments during the evening our time.

Q: You were there before email. This was the beginning of the real explosion, and ability to communicate, wasn't it? I would imagine this was all part and parcel of what your organization was doing and was getting involved.

JOHNSON: Yes, the email was just starting. It really exploded in '95 or '96. We were still communicating by phone and telegram. One night about 3:00 am I was awakened from a sound sleep by the phone next my bed. A secretary in the Department declared, "I called your office and you're not there."

I said, "No, I'm at home. It is my nap time"

She said, "When are you going back to your office?"

I said, "In a few of hours."

She said, "That's a long nap."

Finally I growled, "It's three AM here, not PM, AM."

There was a long silence and then, "Oh, really?"

One does not offend clerks and secretaries because they can take their revenge in unexpected and untraceable ways, so I was as sweet as possible.

We cleared up a problem concerning travel orders, then I finished my nap.

Q: Did you have a pleasant apartment?

JOHNSON: Bill got me in the building were he was living. I had a one bedroom furnished apartment on the sixth floor just off Orchard Road in downtown Singapore. It was quite adequate for my needs, well located but very noisy outside. Fortunately my flat faced a quite residential area, not the busy street that ran in front of the building. Singaporeans hold their motorcycle races at 2:00 a.m.

Q: How did you adjust to being a bachelor again?

JOHNSON: It was hard. I had a very solid marriage and deeply missed Carolyn. I loved our kids and thought of them frequently. Evenings when I was alone my apartment were the worst, especially since most of my colleagues had their wives and children with them. Carolyn and Suzanne flew out to Singapore in the summer of 1993 for a several weeks. We vacationed on Bali and had a great time. Patrick, our older son, joined me for about a month in 1994 and did an internship at the Secretariat of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council. Patrick and I went to Bali for an APEC conference. Erik, who had just finished a stint in the Marine Corps, was unable to take time out from his studies to come to Singapore.

Q: Did you have a car?

JOHNSON: No. I was terrified of driving on the left. Although Singaporean drivers were courteous, crossing the street was sometimes an adventure. I was happy to avail myself of the city state's well developed mass transit system and taxis. Except when it rained and everyone was hailing a taxi, cabs were not readily available.

Q: Did the tours of duty of you and Ambassador Bodde coincide from beginning to end?

JOHNSON: No he arrived in late 1992 and departed just before Christmas 1993. I stayed on until July 1994.

Q: Were you then the US representative to APEC for the remainder of your tour of duty?

JOHNSON: Yes, the same as other colleagues were representatives of their economies. We used our functional titles and mine was Director of Public Affairs.

Q: When Ambassador Bodde departed, who was your APEC boss?

JOHNSON: Bill was replaced by a very senior Indonesian diplomat, Ambassador Rusli Noor. Well into his 70s, he was very courtly and articulate. He and I got along very well. When my time in Singapore was up he asked me to extend until he moved on in six months but that was not possible.

Q: Did you do much entertaining at home while you were at APEC?

JOHNSON: Without Carolyn it would not have been much fun. Moreover since I couldn't grill in Singapore, I had no way to hide the fact that I am a miserable cook. When I hosted a reporter it was a restaurant. Nearly all the entertaining was done in restaurants.

Q: What was your relationship to our embassy?

JOHNSON: I had a desk in the political-economic section, and in the rare instances I needed to send a classified cable to the Department, I typed the document myself and delivered it the communications and records room. Dennis Donahue, the Public Affairs Officer, and I became friends. When Dennis was out of town I supervised his staff and signed the USIA cables. However I never attended a country team meeting because I had to maintain my distance organizationally from the embassy. My boss was in the State Department in Washington, not the US Embassy Singapore. I should note here that Skip Boyce, who was chargï¿½ most of the time I was at APEC, and Larry Greenwood, the Political-Economic Counselor, were extraordinarily supportive our mission to APEC.

Q: What was life in Singapore like?

JOHNSON: Soon after I arrived a reporter asked me if I knew the difference between Singapore and yogurt. I pled ignorance.

"Yogurt has culture."

I walked over most of the island, at least the urban area. The variety of architecture was remarkable. The government preserved a lot of the old houses and ensured that many traditional areas, such as on one bank of the river front, warehouses and other commercial establishments were recycled into restaurants and pedestrian areas. I loved walking through the old neighborhoods. The island state has a symphony orchestra. It wasn't great but I attended a number of their performances. It also has a few good museums. One musical, Les Miserables- a road show- drew large and appreciative audiences. Cinemas showed first run films uncut. Singaporean friends took me to "Schindler's List". During the most tragic scenes there was laughter in the audience. I was furious at the show of insensitivity, until my host whispered to me that Chinese sometimes respond to shocking situations with laughter.

Video tapes were subject to the machinations of the government's morals squad. Nudity was blanked out, although you could read on the box what was happening. Obscenities were covered with silence, although you could read lips or consult the guide on the box. Fortunately Skip Boyce had a collection of feature films on tape which he shared with me.

The city state's greatest source of culture was its unending assortment of inexpensive restaurants. The cuisine reflected the three cultures of the nation: Chinese, Indonesian and Indian. Best of all were the open air restaurants over looking the Straits near the Changi Airport. I spent many happy evenings at the East Coast Seafood Center. Incidentally although lights on the Indonesian islands of Batam and Bitam twinkled in the distance, diners could not help notice that merchant ships anchored in waters patrolled by the Singaporean Navy. Piracy still is a major problem in the Straits of Malacca.

Q: Did you do much official travel while assigned to APEC?

JOHNSON: I was not on the road as much as the officers who coordinated the activities of the working groups, but I managed to get to China twice and to Indonesia several times. I represented the Secretariat at a conference to promote the growth of small and medium size enterprises. Shenzhen was just across the border from Hong Kong. I represented the Secretariat at this conference of small and medium-sized enterprises. The chief of the Chinese delegation to the conference happened to be a Chinese Senior Official to APEC. He asked to see the remarks I had prepared to give to the meeting the following day. I allowed him to read the remarks which I had cleared with Bill Bodde. A few hours later he asked me to come to his hotel room and announced objections to several things I planned to say. I responded that I would rephrase some points but not others. After I gave my presentation the following morning, he lashed out at me during a plenary session. Most of the delegations were clearly embarrassed by the Senior Official's attempt at censorship. I soon learned that in the PRC control of information is part of daily life and foreigners are not excused from control.

I should add that the Chinese were wonderful hosts. I was asked to stay after the conclusion of the conference to help write the final report. I waited in my hotel room most of the day for a call from the conference coordinator. Finally late in the afternoon he phoned me that the draft was not ready but that he would like to take me to dinner. That night he took me to a private room in a large restaurant where we had a sumptuous meal with the other conference staff. I suspect my presence legitimized the cost of the banquet for everyone. I don't know if a final report was ever written on the conference.

A few months later I represented the Secretariat at a conference in Beijing. The Chinese threw a lavish banquet in the official hall next to the entrance to the Forbidden City. The Deputy Trade Minister came by the table where I was sitting with delegates for several other economies. He greeted each of us warmly and selected morsels from a tray of exotic dishes and placed them on our plates along with a commentary on the importance of fine food in fostering international understanding.

However the following morning our hosts had a little fun at my expense. At the beginning of each meal one of the Chinese who were running the conference appointed a delegate as "guest of honor." I suddenly found myself the honoree at breakfast. With everyone looking at me the first delicacy was placed on my plate, a shimmering three by three inch square of coagulated pig blood. Still suffering the effects of libations consumed at the previous evening's banquet, I stared at the undulating mass for several minutes before whispering to my host, "I am really sorry, but I can't eat this." He smiled slyly and had the waiter bring me a bowl of rice soup. Score one for China.

One morning we visited a university outside Beijing. Our guide took me aside and showed me a small plaza between two buildings. He explained that during the Cultural Revolution students belonging to rival factions of the Red Guards fought pitched battles for control of the small piece of real estate. Pointing to places on the ground he said softly, "People died here and here and here. Can you understand that?"

I replied that I could not.

"Thank you for your honest answer," he responded, "Neither do I." Apparently he had witnessed the fighting.

Q; Did you get to Vietnam or Thailand?

JOHNSON: Shortly after I arrived in Singapore I attended a meeting on information technology in Bangkok. I had an opportunity to travel to Vietnam as a tourist but chose instead to go scuba diving with our naval attachï¿½ and a friend from the German Embassy to Sipadan an island paradise off the cost of Borneo. It was by far the best diving I have ever enjoyed.

Q: I gather that one of the functions of APEC was to encourage the sharing of information. Given the diverse array of cultures in the organization, was that difficult?

JOHNSON: I think there were four levels of information sharing. First, there were the presentations by heads of delegations at plenary sessions. These varied widely in relevance and in quality. Second, there was the give and take between Senior Officials in closed door meetings. I never attended one of these confabs but I gather the Senior Officials were fairly candid with one another. Third, there were the thousands of private conversations between delegates outside of meetings and these exchanges were very useful. Finally, the economies provided the Secretariat with data to be included in published reports and placed on the web site. The quality of the statistics varied greatly from economy to economy. The US, New Zealand, Australia and Canada are open societies that gather data and release it freely. Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Thailand are still developing their capacity to collect economic data, evaluate it and publish it. China has traditionally been reluctant to release data, in part because of its definition of state security and in part because Chinese at the province level do not tell everything they know to the central government. Other countries fall into or between these overly simplified categories.

Q: What was the high point of your tour of duty at APEC?

JOHNSON: Ironically it was in Seattle and not Singapore. The US year in the chair of APEC was coming to an end and the final meetings, including a leaders' summit, was hosted by Washington. (Note: leaders, not chiefs of state or heads of government. It was all part of the agreement that brought China, Chinese Taipei and Hong Kong into APEC.)Following the Senior Officials Meeting President Clinton hosted a meeting for the "leaders" on Blake Island. It was a perfect day and the meeting went beautifully. The city of Seattle went all out to accommodate the press corps of 2,000 covering the APEC meeting. Volunteers staffed a huge press center. Even the local topless bar got into the spirit with a sign: "Welcome APECPECKERS".

I went home to have Thanksgiving dinner with my family, and then flew back to Singapore. Bill Bodde, my American boss, was leaving at the end of the year. There was a round of farewells for Bill. I shot a panoramic view of the harbor from his office which we had framed and the staff gave him as goodbye present. Bill was known for having an eye for a trim Oriental leg. My fellow diplomats, at least the guys, gave him a well turned table leg with a plaque commemorating his appreciation for Asian beauty.

Meanwhile there was no response to numerous cables to Washington asking that I be extended until the following July. Ambassador Rusli Noor was adamant that I stay and I was more than willing. I was resigned to leaving although it would have left no American in APEC. Finally on December 20, I got a message that Assistant Secretary Winston Lord had ordered that I remain at the Secretariat until the following summer. Although I sorely missed my family, I had a job to do and I looked forward to working for Ambassador Rusli Noor.

Q: How did you find the Asian press?

JOHNSON: The Singaporean press, of course, is rather tame. Singapore, which is a one party state, has a definition of democracy which is certainly more limited than ours. If you want a nonexistent art form, it's the political cartoon in Singapore. Dissent is unwelcome in a society that thrives on the "common good" and consensus. However at a UN Day dinner I heard a former cabinet member rail against censorship in the name of the common good.

While I was in Singapore, a couple of Singaporean officials leaked an economic forecast and were jailed, although the data was positive.

I got along very well with the Asian press and had several very good contacts among the Singaporean press corps. I talked to the press frequently and arranged for Bill Bodde and Rusli Noor to give many interviews. They had an Asian business television network that was based in Singapore. Bill, a former newsman, was an outstanding spokesman for APEC. The shy Rusli Noor was less comfortable speaking into a microphone or doing an interview in a TV studio.

The Asian press showed much more sustained interest in APEC than American media which remained more focused on Europe.

Every Friday evening reporters and a few of us public affairs officers met at a bar. Until it had a fire, we convened at the Second Story, a pub in an old Chinese row house. Then we moved our gatherings to the Key Largo, a bar-restaurant in a remodeled tea house on the river front. The Key Largo dï¿½cor was based on the Humphrey Bogart film. One night the management was short of waiters so we were given our own bar with two taps. We were to run our own tab with a 20% discount for a lack of service. We had a grand time and left a large tip to cover possible over drafts.

I departed the Key Largo that night with an Australian reporter who was so drunk that I was afraid he would wander into the river and drown, so I attempted to propel him home. He was a neighbor. No cabs were available so we set off on foot. Passing under an underpass a figure stepped out of the darkness. "Oh shit, we are going to be mugged," he bellowed forlornly.

"But we are in Singapore and mugging is not allowed," I slurred hopefully.

"Are you gentlemen driving this evening?" came an officious voice out of the night.

"We're saved. It's a fucking constable," screamed the Australian relieved.

"No officer, we are walking," I said as soberly as possible. I pulled out my keys as did my companion. "See no car keys."

The policeman stared at us sternly. "Stay out of the street," he declared in parting.

During my time in Singapore the biggest story concerned Michael Fey, an eighteen year old American who was caned for stealing a stop sign and defacing cars. Vandalism of automobiles was a fairly serious offence in Singapore. A car is a major investment in Singapore. A normal sedan costs about $30,000 and the permit to drive it an equal amount. Stealing stop signs was also a grave infraction. Upwards of 200 journalists, mostly Americans, were assigned to the story. It was ridiculous. I was very glad I had nothing to do with that. Dennis Donahue, the PAO at the embassy, was the US spokesman.

Q: Do you think caning is cruel?

JOHNSON: It is not a lot of fun for the person who is caned but that is its purpose. Caning serves as a deterrent to crime and is only administered to men under 60. I thought it was absurd for President Clinton to involve himself in the case. Clinton should have said, "Take your whacks and stop whimpering, you little bastard."

Incidentally the Singaporeans have draconian laws regarding drug dealing and drug abuse on the island nation is far below that of other Asian nations such as the Philippines. A half ounce of hard drugs or three ounces of marijuana can lead to the gallows. While I was in Singapore a Dutchman was arrested for possession of more than a kilo of raw heroin. He was on his way from Bangkok back to the Netherlands when his plane was diverted to Singapore because of weather or mechanical problems. Drug dogs found the heroin in his suitcase in the baggage hold. He was arrested, tried, convicted and hanged. Given the misery and death that heroin use causes, it is hard to have much sympathy for that Dutchman.

Q: How did you find the TaiwaPeople's Republic relationship play out within your staff and within APEC?

Q: So you had to sort of denationalize.

JOHNSON: Absolutely, absolutely. It had to the economized and denationalized and "degovernmentalized."

Q: Were there other things you had to watch out for?

JOHNSON: The real mine field concerned the three Chinas, particularly Beijing's sensitivities regarding Taiwan. Shortly after he became Executive Director Bill Bodde innocently put out a list of national days. It did not take long for the PRC to object strenuously to the list because it included the national day of Taiwan. Bill, a very skillful diplomat, accepted responsibility for the gaffe and issued a list of days to avoid trying to do business in the member economies, without identifying the national days. On another occasion a colleague thoughtlessly put up a display of desk flags of the APEC economies. The flag of Republic of China stood in the place for Chinese Taipei. The exhibit was quickly removed.

Q: Why was Hong Kong a member of APEC?

JOHNSON: When APEC was founded in 1989 Hong Kong was still a UK crown colony.

Q: Who brokered the entry of the Peoples Republic of China and Taiwan into APEC?

JOHNSON: South Korea. Apparently it was a masterpiece of diplomacy. Incidentally the Taiwanese, Hong Kong and the PRC diplomats seconded to the Secretariat got along famously.

Q: How did the inclusion of three Chinas play out in the media?

JOHNSON: The Singaporean press and nearly all the international correspondents were aware of the inter-China sensitivities and phrased their questions accordingly. However when Winston Lord, the Assistant Secretary of East Asia and the Pacific, held a press conference at the Secretariat a Taiwanese journalist, who I suspect was carrying water for her government, asked a very provocative question that I thought attempted to get Lord to say something that would have been offensive to the PRC. Lord handled the situation beautifully and sidestepped the land mines the reporter had put in his path. I had words with the journalist afterwards and told her that I thought her loaded question was unethical. Perhaps I was being overly sensitive.

Q: Tell me about your relations with other members of the staff.

JOHNSON: Almost without exception we got along with one another very well. When Rusli Noor moved up to be Executive Director, he was replaced as Deputy Executive Director by a senior Japanese diplomat Sujuiro Imanishi who had studied at Dartmouth and been Consul General in Houston. We didn't socialize with one another after hours but I often joined him for a late morning coffee. We were the same age and, unlike most Japanese, he talked about World War II freely. I said to him one day, "You know when I consider the US conduct of the war I am really deeply troubled by one action. I refer to the American-British bombing of Dresden in February 1954. It was senseless slaughter of innocent, perhaps a war crime." He listened intently and I should have shut up but I continued, "One the other hand, I can think we Americans can make a case for the destruction of Hiroshima."

Suddenly the temperature in the room dropped the about 20ï¿½. He looked at me very icily and said, "I'm not listening."

I said, "I'm sorry but I am not sure I understand you.

Imanishi repeated his words slowly, "I'm not listening."

I responded, "I guess the conversation is over."

Later I learned Imanishi came from an old samurai family.

Q: Did you ever talk to Imanishi about the war again?

JOHNSON: I don't think so. But we got along fine.

Q: Wasn't there a Japanese on the professional staff?

JOHNSON: There was indeed. Shuji Miyazaki, who belonged to the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MITI) was in charge of the research and analysis section of the Secretariat. Shuji was junior to Sujuiro Imanishi, who was later Deputy Executive Director and eventually Executive Director. Although the more junior officer worked for a more powerful ministry than the senior officer, they respected one another. I much enjoyed Shuji's company at lunch and he was a real pleasure to work with.

Q: How about your colleagues on the professional staff?

JOHNSON: As I noted earlier, we were a merry bunch. I particularly liked the Korean, Park Jin-Ho, a very jovial ex-army officer. We called him "Dr. Noodle" because no matter where we went to eat, he nearly always ordered noodles. He heard Bill Bodde and me talking in a worried tone about some bad economic news from North Korea (which is not a member of APEC). Park told me later, "Don't worry about the North Koreans. We can handle them. What we don't want is another Germany."

"Germany? What are you talking about?" I asked completely perplexed.

"You know how much reunification has cost the West Germans? Billions and billions! Do you know what would happen if the North Korean government collapsed? We can't afford to have millions of poor North Korean refugees," he declared.

Q: How about the Canadian? What was he like?

JOHNSON: I have forgotten which ministry Peter Richards hailed from. Peter oversaw the efforts of a working group on human resources development. I don't think that working group produced much of substance while I was with the Secretariat. Peter was a congenial guy with an infectious sense of humor. He took great satisfaction in needling me about the things Canadians enjoy blaming us Yanks for. Sometimes at lunch he and Graeme Pirie of New Zealand would gang up on me. I responded that they represented the axis of marginal powers. It was all good fun.

Q: Did you have to be careful about kidding your Asian colleague?

JOHNSON: There were certain topics that were off limits for political reasons. Asians did not think Anglo-Saxon vulgar humor was funny and irony went right over their heads. I never heard an Asian colleague swear.

Q: You have not said much about the Australians, although they initiated this thing, the Australians. In a way, they've always been sort of the odd duck. An essentially occidental country, full of energy, but rather small in population, in the Orient, trying to be a leader. How did that work?

JOHNSON: Well, once the United States joined APEC as a founding member, Australia was very helpful. The US and Australian delegations worked closely with one another. For the most part, our interests coincided. The Australians certainly played a very prominent role in many of the working groups. I have forgotten which ones they were most interested in. As a major coal producer, they were certainly involved in fossil fuel discussion and of course as big meat and grain exporter the Australians wanted to liberalize trade in agricultural commodities.

Merry Wickes, an Australian diplomat, was assigned to the Secretariat. Merry coordinated the meetings of three working groups: Transportation, Tourism and Telecommunications. Merry had an exhausting schedule and was on the road most of the time. She was very ambitious and worked hard. Merry kept the High Commission in Singapore well informed on what we were doing.

Q: Didn't you and Ambassador Bodde regularly brief your colleagues at our embassy on what was happening in the Secretariat?

JOHNSON: I am not sure about Bill, but I did not go out of my way to keep Larry Greenwood and Skip Boyce up to date on our work. We dealt directly with Washington and, besides, they had a full plate dealing with bilateral issues.

Q: How about New Zealand?

JOHNSON: The Kiwis played an important role in APEC. They even managed to stay out of the shadow of Australia, a nation to which they often play second fiddle internationally. We had an embarrassing incident at a Senior Officials Meeting in Jakarta. The Indonesians of course hosted the meeting at a beautiful hotel. In the ballroom, where the plenary sessions were held, the Indonesians had hung a huge banner with the APEC logo, a map that included all the member economies. I had just had the logo redone but apparently APEC Jakarta slipped up because shortly after we entered the room I gently nudged my boss, Executive Director Rusli Noor, and said, "Sir, don't look now but there is something missing on the banner."

"What's that?" he responded.

"New Zealand," I said.

"Oh God," the old diplomat declared. What should we do about it?"

I said, "If I were you, I would quietly apologize to the New Zealanders for the mistake and nobody will notice. Afterwards you can burn that banner." And so the Indonesians had the right person speak to the right person on the New Zealand delegation. The Kiwis took the gaffe in good humor. I think they were used to it.

Q: What was your New Zealand colleague like at the Secretariat like?

JOHNSON: He could be a pain in the ass. He had been Consul General in San Francisco and was always complaining about things going wrong in the United States. Finally in exasperation I told him, "Graeme, if you stop bitching about how evil the US is, I will try to forget for a moment how irrelevant New Zealand is to the world."

I don't think I ever heard him criticize the US again. Actually we got along with one another very well. Graeme had one of the hardest jobs at the Secretariat. He coordinated the input of the "Eminent Persons Group"- a council of advisers. He had to finesse input by some large egos. The poor man developed a condition that made him painfully sensitive to heat, which was not a good thing to have in Singapore.

Speaking of heat, our Australian colleague told me she was allergic to bright sunshine, not a good condition to have in a place one degree above the equator. When she did get her ambassadorship, I understand it was in the Middle East.

Incidentally, the Australian Public Affairs Officer at the Australian High Commission and I were good friends. He was married to an Indonesian, and he converted to Islam. He was probably the only Aussie I ever knew who did not drink.

Q: Were any Singaporean diplomats assigned to the Secretariat?

JOHNSON: Not while I was there. However we had about a dozen support staff. Agatha Choong, the Executive Director's secretary and office manager was a professional of stellar quality. The other secretaries, clerks and drivers were all first-rate. I should also note that we had a very able librarian, an Australian, who worked for me.

Q: What was it like dealing with the Chinese?

JOHNSON: I assume by Chinese you refer to all three economies. The Foreign Service Officers they sent were exceptionally able. They were a real pleasure to work with, lunch with and, on occasion, have a beer with. Yang Yafei, the PRC rep, coordinated the work of the Marine Conservation, Fisheries and Regional Energy Cooperation working groups. Max Li was the chief administrative officer at the Secretariat and Terry Lee was organized our all important data base. What was really interesting was how smoothly the three men worked together.

Q: How did you the find the Mexicans and Chileans when they came in? Because talk about strangers in a strange land. Most of the other members had been dealing together for centuries but all of the sudden there's Mexico and Chile (and then later Peru). Some of them had Japanese immigrants.

JOHNSON: Well, Mexico joined APEC after I left the Secretariat. Historically Mexico's main link to Asia was the colonial galleon trade between Acapulco and Manila. Chile was interested in Asia primarily as a market for its copper. Still later Peru joined APEC so that made three Spanish speaking members. Even after they entered APEC their commerce remained predominantly in the western hemisphere.

Q: How about the Philippines? They were going through a lot of unrest, they were having real problems.

JOHNSON: The Philippines was very interested particularly in telecommunications and in anything that could contribute to the modernization of its economy. Manila sent very qualified representatives to APEC meetings. The Philippines didn't have a diplomat seconded to the Secretariat when I was there, but one came later.

Q: I was in Korea and we used to get those calls in the middle of the night. I don't sleep with pajamas, and sometimes getting up to answer the phone it would be cold in the winter and I was trying to make decisions while I am shivering away. Were there any particular economic or commercial issues during the time you were there that sort of engaged everybody?

JOHNSON: Well, I think the biggest issue was how fast APEC was going to grow, and we were getting ready for the 1994 Bogor Leaders meeting. According to the Bogor Declaration, the leaders announced their goal of achieving "free and open trade and investment in the Asia-Pacific by 2020. ...the pace of the implementation will take into account differing levels of economic development among APEC economies, with the industrialized economies achieving the goal the goal of free and open trade and investment no later than 2010 and developing countries no later than 2020." We are only four years away from the first deadline and fourteen years from the latter. We will see whether the objectives contained in the Bogor Declaration were overly ambitious.

During my tenure we were preoccupied with getting the Secretariat up and running. One thing that we did do - and this is to Bill Bodde's eternal credit - is we established an internal communication network, sort of an email type. Bill oversaw the very nonpartisan, fair letting of that contract. I've forgotten who went to, but it took up a lot of time and has provided a very important tool for the infrastructure.

Q: Did you find that APEC overlapped or was in collision with or any problems with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)?

JOHNSON: No, ASEAN is primarily a political organization, and APEC has ASEAN as its core. All members of ASEAN were in APEC. I think ASEAN today includes Burma and Burma is not part of APEC. ASEAN has its headquarters in Jakarta, which I visited and met with several officials. With the advent of the war on terrorism APEC has become more politically oriented but that occurred long after I left. One organization that we dealt with a lot, and after I retired in 1994, I ended up going to work for, was the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC). PECC was, and I assume still is, APEC's think tank.

Q: Did you receive many visitors from embassies of non APEC members?

JOHNSON: Yes. The Mongolians visited the Secretariat on several occasions. Unfortunately Mongolia, although Asian, has no coastline on Pacific. One day Rusli Noor and I were in his office with some Mongolians and Rusli pointed to a map and noted that his home consisted of an archipelago of more than 9,000 inhabited islands. I remarked facetiously, "Well, why don't we trade one of the Indonesian islands for a few thousand square kilometers of the pasture land in Mongolia and that would qualify the Mongolia to join APEC."

I could see Rusli wince. Mongolian seized upon my wise crack as a great solution. I spent the next fifteen minutes trying to explain to them that it was not a very funny joke. The Mongolians left a bit crestfallen.

The South Africans and the Israelis were also quite interested in APEC. Both realized they were not eligible for membership but interested in APEC's efforts to liberalize trade and investment. The South Africans lamented that the African nations could not cooperate as the economies of the Pacific Rim.

Q: What was Viet Nam's relationship to APEC?

JOHNSON: It wasn't a part of APEC. I guess there was a Vietnamese embassy in Singapore, but I don't remember ever meeting a Vietnamese official in Singapore.

Q: What was the policy on bringing in new members?

JOHNSON: I believe after Mexico and Peru joined, there was a moratorium on bringing in new members. Part of the problem was there was only so much room of the table. And as we got more and more delegations, instead of having three people abreast, you had two people abreast or just one person. The Secretariat delegation sometimes sat fifteen deep, which reminds me of something that happened to me during a conference in Jakarta. On about the third day of a conference, I was really tired and the Japanese delegation was presenting a detailed proposal which I was sure I could get the text of. I was sitting in the third row of the Secretariat delegation and it would have been awkward for me to excuse myself so after adjusting my glasses low on my nose so it was hard to see my eyes, I dozen off. Suddenly I was awakened by a tap on my shoulder, It was an aide to the Deputy Foreign Minister of Indonesia who was chairing the meeting. I thought I'm in trouble. The aide said, "The minister wants to see you."

I crouched down and made my way to the chairman.

He said, "I have to brief the Indonesian press at the end of this session and I want you to provide me with notes."

I responded, "Yes, Mr. Minister, but we have another hour and a half to go."

He smiled and observed, "You know what's going to happen."

I said. "All right. Give me a half hour."

I wandered sleepily to the office set aside for the Secretariat and hammered out a dozen talking points regarding what I assumed would happen in the next 90 minutes along with some standard APEC catechism. Since the press was not allowed in the plenary sessions it was hard for me to go wrong. Of course I didn't go to the press briefing which was in Indonesian. The Deputy Minister thanked me later for my work.

Q: In the summer of 1994, what happened then?

JOHNSON: I returned to Washington via Manila where I toured Corregidor and a volcanic area full of bubbling hot springs. A former colleague from my days as an inspector had retired to Manila. He and his Philippine wife provided me with some useful insights into what was happening in that troubled nation. I retired for a second time on July 1, 1994. Doug Ryan, who has worked on APEC in the Department, had no background in public affairs. He was a strong executive and a fast learned. I knew he would do just fine and he did.

Q: Did you regret leaving APEC?

JOHNSON: Yes in the professional sense but I had been away from my family for nearly a year and a half and it was time to go home.

Q: Were you offered continued employment by USIA or State?

JOHNSON: Yes, but I wanted to take some time off and try something different.

Then I went to work for some political campaigns and applied for several jobs but got none. It is remarkable that while we Foreign Service Officers are rather successful in promoting the United States to skeptical audiences, we are far less adept at selling ourselves to potential employers. Meanwhile our stock portfolio was doing extremely well and there was no need for me to go back to work. Had I been offered a good position I would not have accepted it if it entailed moving because Carolyn was enjoying her career as a teacher and our daughter Suzanne was very happy in her middle school. Then there was the problem of vacation. I knew no employer would offer me five weeks of leave, which I was accustomed to.

Q: Other than the political campaigns, did you do volunteer work?

JOHNSON: I was President of my Lions Club. As I have already noted, we hosted the daughter of a Lion from my Frankfurt Lions Club for four months. We are still in touch with her. I volunteered at the Youth for Understanding (YFU) and we hosted a German and a Finnish student for an academic year. Well, the truth be known, things did not work out very well with the German, who abandoned us a little more than half way through the scholastic year. We remain in touch with the Finn. I worked for YFU on contract and nearly ended up taking full time position there. A former colleague from USIA Germany got the job and had a heart attack after about a year. I ducked a bullet on that one.

Wanting to get back into international affairs, I offered my services to the US office of PECC, the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council. I knew the Executive Director, Mark Borthwick, an Asia expert and a published author. For the next two and half years I served as the Public Affairs Director for the US Committee to PECC. It was a part-time job and the pay was low. However I enjoyed putting together events, including the launch of an annual report, The Pacific Economic Outlook which always drew a lot of press attention. In 1997 USPECC organized an information technology summit in San Francisco that featured many of the biggest names in the industry, including Intel Chairman and CEO Andy Grove, Cisco Systems CEO John Chambers, Oracle CEO Larry Ellison, News Corp CEO Rupert Murdoch and Netscape CEO Jim Barksdale. It was a huge success.

In the spring of 1999 I took Carolyn with me to Asia to promote our annual IT summit with PECC offices and also do a little tourism. We arrived in Hong Kong where I met with the local committee the following morning. Then we were off to New Zealand where we toured the south island before I met with Kiwi PECC whose office was in Auckland. Singapore was our next stop where I tried to drum up support for the summit with the Singaporean committee and with the Executive Director at the PECC Secretariat. Finally we headed for Beijing via Hong Kong, where we spent several days enjoying the attractions of the former crown colony. We marveled at how little evidence there was of change since Hong Kong was again part of China. We were in Asia during the NATO bombing campaign against the Belgrade regime which had been supporting Serb atrocities against Croatia and Bosnia. We read about the war with interest, delighted that NATO had finally taken action. Then we heard the bad news: on May 7th US Air Forces fighter bombers had killed two Chinese officials when they attacked what they thought was a Yugoslav office in Belgrade. Three days later we flew to Beijing. En route we read the State Department travel advisory recommending Americans put off non-essential travel to China.

Once in Beijing we hired a guide to provide us with a better sense of possible danger. The Chinese populace was understandably incensed by the attack. The famous silk street near the US Embassy was closed because it was frequented by American tourists. A series of "spontaneous" demonstrations took place at the embassy and at consulates general causing property damage but, as I recall, no injuries. On our second day we visited the Forbidden City. As we were approaching the City a bus full of elementary school pupils stopped at a red light next to our taxi. The children noted we were westerners and hastily conferred with one another. In unison they shook their fists at us and put on their fiercest frowns. I replied by smiling and waving to them. After a very quick caucus, the boys and girls smiled warmly and waved back. American devils weren't so bad after all. We spent much of the next morning on the Great Wall where we were welcomed. It was colder than we expected, so we purchased "I Climbed the Great Wall" sweat shirts. I was sure that only tourists would buy the sweat shirts but once we were on the wall, we almost blended in with the Chinese who were all wearing "I Climbed the Great Wall" sweat shirts

The next afternoon I met with Chen Songlu, China's Secretary General of the PECC National Committee. I had phoned the Chinese official soon after we arrived in Beijing and asked if he would still receive me. I told him I would understand it if he canceled the meeting because of the bombing in Belgrade. He replied that he looked forward to meeting with me as planned. Upon arriving at his office I expressed my deepest and most sincere regret regarding the death of the two Chinese officials. My explanation was simple and direct: in spite of Washington's reputation for efficient intelligence gathering, the Pentagon had made a major blunder. My condolences probably lasted a half hour.

Q: Do you think Mr. Chen believed you?

JOHNSON: I don't know but, more important, he seemed to realize that my statement of regret was genuine. After more tea we got down to the reason I had come to Beijing and I presented him with detailed information about the upcoming IT summit. Chen accepted the brochures with assurances that China would be well represented at the meeting. Unable to find a taxi I returned to our hotel in a pedicab, a harrowing experience in Beijing traffic.

That evening as Carolyn and I were turning in the phone rang. A young woman asked with a thick Chinese accident, "Do you want a massage, mister?"

"No thank you," I replied firmly.

Twenty minutes later: "Mister, do you want a massage?"

"No, I don't want a massage," I responded irritated.

It seemed that I had no sooner hung up the phone when there was a vigorous pounding on our room door.

I opened the door a crack, when a very attractive manipulator of masculine muscles tried to enter our room. I shoved her back into the hall and told her to leave me along. I noted that my wife was in the room which did not seem to concern her in the least.

Our last stop was Shanghai where I met with an old buddy who was the public affairs officer at the Consulate General. He showed us the damage students had caused to the building. That afternoon we found the house in the old French quarter where a college buddy was born. His father was Consul General at the time. Sadly the houses in the neighborhood were being demolished to make room for high rise office buildings and luxury apartments. The rapid increase in wealth in Shanghai was evident nearly everywhere. Wandering along the famous promenade, the Bund, Chinese girls invited me to be photographed with them and their friends. No animosity regarding the Belgrade bombing in Shanghai.

Meanwhile in Washington USPECC financial woes were getting steadily worse. Mark Borthwick threatened to pull the committee out of international committee if the State Department carried through on its plan to abolish funding to our office. My services could no longer be compensated, so I packed up my belongings and gave Mark my office key.

I had already applied for a WAE (When Actually Employed) appointment position at the State Department. It took me over a year to get my top secret security clearance reinstated. By the time I was on board I learned that the position in the Office of Economic Policy was no longer open. The enterprising personnel officer however asked me to fill in as the Global Affairs Officer iRegional Security Policy (RSP) which was still part of East Asia and Pacific Affairs Bureau (EAP).

Global Affairs Officer position which had a great variety of responsibilities which I liked and one for which I was ill suited, budget officer. I told Rick Villefranca, the Office Director, that I was game for anything but that I could not balance a check book let alone manage a large budget. Rick suggested I rely on the able assistance of a civil servant.

Q: Please clarify for our readers what a WAE appointment is.

JOHNSON: There are at least a hundred of us former Foreign Service Officers who have been hired as WAEs. It is not an option open to civil servants, because the retirement systems are different. We are paid at an hourly rate from GS-11 to the Senior Executive Service. Pay varies from bureau to bureau and from position to position. WAEs receive the Washington DC cost of living supplement, but do not earn sick leave or annual leave, nor are they eligible for promotion. WAEs can earn up to what they would be making had they not retired in their old grade or they can work up to 1,040 hours (half time employment). In my case, I try to put in 1,040 hours. WAEs perform duties for which no officers or civil servants are available. Most WAEs work in Washington; however there are opportunities for temporary duty abroad, particularly for administrative and consular officers. My old buddy Robin Berrington was hired as a WAE to fill in as Cultural Affairs Officer in Tokyo, a position he once held.

Q: Why do officers go back to work as WAEs?

JOHNSON: Some need the money, particularly those who are divorced and are required to share their annuities with former spouses. Others do it for the intellectual stimulus. A few work simply because they have never developed outside interests. I know several ex-FSOs whose entire life was the Foreign Service.

Q: What is your motive?

JOHNSON: I continue to work because I find my duties challenging and enjoyable. I also like the comradeship, particularly of fellow WAEs. The extra pay is also welcome.

Q: Does Regional Security Policy deal primarily with international security assistance?

JOHNSON: An Army bird colonel is assigned to the office for almost everything military but most of the work concerns civilian issues. RSP is really an extension of the office of the Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs.

Q: By this time your beloved USIA had been folded back into the State Department. How did that reintegration work out?

JOHNSON: USIA was abolished as separate agency with its own budget in 1999 as part of a reorganization of foreign affairs agencies. The changes were championed by the archconservative senior senator from North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms. Funding for cultural and information programs was drastically cut. In the last years of USIA more than 2,000 positions were cut. Many our information centers and libraries were abolished. Morale plummeted. In Frankfurt the Branch Public Affairs Officer was told to leave the lovely home that I and the other the BPAOs had used so effectively for programming and representational events and move into an apartment in the American housing area. A new career cone, Public Diplomacy, was established within the State Department. The effect of the government's shortsightedness became painfully evident after 9/11 and the State Department found that it no longer had an effective public affairs organization. It was all so stupid and so predictable. Meanwhile many of the best public affairs professionals deserted public diplomacy posts for assignments to positions elsewhere in State which would give them greater responsibility and a better shot at getting promoted.

Q: Back to RSP. What were your duties?

JOHNSON: I probably spent more time on anti-corruption than any other subject. I took some notes that an intern and a colleague had written and wrote a comprehensive report on what EAP was doing to combat international corruption and listed additional initiatives that might be undertaken. Each of the geographic bureaus wrote anti-corruption strategies but, as far as I know, no overall plan for State was ever written. Nevertheless I think the US can be proud of the leadership in combating international corruption, particularly corporate payoffs which increase the cost of doing business internationally and often result in major projects so shoddy that it may endanger the lives of innocent people.

I coordinated the input of the EAP desk officers for the annual human rights and freedom of religion reports. I also represented EAP on a committee which solicited the participation of governments and NGOs (Non-governmental organizations) in the rebuilding of Iraq.

Q: In retrospect how important do you think human rights was in our winning the cold war?

JOHNSON: I think it played a central role in defeating Communism. The suppression of freedom of speech and of free press hobbled the efforts of East Block nations to make their economies more competitive and in the last analysis more than anything else it was economic decay which led to the collapse of the Soviet empire. Unfortunately the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by a handful of American soldiers has destroyed our credibility as a champion of human right. It will take a long for the United States to regain the prestige it has lost.

Q: What else did you do at RSP?

JOHNSON: I backed up a colleague who worked exclusively on trafficking in persons. English was not her native language so I edited her work. I coordinated EAP's input in Department's anti-narcotics strategy. One of the most difficult things I did was to negotiate on behalf of EAP a measure that allows State to ban anyone who has been egregiously involved in corruption from entering the US. The measure allows the Secretary of State to revoke visas and ban family members of kleptocrats. To my knowledge, the measure has only been invoked just once, for a Filipino politician.

I represented the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Bureau at senior staff meetings of the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental Affairs (OES) and tracked for my bureau everything to do with illegal logging and the preservation of endangered species.

I performed miscellaneous tasks for RSP, including attending conferences at think tanks and programs organized by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, which was generally very stimulating. Sometimes I represented EAP at inter-agency meetings, including one held in my favorite building in Washington, the Old Executive Office Building. The agenda concerned a sensitive diplomatic immunity issue. Elliot Abrams, of Iran-Contra fame, chaired the gathering as the representative of the National Security Council. Abrams, who has a keen sense of history, remarked that the conference room in which we were sitting had been the office of Secretary of State when the Department had shared the Old Executive Office Building with the Navy and War departments. Secretary Cordell Hull received Japanese Ambassador Nomura in his office on December 7, 1941 and received what was to have been Japan's final diplomatic communication to Washington before the outbreak of hostilities. Normura had not been privy to plans to attack Pearl Harbor, an attack that had already taken happened. Hull thundered at the frail diplomat, "In all my fifty years of public service I have never seen a document that was more crowded with infamous falsehoods and distortions- infamous falsehoods and distortions on a scale so huge that I never imagined until today that any government on this planet was capable of uttering them." (Excuse this side trip into history.)

Q: Did you have a lot of paperwork in your new job?

JOHNSON: The State Department thrives on paper, particularly in Washington. That was one thing that I had to get used to after having spent most of my career in USIA. And as much as everyone loved Colin Powell, he was a stickler for uniformity. Everything had to be in the correct font with the correct spacing and the same indentation. Fortunately there was a wonderful civil servant in the outer office of Jim Kelly, the EAP Assistant Secretary, who could scan a memo or letter and tell you in 30 seconds whether you were good to go, and if not, what was wrong. When she was ill or on leave that office went to hell.

Q: Did you partake in the State Department's culture of staying late at the office?

JOHNSON: No. I was not competing for a promotion. Moreover I had to catch a bus by six p.m. on Constitution if I was to make my connection at the Pentagon for the express bus home.

Q: How about conferences? Were you involved in arrangements?

JOHNSON: I coordinated the annual chiefs of mission (ambassadors) conference for the bureau, which including lining up the Secretary and/or the Deputy Secretary, as well as Under Secretaries and select Assistant Secretaries. Naturally every letter had to be perfectly done and followed up on. I also helped coordinate the arrival and departures of delegations to the annual General Assembly of the United Nations. During the weeks prior to the start of the General Assembly I worked Saturday mornings. I had to be careful not to work too many hours otherwise my annuity would be cut according, e.g. I would be working for free, and my days of working pro bono were over.

Q: Other than more paperwork, how would you compare working for State vs. USIA?

JOHNSON: It was the same caliber of officers, but State is much less personal and the FSOs demonstrate less individualism. There was a lot more socializing over lunch at USIA. The Agency was a fun place to work. We took our work seriously but not ourselves. No one stayed after hours unless it was necessary. State has a culture of long hours and I am not sure the extra hours are always necessary.

I slipped on ice walking to work one day and shattered my ankle. Neither the Office Director nor his Deputy bothered to call or write me during the five weeks I was at home. Only one colleague, a former Army officer, visited me. In USIA the whole office would have swung into action. USIA was much more intimate, perhaps because it was smaller. I remember one day just before we left for Singapore Bill Bodde and I were on an elevator with several mid-level bureaucrats. Once we were outside, Bill turned to me and said, "Damn it, but did you notice how serious they were?!" I replied that I had had the same feeling.

Q: How long did you remain as Global Affairs Officer?

JOHNSON: About nine months.

Q: Then what happened?

JOHNSON: I guess I didn't do too bad a job so the Office Director asked me to stay on. I moved into a smaller office and fixed it up. I bestowed upon myself a new title: MAO (Miscellaneous Affairs Officer) and had a brass plaque made for my door. Actually my duties did not change that much other than I was no longer involved in budgetary matters. I had made myself indispensable, or so I thought.

Q: You enjoyed it?

JOHNSON: I had a great time. I wasn't competing with anyone for a promotion and pretty much did and said what I wanted. Incidentally, WAEs afford the State Department a welcome dose of candor. We are expected to be outspoken. Of course our advice is frequently ignored.

Then I took a trip to Europe to see old friends in Germany, including Susan Elbow, who had been my last Junior Officer Trainee in Frankfurt. She was Consul General in Hamburg. The day I returned the Deputy Office Director in RSP told me that the office was adding a counter-terrorism expert and that I would have to find another job. I demanded two weeks notice which she gave me with the understanding that I continue to perform my normal duties. I agreed and within a few days the Office of Economic Policy in EAP hired me. So after two years in RSP I moved on.

Q: What did you do in Economic Policy?

JOHNSON: Economic Policy was a euphemism for the office that backs up our participation in APEC, so I was an asset in that I had more institutional memory than anyone else. During a Senior Officials Meeting I was on the phone with my boss several times a day and reported on progress at the meeting at the Assistant Secretary's weekly staff meeting. I drafted some reports but my duties were ill defined and I was bored. It would have been fun to have participated in the APEC meetings but backstopping our delegation from Washington was dull. The Office Director was distant and I began to look around for another job.

I did something I swore I would never do, I applied to work in the Freedom of Information response office and as a Reviewer to declassify paper files.

Q: Is the application process complicated?

JOHNSON: Yes, one needs the endorsement of at least three geographic bureaus, a Special Compartmentalized Information (SCI) clearance and approval of a lengthy financial disclosure statement. I already had my SCI clearance, which I received in order to work on highly sensitive matters related to international narcotics trafficking. I filed justification memos to the Executive Directors of the East Asian and Pacific Bureau, African Bureau, European Bureau and West Hemisphere Affairs Bureau and quickly received their approvals. The financial disclosure form was complicated. I included a statement by my financial advisor that Carolyn's and my portfolio consisted solely of mutual funds and that we were not involved in the selection of stocks in those funds. I interviewed with the Freedom of Information office (FOIA) and with paper review office. I knew Brian Dowling, the director of the latter office, from my years in USIA. Brian had been Director of the Office of Security. A panel of ambassadors approved my appointment. I decided I would rather review paper than work on FOIA.

Meanwhile upon returning from vacation in June 2004 I found a stranger sitting at my desk in EP. I asked, "Who are you?"He looked up from his paperwork and replied defensively, "I think you should speak to the boss."

I asked the Office Director what was happening, not that I cared. She explained that the young officer now occupying my office had become available unexpectedly and that she had had him assigned to EP. Her rationale was understandable. "At best you are here only half time. I have the services of this guy full time. Do you blame me for making the switch?" I didn't tell her I had been planning to leave anyway.

I spent my last weeks in EAP in the Office of the Executive Director dealing with security violations and other miscellaneous matters. Then Carolyn and I headed to our summer place outside Frankfort Michigan where we spent seven lovely weeks working on our cottage and hosting friends from Berlin.

Q: What did you do when you returned in September?

JOHNSON: I started a very long training process, most of it autodidactic. I have been at it two years and I am still learning. No two boxes of documents are the same and when you think you know everything, you encounter something completely new. Often you just wing it.

Q: Where do you turn for guidance?

JOHNSON: Every reviewer has a thick loose leaf note book on his or her desk which contains the essential directives. There are several sets of detailed directives which Reviewers continually consult. But perhaps most important, Reviewers turn to the "box cops", senior reviewers, who are supposed to have all the answers. More frequently we ask one another for advice, which is always cheerfully provided, often along with a war story or two to illustrate the point. Even in these times of reduced budgets, there are about ten reviewers working at any one time and each has upwards of 25 years experience in the Foreign Service and several years doing reviews. That is a lot of expertise.

Q: Did you receive any formal training to be a reviewer?

JOHNSON: Bob Rich, one of the box cops, took me through the basics and I had three days at the Department of Energy on recognizing material on nuclear arms and their deployment.

Q: So you had to get a Q clearance to work on nuclear issues?

JOHNSON: Correct.

Q: Are all Reviewers paper reviewers?

JOHNSON: No there is also electronic review which is done by looking at documents on monitors. I don't like sitting at a tube. While I was at RSP I sometimes drafted reports for six or seven hours a day, after which my head and my back both ached.

Q: How old are the documents you review?

JOHNSON: At least 25 years old. I have run across cables and letters from the 1940s.

Q: As a Reviewer what do you look for?

JOHNSON: The number one priority is to identify and refer to the Department of Energy (DOE) material related to nuclear weapons. We also look for cables naming CIA officials or identifying intelligence gathering operations. Confidential human intelligence sources have to be protected and we withdraw documents that would "...seriously and demonstrably impair relations between the United States and a foreign government or demonstrably undermine ongoing activities..." Note the admonitions "seriously and demonstrably" so the barrier is pretty high in favor of release.

Some documents are exempted from international agreements, such as some NATO reports. We have guidance for handling this material. In addition to the protection of intelligence personnel and operations, we protect material that if made public would "seriously and demonstrably" jeopardize our relations with foreign governments. Federal law stipulates we protect visa files. There are six other categories which we encounter so rarely that I won't mention them here.

We also hold records covering arms control and export control records for 30 years. Many Department of State internal records, such as medical records, personnel files, embassy blue prints and security investigations are not releasable.

Q: Can you censor a document and then release it?

JOHNSON: No. Reviewers do not have a black magic marker. Woe be to the reviewer who writes on a cable.

Q: Are documents ever destroyed?

JOHNSON: Civil servants at the National Archives destroy documents deemed not to be of "permanent historical value", such as purchase orders, phone lists and travel authorizations.

Q: What percentage of the State documents you review do you withhold?

JOHNSON: Less than 1%. We release the rest.

Q: Do you have authority to release documents from other agencies other than State?

JOHNSON: Yes, we have authority to declassify material from the now defunct USIA and Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Peace Corps, Commerce, NSC and the Navy.

Q: How about the other branches of the armed services?

JOHNSON: They do their own declassification. Incidentally one Navy cable I released was from an irate lieutenant commander to an ensign demanding that the latter return a set of golf clubs the junior officer had borrowed in Manila. The cable was classified confidential.

Q: Does anyone check your work?

JOHNSON: Actually it is a three step process. The Reviewer goes through the box placing collars on documents which need to go to other agencies, exempting documents that require protection, and removing certain very sensitive documents. Then a fellow Reviewer checks the Reviewer's work either by looking at every page in the box or about 50% of the reviewed documents. Finally a Senior Reviewer, a "box cop," checks the work of Reviewer and the quality control work.

Q: Do reviewers sometimes disagree on what should and should not be released?

JOHNSON: Yes. Some reviewers are more restrictive than others. Perhaps because I am a historian at heart, I tend to release a document unless there is a very good case for withholding it or referring it to another agency. Box Cops arbitrate disagreements, which, by the way, are almost always collegial. I am privileged to work with a terrific group of people.

Q: How many pages are there in a box?

JOHNSON: Sometimes as few as a couple hundred and as many as 5,000 but on an average about 3,000.

Q: How long does it take to review a box?

JOHNSON: I have done boxes containing only material on Law the Sea or UN General Assembly guidance in as little as an hour. I have spent a week on other boxes which are full of cables on very sensitive political matters and military subjects. We try to look at every page. Once I encountered a folder that contained about 50 pages of cables dealing with staffing a school for American dependents and then ten pages of memos concerning the stationing of nuclear weapons in that country.

Q: But you don't read every cable and memorandum of conversation?

JOHNSON: No. We would never finish if we did. I look at the origin of the document, title and its classification. Fortunately I have a well developed brain stem and am a fast reader so I try to move along as quickly as possible. I make fewer mistakes if I read rapidly which requires me to concentrate on what I am doing. If a page shows certain characteristics, then I slow way down. Being a Reviewer is like being a personnel officer, you spend 90% of your time on 5% of the cases.

Q: How do the professional interests of the Reviewers play out in the process?

JOHNSON: Each Reviewer has his or her own interests. For example, if I see a good reporting cable on Paraguay or on international corruption I may pause to read it.

Q: Do you specialize depending on what you have done and where you have served?

JOHNSON: No, although we tend to look for boxes containing material from favorite posts. Sometimes after spending several days doing nothing but arms control or political reporting on Germany I take a box with files from a post in a country I know absolutely nothing about. The best description of my work as a Reviewer is attending grad school and practicing law without a license.

Q: I understand the part about going to grad school, but "practicing law without a license?"

JOHNSON: I don't have any legal training but I am continually making decisions to release or not release documents that may have great importance to a researcher or a journalist. One reason I enjoy my work is because I am constantly using my professional judgment and no one is second guessing my every decision.

Q: What are some of the more interesting subjects you have dealt with as a Reviewer?

JOHNSON: I reviewed several boxes containing detailed files on Lee Harvey Oswald. I encountered scattered documents related to an American who was on the losing side of the civil war in Angola, captured, tried and executed by firing squad. The American consular officer who retrieved the body noted that on the death certificate the attending physician had written under the cause of death "acute anemia." I have seen boxes related to the seizure of the USS Pueblo. Recently I reviewed thousands of pages of documents concerning the 1978 Jamestown massacre- one grizzly folder after another, complete with photos. Some of the victims were infants.

Q: What happens if you screw up?

JOHNSON: Depends how badly but pretty soon you get fired, and that is the way it should be. It doesn't happen often.

Q: Are you only looking for classified material?

JOHNSON: No. We collar many documents concerning personal privacy, such cables containing Social Security and passport numbers, references to arrests and other subjects that might legitimately embarrass someone. I dealt a lot with privacy matters of American citizens while I was in Mexico City. For example if Joe Smith is arrested for drug trafficking, that's protected. If Joe Smith is then convicted and sentenced to prison for the offense, then it can be made public.

Because aliens receive pretty much the same protection as US citizens, we protect visa records and green card numbers.

Q: Do you encounter documents from other governments?

JOHNSON: Regularly. Most are releasable after 30 years, although very sensitive material may be withheld longer. Washington has agreements with a number of governments, including the UK and other members Commonwealth. Obviously Reviewers have to use their judgment in deciding what foreign material requires protection.

Q: Where do the boxes go when your office is finished with them?

JOHNSON: To the National Archives in Suitland, Maryland, where declassified material is separated from referrals and withdrawals. The declassified material is made available to the public. Referrals go to the relevant agencies, including the CIA, DIA, DOE and the Pentagon. Withdrawals, which are State Department documents, are held for amount of time stipulated by the Reviewer and then reexamined before they can be released.

Q: What's your impression of the process?

JOHNSON: It works well. We balance the public's right to know with legitimate needs to protect national security and personal privacy.

Q: How long do you think you are going to be doing paper reviews?

JOHNSON: The pipe line is full so are thousands of boxes that will need our attention. Unless I throw my back out lifting a box or feel I am burning out, I expect to be a Reviewer for the foreseeable future. And by the way, someday the Department is going to have to hire a whole bunch of reviewers to look at the millions of emails. Currently for every cable sent between posts and between posts and Washington there are about 80 emails. Add to them the many thousands of emails exchanged within the Department and the total figure is staggering.

Q: Will reviewers delete some emails?

JOHNSON: Definitely.

Q: As we conclude this interview, I would like to know what you think makes a really good Foreign Service Officer.

JOHNSON: I think you have to start with brains, then I would add to the equation an open, critical mind, a thick skin, perseverance and integrity.

Q: How would you summarize your own strengths and weaknesses as an FSO?

JOHNSON: Let's start with the weaknesses. Impatient by nature, I have paid too little attention to details. I was never a very good paper pusher. On the plus side I get along well with people, am a good public speaker and am a concise, analytical writer. I have lots of energy, am creative, persistent and don't take myself very seriously.

Q: If you had not been a Foreign Service Officer, what career would you have pursued?

JOHNSON: I would have enjoyed being a history professor at a small college.

Q: But did you ever regret going into the Foreign Service?

JOHNSON: Some days it was pretty discouraging, but no, I can't think of any profession I would have found more fulfilling.

Q: Looking back on your years with USIA and State, how would you write the obituary to your career?

JOHNSON: When we departed Heidelberg a reporter for the Rhein Neckar Zeitung wrote an article about my tenure which she titled "Bemuehen um Offenheit" (Trying to be Open). If during my career my openness has helped me impart to diverse publics a better understanding of the United States, its society and its political system, then I am content.

Q: I guess that concludes our interview. Thank you.

JOHNSON: I thank you. I hope others find our dialogue interesting.

End of interview