

AMBASSADOR JOAN M. PLAISTED

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: This is tape one side one with an interview with Joan M. Plaisted. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Today is July 30, 2001. Joan, start at the beginning. Tell me when and where you were born and something about your family.

PLAISTED: Okay. I was born in St. Peter, Minnesota August 29, 1945. It was just at the end of the war, and my father had been in the navy in the Pacific, and was then in St. Peter. We moved from St. Peter to Chicago where my father was in optometry school. He studied to be an optometrist.

Q: Using the GI Bill?

PLAISTED: Absolutely, and feeling very fortunate to take advantage of the GI Bill. My mother, this was very common in those days, was working at a Walgreen drug store to help put him through college.

Q: Tell me a little about the family background of your father and then we will go to your mother.

PLAISTED: He was from a large family. My grandmother was someone who always believed in speaking English very well, very correctly. We lived with my grandmother and grandfather for one year when I was about four or five years old. My father was raised with the work ethic to really work hard which he - for better or for worse - inflicted on his children. Thank goodness he also believed in playing hard.

Q: Where did he go to school?

PLAISTED: Originally he went to school in North Dakota, at Minot, North Dakota. That is where he met my mother. He attended optometry school in Chicago at the University of Chicago.

Q: And in the navy did he use optometry?

PLAISTED: No, in the navy he was on board ships. He was the assistant usually to the captain of the ship, a good position to be in.

Q: Executive officer.

PLAISTED: The executive officer. He would be writing up the shore leave for who was going to be able to go ashore. He always put himself on the list. He was on mine sweepers. There was one incident where half of his ship was blown up. He was on the half, fortunately, that was not blown up.

Q: And your mother's side of the family. Where did they come from?

PLAISTED: They were from North Dakota, from Minot. She, too, was from a very large family. She had some college education herself. Then after her children were older and we were living in Minnesota, she went back to school to do more towards her college degree. She graduated with honors with an AS degree.

Q: You know, one thinks of Minnesota as being very Scandinavian. Was your mother from that side or not, or were both from the English side?

PLAISTED: My mother's maternal grandparents emigrated from Sweden. Her paternal grandparents came from an area which today is part of Poland but was then Prussia. It is also very much a Scandinavian group originally on the Plaisted side. We were Vikings. I can trace my ancestry back to the 11th century. We were Vikings and probably raped and pillaged, although now, with revisionist history... I went to the opening of the Viking exhibition at the Museum of American History in New York and they were saying we were all farmers engaged in agriculture. Then the family immigrated to France, to Normandy. That was the du Plessis, the French, and then to England where we were barons and knights and then to Maine in the 1700s. There was a Plaisted who was a general in the Civil War, and two were governors of Maine. Then the Plaisted moved on to Minnesota. My grandmother on the Plaisted side was proud of being French. Her parents came from the Alsace-Lorraine region. To say we were English on the Plaisted side, it is quite a mixture.

Q: Farmer stock mostly. Did they come over for farms? I guess most people did.

PLAISTED: Yes, but the Plaisteds came over quite early, before the revolution. I have not joined the Daughters of the American Revolution, but I would be eligible.

Q: Well then you say your father studied in Chicago when you were quite young. Did you stay there very long? Where did you start going to school?

PLAISTED: Actually I went to a nursery school in Chicago. I went to a Japanese nursery school which is quite interesting since he had just fought the war in the Pacific. Then we lived with my grandparents in Minnesota for about a year, after he finished school. We were trying to live more cheaply and to figure out where he was going to practice optometry. He bought a small practice in a little town near Minneapolis called Willmar, Minnesota.

Early Life

Q: Did you grow up there?

PLAISTED: I grew up in Willmar. Willmar's claim to fame is being "The Turkey Capital of the World" because more turkeys come from Willmar than any other place in the world, so they say. I don't know if I should be proud of that or not, but I always love to tell the story.

Q: What was Willmar like when you were a young girl?

PLAISTED: It had a population of about 10,000 people. It was a very small town. It was very rural. Many of the people, much of the town's business, depended on whether the crops were good that year or not. It was also about a hundred miles from Minneapolis, so we had easy access to a larger city. With my family we would often go into Minneapolis to go shopping or to see the ice follies or to do some of the things we did in Minnesota.

Q: So as a young girl, we will get to education in a minute, what sort of activities, sports and all did you get involved in?

PLAISTED: In grade school, I remember reading a lot. I was reading so much that my father, as an optometrist, tried to limit the number of books I was allowed to read.

Q: Did you have a Carnegie library out there?

PLAISTED: There was a public library. I was always checking books out. My parents sent me out to play more with the neighborhood kids. We would jump over garbage cans in our back yards. When I was just a child, I remember my parents reading to me all the time, reading very positive books to me. I think this gave me a very optimistic outlook, reading to me "The Little Engine that Could," "I think I can, I think I can." I played flinch and other card games with my grandmother as a child. She often let me win. I was never really active in school sports. In fact, even in high school, I would sometimes get a "D" in gym, which, thank goodness, didn't really count on the academic record, or I would never have made it into a good university.

Q: Ice skating and winter sports, did you get involved in those at all?

PLAISTED: Yes, as a family we would go skiing, skiing on the "mountains" of Minnesota. We would do that as a family. We also traveled quite a bit as a family around the United States. As a child I wanted to visit every state, and I also wanted to see every capitol building, so my father would have to drive through the heavy traffic, not only through the capital city, but also show the kid the capitol building in each state we would drive through on a vacation going to Phoenix or to Florida. I wanted to see everything on the way.

Q: Well then in school, let's take elementary school first. You say you were interested in reading. Did that show up in your academic side, too? Did you enjoy school?

PLAISTED: Yes, I think I enjoyed school quite a bit. I received good grades in grade school. I usually liked my teachers.

Q: Do you remember any teachers that particularly struck you that you can think of?

PLAISTED: Yes, Mrs. Reimer, my Sunday school teacher, whom I really disliked. I bit her in the thigh. She called up my father to complain and I heard him tell her he would reprimand me. Instead, when he hung up the phone, he told me he would have bitten her too if he were five years old. Is this the way to raise a child?

Q: How about what sort of books were you reading?

PLAISTED: I was reading things like Little House on the Prairie, Little Women, all the Nancy Drew mysteries. Just a wide range of children's books. As a child, I would read Grimm's Fairy Tales, Winnie the Pooh, the standard things.

Q: Good solid standard things.

PLAISTED: ... that kids were raised on.

Q: I imagine the Little House on the Prairie series must have struck a responsive note in where you were. You went to high school where?

PLAISTED: In Willmar.

Q: In Willmar. What was high school like? Was it consolidated or bigger?

PLAISTED: It was a junior high and a senior high. My high school experiences, I think, were very positive. I have good memories of high school. We had a group of about 12 girls. We were in a little gang of sorts and had some wild, fun times. When I go back to Minnesota now, I still will get together with these girls from my high school days. I was very active in high school in about every organization possible. I played a saxophone in the high school band. I was the editorial editor of the high school newspaper, writing a column for the newspaper with a girl friend of mine "On the Phone with Aud and Joan." I was on the debate team. On the debate team we would debate such issues as should the United Nations be strengthened. I think that really opened up to some extent my eyes to the world of international affairs. We would travel around the state to debate with opposite teams.

Q: At home, did you have brothers and sisters?

PLAISTED: I have two younger sisters.

Q: Were events of the world or the United State being discussed around the dinner table?

PLAISTED: We really didn't have in-depth political discussions around the dinner table. We would discuss the U.S. presidents. I remember once as a child going to a little church in Minnesota where we thought President Nixon was going to show up. He didn't but we went there specifically to see if we couldn't catch a glimpse of the President of the United States and his family. But we didn't really debate the world political issues of the day.

Q: I would imagine that sort of world coverage would be rather sparse there wouldn't it? I mean you are right in the heart of the heartland as regarding say newspapers and all that, or did these issues spill out?

PLAISTED: In high school we followed national politics to some extent. I remember in high school we staged our own debates between Kennedy and Nixon. I remember in those days walking into class behind a huge, my parents were Republican, and of course I was Republican, walking into class behind a life-sized Richard Nixon cardboard mockup. I was going to be Nixon in those debates. Some of this came out in high school. Then, as I said, we would travel as a family. Right before the revolution in Cuba we went on a little cruise to Cuba and Nassau. That really opened up my eyes to how countries could be very poor. I remember being so very shocked to see the beggars and the poverty in Cuba in contrast with their very rich sights, too.

Q: You graduated in '63 from high school. Did you have any idea about where you wanted to go or what you wanted to do?

PLAISTED: Yes, I did. It was at age 16 that I decided what I wanted to do. This was rather strange for growing up in this small community. When I was 16, I decided I wanted to be a foreign service officer.

Q: Good heavens, how did you hear about it?

PLAISTED: Part of it was when I was seven, we took a family vacation to New York and visited the UN. My parents were showing me the General Assembly. I was just so impressed by the whole scene at the UN. You know, in Minnesota in those days everyone sort of looked alike, ruddy red slightly chubby faces. Here I was a seven year old hauled to the UN seeing the Chinese, the Sikhs with their turbans, the Africans with their colorful robes. I thought this place is fascinating. My parents pointed up to the interpreters' booths at the General Assembly and said, "Now maybe someday when you grow up, you could be an interpreter here." I still remember my reaction, I was thrilled to think that I could do that. Little did my parents know I was linguistically challenged. It was such an epiphany. I could do something here. I could work for my country here at the UN. So that gave me the idea as a seven year old, this is something I could really do. I became interested in foreign affairs, I wanted to join the foreign service. I read in a Methodist church bulletin about a university that would train you to be a foreign service officer. The university was the School of International Service at American University, in Washington. I went off my senior year to take a look at the university and to interview with them, and ended up as a freshman at the School of International Service. The first day of school Dean Griffith addressed the 90 of us in the freshman class and said, "Now most of you are here because you want to be foreign service officers when you graduate, but I should tell you that out of the 90, on the law of average, two of you will become foreign service officers. I never felt so shocked and disappointed. But I was determined to be one of those two. It was a long roundabout route until I eventually joined the foreign service. But that is exactly what happened. Today two of us from our class ended up in the foreign service.

Q: This would have been the class of '67.

PLAISTED: Class of '67.

Q: Tell me about American U and the School of International Studies at that time. What was your impression of it?

PLAISTED: I had some fascinating professors and very interesting classes. I took a world politics course from a professor who just presented me with an award from the school, a Professor Abdul Aziz Said. I took a western civilization course my freshman year that I really loved from a Dr. Albert Mott. When I ended up in graduate school, I was his graduate assistant. Part of wanting to do that was so I could retake the course. I got to sit in his classes once again as a graduate student. I would probably do it again today if he were still offering that course. I had some excellent professors. It was very difficult for me my first year at American University because I had never written an essay exam. Coming from this small town in Minnesota, we didn't get to write essay exams, so that took a little getting used to. I did perfectly fine in factual multiple choice tests, but having to write something so general as an essay took me my entire freshman year to really catch on. I did have a lot of difficulty my freshman year with the world politics course. When I see Professor Said today, I am always grateful that he passed me. In fact, when I was a graduate student I took another course from him to prove to myself that I could get better than a "C" in his class.

Q: Well, in '63 to '67, you would have been here during the Kennedy assassination. How did that hit the school?

PLAISTED: Oh, I think it hit the school as I think it did everyone in the country. It was just a very sad period of mourning for the nation. I was actually up in New York with a class about to go into the United Nations to the General Assembly again when we heard the news. Of course the UN closed down and we all went off to St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Q: Washington, of course, is a huge source of things about foreign affairs. At American University were you able to dip in to various cultures and various foreign policies and that sort of thing?

PLAISTED: Yes, and of course it was at the height of the civil rights movement and the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. American University has a very international student body, something I always appreciated about AU.

Q: At AU, did the students there organize much on the civil rights side, demonstrations and that sort of thing?

PLAISTED: No, the students themselves didn't. I never think of AU as that active of a campus. I later was out in Berkeley in '65 and '66. Of course that was a much more active campus. But there was a seminary at AU, and the students at the seminary were much more active in civil rights. I joined the students from the seminary in '63 in picketing the White House for civil rights. This was fairly early on in the civil rights movement. Then I went back to Minnesota and gave a talk. There was a little announcement in the Methodist church bulletin that Joan Plaisted would discuss with the youth group at our church her experiences picketing the White House for civil rights. My mother was so embarrassed that her daughter had picketed the White House and everyone in the community was going to know about it and I was going to talk about it. So my early civil rights activism wasn't totally appreciated. This was during the time of the anti-war demonstrations in Washington, too, and I was quite active in picketing the White House and demonstrating on the mall against the war. In part this was because I was in France in '65-'66. My mother, herself, later picketed the White House for women's rights for abortion.

Q: This was part of a study abroad?

PLAISTED: It was my own half a junior year abroad program at the University of Grenoble in '65. I would be happy as an American tourist on a bus, and the French would come and sit beside me and start asking me, "What is your country doing in Vietnam?" I was hardly even aware that my country was in Vietnam in the summer of '65, but it really started my questioning. Why are we in Vietnam; what are we doing? I ended up with a masters degree in Asian studies trying to figure out what are we doing in Vietnam. I ended up with a masters but never did quite answer my original question.

Q: Well, when you were in France, this was the height of de Gaulle's period, wasn't it? How did you find the French educational system? You were at the University of Grenoble?

PLAISTED: The University of Grenoble. I was in a program for foreign students. My French was really quite basic at that time. I was taking French history, culture, and geography. One class was geography class where they would show us slides of mountains every day. If you have seen one mountain, you have seen them all. A little bit of French culture. It was mainly to learn the French culture and the language. What I actually did during my time in France, it was the first time I was actually free and on my own, I started reading a lot of the American classics in English, you know, Fitzgerald and Hemingway, just having time on my own to read. Plus I traveled, I had a Eurail pass and traveled to East Berlin. That was really quite a memorable experience during the days when you had to go through Checkpoint Charlie. I remember so clearly President Kennedy's comment that if you could only take every communist in the world and show them East Berlin and West Berlin, show them the contrast, just see how long they would still be communists. That was certainly how it struck me seeing the two sides of the Berlin Wall. I traveled all over Europe. Then I traveled to North Africa and also around the Middle East, so that really opened my eyes to the world. It was probably the most educational experience I ever had in my life - the traveling.

Q: Were you getting any sampling of the foreign service at that time? Were you able to talk to anybody who was involved in the foreign service?

PLAISTED: Not so much in France, but at American University, the School of International Service, our interest really was in the foreign service. There were foreign service officers occasionally to talk to. I remember an ambassador came to lecture our class, and I was really quite bored. I was quite unimpressed. It is good I don't remember his name to this day, but I wasn't too impressed with the ambassador's lecture to our class.

Q: Well in the Middle East, did you get any feel for the situation there?

PLAISTED: Yes, we visited Jerusalem, but you were only able to go into the one side of Jerusalem.

Q: That was before the '67 war.

PLAISTED: Yes. At that point it was peaceful in December in '65. So yes, of course. Then I went to Damascus which was a fascinating city and to Baalbek. I remember how dynamic the route was in those days. This was Beirut in its heyday. Then there was Egypt, seeing the pyramids and visiting Alexandria.

Q: All of this kept whetting your appetite for something. Did you have while you were doing this, did you have what I'll call a fall back position? If not the foreign service then something else you were thinking of.

PLAISTED: No. I don't think I really had a fall back position. I was going through the civil rights period and the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, becoming more anti-government myself and starting to question my original intentions. Did I really want to join the foreign service? So I didn't take the foreign service exam initially out of college.

Q: Well you graduated in '67 and then went on to what?

PLAISTED: In '67 and then I went out to California, and worked part time in an insurance company. That was a pretty awful experience as an accounts adjuster. I was one of two people with a college degree, the other being the boss, so he really had me doing everything, in charge of the personnel department when the head of personnel was on leave. I was drawing architectural plans for the office. He didn't want anyone to know he was redesigning the office space. It was a rather unusual thing to be doing. Then I went back to American University for my masters in Asian studies. I ended up taking two years to get my M.A.

Q: That brings you up to '69.

PLAISTED: I graduated in '69.

Q: What about, '69 of course things were really coming to a boil on Vietnam. Did you get involved in anti-Vietnam activities and this sort of thing?

PLAISTED: Yes, all throughout. I think, I remember once comparing notes with Senator George McGovern when I eventually met him, because I thought I had come out against the war so early, and did I come out against the war before McGovern did? But when I compared notes with him I really hadn't. He said that he first came out against the war in the early '60s. I was questioning it in '65, so he was questioning it a little earlier.

Q: Was the State Department still something you were shying away from at this point?

PLAISTED: I was questioning it more. Did I really want to work for the U.S. government? After I had my masters degree, every time I get a degree I go out to California to see, besides I really like that area, to see if there was something I could do. At that point, I had worked quite hard on getting my masters. I had two graduate assistantships and a scholarship, and I really wanted to do something on Asia. I had promised myself for the first couple of years after I graduated, I would work on Asia. I went to California after each degree to see if I could find something interesting to do. After I got my masters, I remember going to the Asia Foundation which was a logical place to work for someone with a masters. They were very interested in talking to me. They Xeroxed all my research. I had done projects on the communist party, the PKI, in Indonesia. I had done something on how to use Theravada Buddhism for advancing social development in Thailand. They Xeroxed all my research papers. At the end of this they told me they never hired, they were impressed by all my work, but they had never hired a woman in a professional capacity before. This was '69. I accepted that. I went to the Bank of America to see if they might send me out to Asia because at that point I could speak and write Thai which I had studied in graduate school. They told me they had never sent a woman overseas as a professional before. Today I would probably sue them, but then I just accepted it and decided that it was going to be difficult to find something on Asia and ended up coming back to Washington, and in my searching for something to do on Asia, ended up with the U.S. Department of Commerce in the Far Eastern Division of the Department of Commerce.

Q: Had you while you were in college and in graduate school and before, had you and your female colleagues talked about what they call the glass ceiling? Was this something that was almost accepted, or was this something you ought to do something about?

PLAISTED: I don't remember any discussions at that point. I don't think I knew the glass ceiling terminology, knew the concept - that terminology really hadn't come into our vocabulary. It was important to me, you know, because I was experiencing this firsthand, where could I as a woman find a job working on Asia. One of the conclusions I reached is probably the U.S. government is going to be the most likely employer to hire me on Asia, to do something on Asia, because I was running into blocks with private industry.

Q: In particular I suppose Asia more than the general idea well the Asian man won't accept a woman, and you can't get anything done like that. I recall that type of thinking.

PLAISTED: Yes, from working on Asia there is some truth to that.

Q: Well you got into Commerce when?

PLAISTED: I was in the Commerce Department from the fall of 1969 until 1973.

Q: How did you find the culture of the Department of Commerce at that time?

PLAISTED: When I first started working at the Commerce Department, I was very disillusioned with the department. The National Aquarium was in the basement. I remember every morning I would walk by the aquarium to get my coffee, and I would go by the clown fish. I thought the clown fish was about the only thing I could relate to in the whole department. Then one day after I worked there about six months the clown fish wasn't there anymore. I thought I am going to have to resign. My only friend - the polka-dotted clown fish - in the Commerce Department isn't here anymore. My original intention was I'll work here for about a year, save \$3,000, quit and achieve my goal of traveling around the world, to use that money to travel around the world for a year. In my initial job, I had a female boss, and with her we were in charge of the trade regulations of all of the countries in the Far East including the Pacific islands. Exporters would call up, business people. They would want to know what is the tariff to export their goods to the Philippines. I would look it up in these complicated tariff books and tell them it was 25%, but it really didn't make much sense. To export to these countries you have to go through paying off a number of the customs officials. In those days there were so many hidden charges, so I was a little disillusioned, too, with what we were passing out as information. But what happened after I had been there about a year, and I did start slowly meeting more people in the Department whom I could relate to, there was a sudden opening on the Korea desk when the desk officer departed. It was a one-person desk, and my boss asked me if I would take that job. I was the youngest Commerce desk officer at that point. It was a fabulous opportunity because it is the only country where we had a bilateral ministers' meeting between the Secretary of Commerce and his Korean counterpart. So there was a lot of activity. It was a job that had it not been abolished in yet another Commerce reorganization about a year and a half later, I often wonder would I have stayed indefinitely, because I really enjoyed the work.

Q: Korea at that time was beginning to feel the firm and mostly positive hand of Park Chung Hee on the economy wasn't it? It wasn't one of the young tigers yet, but how was Korea coming along from your perspective?

PLAISTED: It was opening up. Korea was really trying to attract additional American investment, starting to export more to the U.S. It was starting to really realize its economic potential and really wanted U.S. assistance. Many of these meetings I would line up were all that more important. As a desk officer, I went to Korea and traveled from one end of the country to the other looking at the economic potential of the country. I was quite impressed by what I saw. We went to visit a huge steel plant, and went down to Pusan to the port city, and then I wrote articles that the Secretary of Commerce had promised his Korean counterpart on Korea's investment climate and what the regulations were to try to attract a little more attention to the potential in Korea.

Q: Somewhat later in '76-'79, I was part of the country team. I was consul general in Korea, and I can recall our economic officer/commercial officer complaining the Koreans wanted to buy American goods but, an example that comes to mind immediately, they wanted to buy some American fire trucks. There were some companies that could produce them, and they said fine, but we are really pointed toward selling them in the United States you know. They don't want to get involved in that export business. Did you find a sort of reluctance on the part of American firms to reach out particularly to a place at that time that was rather obscure?

PLAISTED: That is very true, and it was because, you know, at that point the percentage of the U.S. GNP involved in international trade was very small, quite a bit smaller than it is today. Yes, it was part of what I became involved in trying to get U.S. firms interested in exporting, trying to line them up with agents in Korea to help them through this labyrinth of customs officials and regulations to be able to export to Korea. So it was very much an issue at that point. Our very active ambassador, Phil Habib, was lobbying for an American trade center in Seoul where would be able to introduce U.S. firms that were new-to-market to be able to export to Korea and really open up the market.

Q: Did you get any feel for relations between the Department of Commerce and the Department of State at this point particularly on the desk?

PLAISTED: Yes and I certainly did later, but for my own experience I was dealing with the country director for Korea because the State Department was providing a number of the briefing papers for the U.S.-Korean ministers' meetings. I always thought he was very professional. I had a lot of respect for the country director, for the materials they would provide for the meeting. That spurred my interest once again in the foreign service that I first had in my youth.

Q: One of the things I have noted, I have never been involved directly, with the Department of Commerce, is they have always been, maybe this is unfair, but sort of the dumping ground for the political appointees, I mean where do we put so and so if they don't come back to our people in the White House. They have political favors to pay off, and the Department of Commerce gets an excessive number of these. Did you find that a problem?

PLAISTED: Well I think that is very true at the upper levels of the Department of Commerce. In those days I was such a junior bureaucrat and I was dealing more with the lower levels of the Department of Commerce, and some of the people who were working on trade promotion were really quite fine professionals. They were doing everything they could to promote U.S. exports on the trade policy side, too.

Q: Well there is always the yin and the yang, exports-imports, you know with countries at the time we were particularly fostering to try and get developed. Did you find that you were working both sides of the street, both the export and the import thing in Korea?

PLAISTED: On Korea, yes, because I would be in Korea and call on their ministers and they were concerned. We would want to open up the Korean market for U.S. insurance companies. Of course, at the same time, Korea was very concerned at that point with some of the regulations that the U.S. had. I would certainly listen to their concerns. At that point the U.S. had slapped on a 10% import surcharge in September of '71, and, of course, they were protesting that. It had a real dire impact.

Q: That was a general one all over wasn't it?

PLAISTED: It was general, it was worldwide. It was imposed by Nixon. They were very concerned and, of course, raised this with the Commerce Minister Maurice Stans during the Commerce ministers' meeting. On the U.S. side we were also trying to get the Koreans to sign on to the intellectual property rights conventions. Of course this is years ago. They have in subsequent years, so I was hearing both sides while I was working to get Korea to open up its markets.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Korean embassy at that time?

PLAISTED: Yes, I had contact with the Korean embassy here in Washington. I had a lot of contact with the Koreans in Korea, too. It was the Secretary of Commerce, his contact with the Korea ambassador, that led to a rushed ministerial meeting. We were supposed to have a lead time of a minimum of about five months to line up this annual meeting between the two ministers. Secretary Stans went out on the golf course and played golf with his Korean counterpart and decided well, we will go ahead and have the meeting a month from now at your request. So I was really scampering to pull it all together.

Q: Did you run across your counterparts in the Korean Ministry of Commerce and all, ministry of trade? I am not sure what they call it.

PLAISTED: Yes. It was called the Ministry of Commerce and Industry at that point in Korea. When I was traveling on my first trip to Korea, I had a control officer from the Ministry of Commerce and industry. I remember I would be very well prepared to go in for my official meetings. I was able to call on the Commerce minister a couple of times and also on other ministers. I would prepare very carefully. But what they were really interested in if the conversation went quite smoothly, the question would inevitably come up during our visits, it came up a few times in Seoul, "How old are you?" I was 26 years old. "Why aren't you married?" How I answered it, I sort of avoided it or laughed it off, but they really could not understand how a 26 year old who was somewhat attractive, was not married. Something must be wrong with me. They kept looking for some defect to explain why I wasn't married. One top Korean during our official meetings actually asked me, "Hasn't anyone even asked you to marry him?"

Q: You should have mentioned something casually about leprosy or something.

PLAISTED: Yes, I thought of telling them I couldn't have children or something like that so they would just leave me alone and stop asking questions.

Q: Well it does bring up something, we will talk about it when we get to the Foreign Service, that is still around State quite awhile. Did you find any women counterparts to you in the Korean context?

PLAISTED: No, I don't think I saw a single official woman in their ministries, it was very uncommon in those days. When I was traveling around the country to go to the industrial sites, and to the port of Pusan, the Koreans would host their traditional party. I was with our commercial counselor and others from the embassy and our Korean control officer. The Koreans would host the traditional form of Korean hospitality for their visitors, the kisaeng party. But what are they going to do with me, a woman, at a kisaeng party? One didn't usually have an official woman at a kisaeng party. So they would name me Mr. Plaisted because a Miss Plaisted should not have been allowed at a kisaeng party. They made me Mr. Plaisted and gave me my own kisaeng girl, an attractive young Korean who was going to feed me and take care of me which was rather unusual. When I came back to Washington to the Commerce Department, my bosses found it hard to believe they hosted kisaeng parties in my honor as Mr. Plaisted.

Q: I think that is wonderful. Actually, the kisaeng girls served a very... I don't really like sea slugs and things like that. I was able to indicate that I really preferred to stick to just some beef and kimchi and things like that. They were very quick, and that took care of the feeding thing. Did you have to get up and sing songs?

PLAISTED: Oh, absolutely. To this day, with all my work on Asia, I should be able to sing better, but, yes, I would always have to get up and entertain our host and hostesses.

Q: I was never able to get beyond "Old McDonald Had a Farm." They would get up and sing opera.

PLAISTED: I should credit my young Korean control officer from their Commerce ministry for saving my life during one of my first meals in Seoul. I picked up the chopsticks which I had carefully studied how to use. I was quite proud so I took a big chunk of kimchi and was about to pop it into my mouth when he literally knocked the chopsticks out of my hands, because I would have died. It was the most spicy variety.

Q: Did you start looking while you were in commerce? I mean you were really in the machinery already. Did you look at the foreign service then?

PLAISTED: Yes, I did. What happened when I was in Commerce, there was an exchange program between the State Department and the Department of Commerce. The person sitting across from me when I was on the Korea desk was a foreign service officer who was a Japan hand, Wilson Riley. He was a live example working right beside me of a foreign service officer on loan to the Commerce Department. I started looking at this program and I applied for it and was accepted, and found a job at the trade center in Paris that I thought would be fabulous. I really wanted to go and work in Paris having been in France as a student. There was a great opening in the Paris Trade Center. I went around and talked to everyone who was key in the Commerce Department, where I was known by reputation, if they didn't know me personally as someone who was quite good. Everyone who was on this committee pretty much supported me for the position and said "Yes, that sounds like a logical position," until suddenly a competitor developed in the Commerce Department who was the executive assistant to the top person on the committee. When I heard that, I called him up, and with my direct way asked him if it was true that he was really interested in this. He said, "Yes, I am Joan, and there are other jobs you could find." We ended up being good friends, but he ended up with my job at the Paris trade center that I had identified. Later, an opening came up for a commercial officer at the embassy where I really didn't think, I was questioning if I were qualified to do that position. It was the foreign service officer on the Japan desk who said, "Joan, you would be perfect for that. Of course you could do that job," and convinced me that I should apply for that position in Paris which I did. Of course that turned out to be a much better job for me. It was in the embassy; it was in the heart of where things were happening in terms of our relations with the French. So I indicated an interest in the commercial officer position and was approved by this panel at the State Department and the Commerce Department for the position on the exchange program in Paris. That is how I first went into the foreign service as a commercial officer in Paris in 1973.

Q: You were in Paris from '73 until when?

PLAISTED: From '73 until 1980 which was highly unusual and highly illegal.

Q: Well, let's start, when you went there in '73 who was the ambassador?

PLAISTED: It was John Irwin when I was first there. I just remembered Ambassador Irwin as being very generous. Occasionally I would be invited over to the residence when he was entertaining some of the top business people for luncheons. He, of course, was known for his very fine vineyard. He had an interest in Chateau Haut Brion, and he helped introduce me to the finer wines of France. Once I caught on that they were going to serve Chateau Haut Brion at the luncheon table, I would clear my calendar for the rest of the afternoon, and tell my staff that if they wanted me to do anything that day it would best be signed in the morning because I had a lovely lunch. I was going for lunch at the ambassador's residence and I was going to try and get as much Haut Brion as I possibly could, because if I finished my glass, the wine stewards would quickly fill it up again. So that was one of my more memorable experiences with the ambassador. This was the first ambassador I really knew.

Q: What was the situation in France, particularly as seen from the American Embassy in '73?

PLAISTED: It was a time of still close relations with the French. I was there during the election campaign between Valery Giscard d'Estaing on the right and François Mitterrand on the left the first time around. It was something we were watching very closely at the American embassy, who was going to win. We were a little concerned about the possibility of the socialists, and in those days the communists were getting about 10% of the vote in France, as to who was going to win the elections. It was Giscard who was victorious at that point. We were following political events in France very closely, especially the presidential elections.

Q: Did you get involved with all the officers in the embassy being sort of sent out to look at the political scene?

PLAISTED: I was friends with a number of people in the political section. I would team up with them. I wasn't professionally sent out as a commercial officer to go and observe political developments, but I was very interested in it personally, and would go with friends of mine to see the debates. I remember going to see Mitterrand in a television interview that he was giving. He was just absolutely perfectly charming, ran overtime, was as gracious as he could be publicly, and then once it was time to leave, I was sitting in the back, he started yelling at his staff for allowing him to be late. Sort of a Jekyll and Hyde personality coming out that one can only see behind the scenes. What I was sent out to do was to be a control officer for VIP visits. For Jimmy Carter's presidential state visit to Paris when Giscard was president, I was the control officer for the segment, it was a dinner at the Grand Trianon, and also a big reception at the Palace of Versailles. I was the control officer for that event and had to write up all these elaborate scenarios. I got to go through the palace several times, to make decisions with security, where were we going to place the nuclear football in case the President had to declare a nuclear war during this reception at Versailles, and decided on Madame de Maintenon's bedroom. If she only knew what was happening so many years later that that's where the nuclear football was, in her bedroom. Also we set up johnny's-on-the-spot at the Versailles palace because Louis Quatorze never designed it that way in the first place. The French polished the floors so highly; they were cleaning every chandelier, waxing the floors. I had to get word to the President's party it would be best to wear rubber soled shoes because you are going to slip all over these highly waxed floors at Versailles. Then to my absolute panic at the end of the Versailles event we lined up all the cars to pick up the President and the congressional participants. There was the chauffeur for a congressman, but we couldn't find the congressman. It was about two or three o'clock in the morning after the events at Versailles. I was running through the palace trying to find a lost congressman who must have shown up in Paris, because I never heard about him again.

Q: In the commercial office at that time, did you find it a challenge to try to get American products through the French system? Was it a feeling that the French were through various bureaucratic methods trying to inhibit our selling things in France?

PLAISTED: It was very much a competitive environment, and there was always the philosophy of buy French if the French product is available. I was the coordinator for the Paris Air Show. Where we had some of the greatest competition with the French was in selling aircraft and avionics equipment. So that was a very competitive environment. But we were able in those days to have record sales at the Paris Air Show, I think in part because of the quality of the U.S. equipment. Of course at the Paris Air Show, there are international buyers, too. These aren't just French buyers for some of the avionics, but this is an international show where the U.S. was very competitive in those days.

Q: Did you run across, let's say the proclivity of the French to sort of sweeten deals for selling things and competition? I mean it has been mentioned many times they sweeten the deal by making some under the table agreements or something like that. Was this apparent?

PLAISTED: It obviously wasn't anything I saw firsthand. It was something that was talked about in those days. Later when I was at the OECD, one of the issues at the OECD was to come up with a code of conduct for this type of investment and just what are legitimate business practices.

Q: By the time you were there, the book, "The American Challenge" had come out...

PLAISTED: Jean-Jacques Servan-Schrieber wrote that. In fact that was one of the questions I was asked on the foreign service oral exam. Are you familiar with Jean-Jacques Servan-Schrieber, and they said it in such a way, and I had been a student in France, that I didn't quite understand until a few moments had elapsed who they were talking about. But yes, the book had come out earlier, I believe, and was debated quite a bit at the time when it came out. I think America was certainly seen as an economic competitor, an economic giant as it is today.

Q: Who were you dealing with in the French bureaucracy?

PLAISTED: In the French bureaucracy the ones I was really closest to were the air show organizers, because my main job was to coordinate the U.S. participation. I was working for the Minister of Economic and Social Affairs, Chris Petrow at that point and later Robert Harlan for the second show. I would be coordinating very closely with the organizers of the Salon Aeronautique, the Paris Air Show, trying to get additional VIP passes, additional tickets, good space for the U.S. exhibitors, negotiating with the officials at the Paris Air Show. I was also in contact with some of the people in the aviation firms. Also I was a U.S. delegate to a Bureau of International Exhibitions that approves world fairs. There was a French head of the Bureau of International Exhibitions who had been in their diplomatic service, and had been a consul general in the U.S. at one point. I had very close relations with him.

Q: How did you find these international exhibitions? There is a tremendous amount of politicking isn't there on that?

PLAISTED: Yes, absolutely, and the Russians were members. In fact my first day in Paris there was a luncheon at the George V hotel. My new boss wanted me to arrive in time to attend a meeting of this bureau. He insisted I move up my arrival date. I was seated at lunch next to a Russian delegate, but thank goodness somebody had tipped me off that he was really KGB. I had to watch out because he was asking me rather embarrassing questions. I knew exactly why he was trying to do so. My first day in Paris and the KGB is trying to convert me! It was quite exciting, but it was in a very international context and it could be quite controversial.

Q: What were some of the dynamics that went on there? Were you more at the technical level or...

PLAISTED: It was really my boss, the commercial counselor, he was our main representative. I was the junior representative. Yes, at times it would get very technical.

Q: In dealing with the French did you get involved, I mean the system in France. I have never served in France, but I understand some of the intellectuals represent a very strong important group, chattering class, whatever you want to call them. Then there would be the commercial people who were pretty hard nosed and practical. I mean did you find any cleavage between these two? Did you get involved in any of this?

PLAISTED: I would sometimes be at dinner parties with people from the staff of Le Canard Enchaîné who were absolutely delightful.

Q: This was the satiric...

PLAISTED: Yes, a very satirical newspaper. I dined with some of their French journalists. In Paris we had delightful, magnificent political conversations around the dinner table. We were used to quite a lively discussion, but I never saw the break between the commercial people and the intellectuals.

Q: You had seen the beginning of the computer generation coming though in France?

PLAISTED: Yes, in fact it was one of the industry products that I was responsible for, trying to promote U.S. exports of computers to France. We were somewhat successful in breaking into the French market. Of course you have the American firms that were established in France, manufacturing computer equipment in France. But even today, the use of computers, the use of the Internet in France, is a lot less than it is elsewhere in the developed world.

Q: In the commercial world, did you feel the relatively heavy hand of the government in controlling things, I mean compared to much looser control in the United States?

PLAISTED: I think there was more planning, certainly more, I don't think there was central planning per se, but there was more government direction, yes, than there would be in the U.S. I think the relationship between government and industry was closer in France than it was in the U.S. It wasn't as close as you would find it to be in Japan. There was a close relationship between government and industry. You would have industrialists sometimes serving in the French government.

Q: Was there much interest on the behalf of commercial people in what America had to sell and all?

PLAISTED: Yes, I think French businessmen were always interested in what was in their industry sector. We had a very active Paris Trade Center. We would be mounting exhibitions on computer equipment, machine tools. We were quite big, the U.S., in the environmental protection field. There were areas where we were quite competitive. Of course those were the areas where we would try and have the trade shows. We could draw a large crowd and get some very good sales results. One of our objectives was always to introduce new-to-market exporters, the little guy. The big guys could take care of themselves and didn't need my help. I was to introduce the little guy, new to exporting to the French market, with his pollution control equipment and help him find an appropriate French agent through the trade center shows. In the mid-'70s it was quite doable.

Q: You say you stayed there until 1980. How did that come about?

PLAISTED: I was a commercial officer in charge of certain industry segments, but my main responsibility was really coordinating U.S. participation in the Paris Air Show. It was our largest overseas U.S. government exhibition. As one of my colleagues, the civil air attaché^{1/2}, said to me, it would be a mistake to look at the Paris Air Show as a three ring circus. It wasn't a three ring circus at all. It was like a 23 ring circus, because the entire embassy would get involved. You had so many congressional delegations, you probably could have had a quorum with the House Science and Technology Committee, the Armed Services Committee, etc. The U.S. pavilion had a number of U.S. exhibitors. We would have off the floor sales. There was always a theme. In the '77 show it was the 50th anniversary of Charles Lindbergh's 1927 flight. We had a little mock up of the Spirit of St. Louis there. Lindbergh's wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, came for the exhibition. The president was appointing, actually he ended up appointing, three personal representatives. So it was such a huge coordinating position. I coordinated the show in 1975 for the first time, and I had a three year tour in Paris. My tour was about to end, and all my friends were trying to get one month, two month extensions because we all loved Paris. One day I was in a car with my boss, and I mentioned to him, I said, "Do you think if I coordinated another air show we could possibly get me an extension to stay in Paris?" He looked at me as if I must have been nuts. He said, "Joan, you would coordinate another air show?" "Yes, if I could extend my tour in Paris." He said, "Well, I'll put in for your extension immediately." So while my friends are fighting for one or two months, my three year tour was turned into a two plus two on the grounds that I would please coordinate another Paris Air Show. I should have known better because for about two months right before the show, I'd work around the clock, nights, weekends. But that is how I got my first extension in Paris.

The second was thanks to our ambassador to the U.S. Mission to the OECD, Herb Salzman, a crusty old guy. He is really great. He was looking for a Secretary of Delegation. It is really the ambassador's assistant or a DCM for the DCM to coordinate everything that is going on in the U.S. Mission to the OECD. He had interviewed a number of candidates. He didn't particularly like any of them and was looking for other possibilities. His current Secretary of Delegation, who was a friend of mine, called me up because he was trying to get the ambassador into the dinner that the French were hosting at the Grand Trianon as part of President Carter's visit. I told him there were only 40 places for the Americans, and I was having trouble getting the President and Rosalyn into the dinner. I really couldn't come up with two more places for Ambassador Salzman and his wife, but in the course of the conversation he asked me if I would be interested in interviewing for his job. I said, "Well, yes, if I could possibly stay in Paris." I went over to interview with the ambassador, and we hit it off quite well. He took on the whole State Department practically, because there was a regulation you couldn't spend more than five years in Europe. But there was also a regulation that said the ambassador could choose his staff aide. So he was arguing with the Director General of the Foreign Service that Joan was going to be his staff aide. Others were arguing yes but you can't spend more than five years in Europe. So it took about two months. The decision went to the Director General. In the meantime I was trying to figure out what was happening to me. But he was a very tenacious negotiator, and ended up getting me a two year assignment to the OECD as his Secretary of the Delegation. So that is how I, an Asian hand, ended up with my first three tours as an Asian hand in Paris.

Q: How did you get into, I mean were you in the foreign service at any point in this process or were you still an exchange?

PLAISTED: I was still a reserve officer, but I was at that point in the process of trying to convert over to be a full fledged foreign service officer. It was quite a trying process. I had taken the foreign service exam at one point and passed the written exam. What was required to convert was to pass the oral exam, and I had a heck of a time with the oral exam. I came back to Washington. I would always come back to Washington at my own expense. I interviewed with the board of examiners the first time around and was told that I had passed. It wasn't a high pass, but I had passed. So I was delighted. I thought I am in the Foreign Service. A month or two later I am sitting at my desk in Paris, and I got a letter saying that the full board of examiners had reviewed the results of my oral interview and decided I had not passed the oral exam. They reversed the decision of the three or four people who were my examiners. I have never heard of this before; nor had anyone else I had talked to.

Q: I was a panelist in '74-'75, you know.

PLAISTED: That was about the time.

Q: When we did it, it was firm.

PLAISTED: Well, that was my impression, too. But I was told that the full board that Joan Clark headed had looked at it and said oh it wasn't that high of a pass, she really didn't pass. I was absolutely devastated as you can imagine. This was when I was a commercial officer. I decided well I will brush up and try again. I spent about a year studying American culture, American history, everything they could possibly ask me on the oral exam. I went back and took the exam a second time. The second time I was again told that indeed I had passed the oral exam, and it went to the board of examiners and indeed they agreed that I had passed. I was offered a commission from the foreign service. But by then I had been promoted as a reserve officer within the foreign service promotion system, I had been promoted to the next highest grade whatever it was in those days. I had been promoted to the next highest grade in competition with all the foreign service officers, largely because of my work on the Paris Air Show. There was a regulation that you could not come into the foreign service at a grade that was higher than 95% of your class in terms of age. I was younger than 95% of my class, so yes I could come into the Foreign Service but they would demote me a grade. I said, wait a moment. This is the same institution that promoted me, but I was willing to take the demotion to come into the Foreign Service. It took so long to get all the papers processed that by the time it was about time to sign me in, someone in Personnel discovered Joan, you are no longer too young to come in at this grade to which we promoted you, but in order to keep your present grade, you are going to have to take the Foreign Service exam again. I said, "What! You want me to take the oral a third time?" He said, "Well, it is your decision, but if you want to keep the grade to which you have been promoted you will have to take the oral exam again." "Is it the same exam?" "Well, you didn't take it at that level. You took it at the level where you were at the time." It was so bureaucratic. I went back to Washington once again at my own expense. Once again, I was told I had passed the oral exam and was able to come in at the level to which they had promoted me. So it took a lot of persistence to ever get into the Foreign Service. This is all taking place during my Paris days, and I very much wanted to stay in the Foreign Service. My alternative would have been to return to the Department of Commerce.

Q: In these oral exams can you recall any of the questions that were posed to you?

PLAISTED: One of them was to design a cultural tour for Europeans to visit authors in the United States. Where would you take this group of Europeans? I suppose the first thing one would say is I'll take you to see Saul Bellow in Chicago, Norman Mailer in New York City, or someone in East Hampton. You not only had to know your literature, but also needed to know where these great authors were located. There were hypothetical admin issues that they always loved to ask - questions about the policy for who could swim in the ambassador's swimming pool where there was no right answer, just to see how you would handle the knotty admin problems. Quite a few questions were on cultural issues and problem solving.

Q: Did a question in any of this come up about being a woman? Was that a factor at all did you feel at that time?

PLAISTED: I didn't. I was trying to think what the atmosphere was at that time, but it was very shortly thereafter that the Department was more active in trying to recruit women. It wasn't a real big issue when I was first interested in the Foreign Service.

Q: When I was doing it which was close to this time, we always had a woman on our panel. The woman would be, every time they were taking the oral exam we had a woman there. It was sort of a mixed blessing because a lot of the women said if I made it, by God, I am not going to cut anybody any slack because they are women. You know, the men were usually, you know, more positive than the women.

PLAISTED: I don't remember a woman ever being on the board of examiners when I was being interviewed. In fact I remember it was all male. There was the one time I was told that the full board had decided I had not passed. It was the two women members on the full board who questioned if I really had passed, I was told. So two women kept me out of the Foreign Service initially.

Q: Back to the air show, what did you come in as, do you remember, was it as a five?

PLAISTED: I was promoted at the Commerce Department shortly before I went overseas to a GS-12. One of the reasons was Commerce was quite certain I would never be promoted overseas as an R. They wanted to be certain I was promoted at the Commerce Department. I was the equivalent of a GS-12 in my early days in Paris - an FSO 4. It was mid-level.

Q: Back to the air shows, a lot of this was military wasn't it. I mean a lot of the aviation stuff was just bigger and better fighters and avionics but not too much so they would be competitive with American planes in case of war, wasn't it?

PLAISTED: Yes, it was McDonnell-Douglas, Boeing, Lockheed, Fairchild, some of the really major contractors that had their own chalets, their own display areas at the show. One of the issues was always to protect the more sophisticated avionics equipment, to make certain spies weren't going to come in and steal it off the display floor, so we had to have pretty good security, too, in those days for some of the equipment on exhibition.

Q: How about on the transport side? Was Concorde an issue at that time, or were we, I can't remember when the Concorde came. As far as a supersonic transport, was this a...

PLAISTED: Concorde made its first transatlantic flight in 1971. Commercial flights came later with flights to Washington, DC from London and Paris in 1976. It was a competition, of sorts, but the U.S. did not have supersonic commercial transport planes.

Q: Do you recall any things that were particularly attractive to foreign buyers?

PLAISTED: One thing we were trying to do was to find agents for some of the new-to-market firms. In those days, just our sales of U.S. aircraft alone were record setting. In the 1977 show at the U.S. pavilion, I am not talking about the major firms that had their own exhibitions, we did \$6,000,000 in off-the-floor sales. We estimated that follow-on sales were going to be over \$100,000,000 for the equipment, that the exhibitors had on display at the U.S. pavilion, the 91 exhibitors. A number of these were new-to-market firms. What we were really trying to do is to get the smaller exporters introduced into the international market.

Q: Well then, I think this is a good place to stop. Is there anything else we should cover in Paris? How did you find social life as an embassy officer and all that?

PLAISTED: I think Paris is one of my finer posts. I absolutely enjoyed the long French dinner parties, the fine food. The one thing I remember during my time in Paris, this was the late '70s, was the very real security threats to American interests. My boss, the commercial counselor, had a bomb attached to his car. It was around the Christmas holidays. He was to drive his son to the airport. He took his son to the airport, put him on the plane to return to the U.S., and came back to his apartment complex, the Neuilly apartment complex in Paris, only to find all these French police circling his parking place. There was a bomb, the theory is it had actually fallen off his car, that maybe he came out just as the terrorist was trying to attach it. It had fallen off and was in the parking place. Tragically a French policeman died when he was trying to detonate it. But that was my boss, the commercial counselor, who was targeted. The deputy chief of mission, Chris Chapman, walked out of his house in Paris in those days, and saw a gunman across the street pointing his gun at him. His first thought was this is a grade B movie, and then he realized I am the star. He had a quick reaction, ducked down behind his car, and that saved his life. One of the military attaches was actually killed in Paris in those days. I remember we were told to look underneath our cars. You asked me about social events. I would look under my car to see if there was a bomb. I lived on the Ile St. Louis. I remember once getting down on all fours in a red silk dress looking up to see if there was a bomb under my car. You know the sidewalks in Paris, everyone in Paris has a dog so that is not the coolest place to be down on all fours looking to see if there is a bomb attached to your car. So when I would go out in the evening, there was always this question am I going to look for bombs or not. It was enough of a threat that you really felt you should. It was a very dangerous time to be in Paris.

Q: Is there anything else we could cover do you think in your Paris days?

PLAISTED: No.

Q: All right. Well, I will tell you, I'll end the tape so we will know where we are when we pick it up. In 1980 you left Paris finally. I guess with your heels dragging on that.

PLAISTED: Funny thing you said I probably could have extended a year, but I think it would have been the end of my foreign service career if I had.

Q: Where did you go?

PLAISTED: I finally got my Asian assignment. I was assigned to Hong Kong as an economic officer.

Q: Okay, so we will pick it up in 1980 when you go to Hong Kong. Before we leave Paris, two things I would like to check with you. One would be talking about the problem or concern over aircraft accidents during the air show. The other one we didn't cover is your OECD time, so we will talk about those before we leave Paris.

Today is July 31, 2001. Joan, let's talk about air safety and crashes, not just prior to whatever happened to your two watches.

PLAISTED: Two watches as the coordinator for the Paris Air Show.

Q: As you coordinated, you get this spectacular flying all over the place with a lot of spectators, and the damn thing looks dangerous to me.

PLAISTED: It can be very dangerous because what they are doing is the flight demonstrations, and, of course, the pilots want to show off the capabilities of the aircraft. There is a fierce competition of the latest in the U.S. planes, the French planes, the British, to really show off the capabilities of the aircraft. So there is that temptation for the pilots to push the planes to the limit. There are major buyers at these air shows. But after the very horrendous crash of the Russian Tupolev, which you may remember, where the spectators on the ground at the Paris Air Show were killed, what the air show authorities and the French government decided to do was to move the flight demonstrations. So they weren't taking place directly overhead of the spectators, which was a very wise safety measure to take, a common sense one which obviously should have been taken beforehand. It meant that the spectators weren't going to get quite the birds' eye view of the planes overhead, but it really made for a much safer atmosphere. I had a tragic personal experience with safety at the Paris Air Show, the second show that I coordinated in 1977. Fairchild was doing a demonstration of the Fairchild A-10 plane.

Q: This is a military plane?

PLAISTED: Yes. The pilot was doing loop de loops, big circles, and would come in very close to the ground and then go up and do another loop. When he came around to do one of his loops, there just wasn't enough space between the aircraft and the ground, and he hit the ground, and, of course, just died instantly. All of his G forces just exploded. It was an instant death. What was really of concern, his wife was watching the flight demonstration. I got a call, I was back at the embassy, I got a call from the minister counselor who was my boss to do something immediately for the wife. And to let me know what had happened. She obviously had to be sedated. She was taken off to the hospital immediately, but it was a real tragic accident.

Q: I haven't heard about it recently, but at that time, was there competition between the Paris Air Show, and I want to say Farnborough in...?

PLAISTED: Yes there was, in England. The Paris Air Show was the larger air show, but, yes, there was competition between the two of them.

Q: Did you coordinate with our man or woman in London on this thing or not?

PLAISTED: I talked to a number of the Department of Commerce personnel who were constructing the U.S. pavilion at the Paris Air Show who would get involved in the Farnborough air show, so I talked to some of the government people who were involved. I talked to some of the equipment demonstrators, too, and to the large aircraft manufacturers to see if there were things we could do better at the Paris Air Show that they were learning from Farnborough, but, no, I really didn't get involved in Farnborough at all.

Q: Let's talk about the OECD. You were there from when to when?

PLAISTED: I was there from '78 to '80, a little less than two years.

Q: What were you doing?

PLAISTED: I was the Secretary of the Delegation which really doesn't mean that much. I was working for the ambassador, but really I was working more closely with the Deputy Chief of Mission, the number two, coordinating the work of all the different sections at the OECD. There was a Treasury Department section, with a minister for financial affairs, an economic and social affairs section, an AID section, a press section, pulling all the work together. It was really being the DCM's DCM. At one point there was a door between the DCM's office and my office, and when the DCM would be on the phone and couldn't answer a question, he would open the door and yell at me, "Get this information, do you know the answer?" I was pulling together the overall projects for the U.S. mission to the OECD, our goals and objectives. I was the coordinator for the OECD ministerial meetings where we would have meetings to bring together our Secretary of State and our Secretary of Treasury to meet with their counterparts of the then 24 OECD member countries. I was the coordinator for OECD Council meetings. We'd have regular meetings of the 24 member countries at the OECD called the council. And then the Undersecretary of State in those days Dick Cooper would come regularly for meetings of the Executive Committee in Special Session, and I handled those, too. It was an overall coordinating job, pulling together all these cross-cutting projects.

Q: I think we had better say, because these things all change: What does OECD stand for, and at this time, '78-'80, where did it stand in relation to economic affairs?

PLAISTED: OECD is the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. There are more members today because they have added a number of Asian countries. At that point there were 24 member countries. It still is largely a talk shop. It is where issues are coordinated. The OECD is known for its annual economic projections. Sometimes agreements are drafted at the OECD. You may get a code of conduct for industry, but it's largely exchanging information on economic trends, energy issues, the latest developments in consumer safety, countries exchanging information. It is, of course, a very useful organization in that sense, and not a very well known economic organization.

Q: Was this mainly the developed countries?

PLAISTED: Yes, the 24 member countries in those days were all developed countries. The European countries, the U.S., Canada, the Scandinavian countries, and Japan.

Q: Again at this time, what were some of the issues that were particularly pertinent?

PLAISTED: No single issues go leaping out of the OECD because we weren't involved in intense negotiations. It was coordinating the economic issues, putting out reports. What is the projection for the next one, two, three years - for the near term - for the developed economies of the world? That is still a very important function that the OECD performs, trying to predict the future of world economic growth, and also doing country reviews.

Q: This is a period of the north-south contrast, which is a simplified way of saying, the rather affluent north, industrially vital north, and the poorer south. It didn't always hold this way, but this is the way it was portrayed. Was this something that was of concern?

PLAISTED: It was certainly discussed within the OECD and was a very valuable function. There was another organization that coordinated assistance with all the African countries so the U.S. could sit down with the French, with the Belgians, with the major African donors, and compare our assistance programs for Africa, because there is a limited amount of assistance. We wanted to be certain we weren't duplicating each other's programs and were working in concert with each other. That was an organization called the Development Assistance Committee, the DAC. It does some valuable work again that is as little known as the OECD, but the DAC performs quite a valuable service for the world and for the taxpayers.

Q: I have always been told that the Scandinavians contribute quite a bit into Africa and all. Is this something that you were looking at?

PLAISTED: Of course one of the comparisons that would always be made would be what percentage of a country's GNP is contributed to overseas assistance, showing the U.S. figure was much less in comparison with the amount of aid coming from the Scandinavian countries.

Q: You mentioned talking about the Scandinavians. Scandinavians come from basically a left wing socialist background, and a lot of their money in Africa was going to places like Tanzania. It wasn't working very well, at least this is my impression. You know, these socialist experiments mostly sort of flopped and they ended up by making one man much stronger. Were these, not just the amount of money in aid, but was anybody in OECD looking at the ultimate effects of this? I was wondering whether the United States was beginning to look with a certain amount of skepticism on some of these things that were going on or not at that time?

PLAISTED: It wasn't a major issue, I think, within the OECD itself. It would have been something probably that the Development Assistance Committee would have been looking at, this aid group that I mentioned, but I never really worked with them directly, so I can't really comment on what their philosophy was and if they were really looking into this in depth, in addition to coordinating the aid.

Q: Did the subject of corruption and bribes and payoffs come up?

PLAISTED: Yes, that was very much an issue. U.S. businessmen were always getting quite upset with their French counterparts who were able to bribe, or so we thought, the various countries to get the contracts. For the U.S. businessmen it was an illegal practice, putting them at quite a disadvantage. There was a code of conduct addressing bribery that we were working on, and that eventually was signed by the OECD countries. It took a long time to work it out as you can imagine. I think it was a major contribution. There was also another valuable contribution of the OECD. We reached an agreement on the amount of aid that could be subsidized. Some countries would give so much aid to a developing country but demand that they for example buy 50% of the products from Japan giving Japan an advantage.

Q: Don't we do that? I mean I thought...

PLAISTED: Well, yes. But at least it was talked about in these agreed upon guidelines as to what or how much aid could be tied, how much would be untied. So it was something that was discussed and agreed upon.

Q: Can you characterize some of the countries delegations there? Which countries were the movers and shakers in the OECD when you were there?

PLAISTED: Once we get into UNTAD and the GATT I will do that in more detail. I was at a little higher level then. At the OECD the chairman was Dutch. The Dutch had more influence than one normally expected them to have. The French were always quite active. The Americans were key. To a lesser extent the Japanese because the Japanese can at times be rather reticent in international organizations, unless there is some Japanese interest firmly at stake which would happen only rarely. Then the Japanese are very hard chargers. They know exactly how to lobby. I think those were the most influential delegations.

Q: Do you have anything to add about your service to the U.S. Mission to the OECD?

PLAISTED: My starkest memory of my service to the U.S. mission to the OECD was I started at the mission in February of '78 and just one month later, in March, we had a very tragic fire. A marine guard was killed. On that afternoon, I was pulling together the U.S. Mission's goals and objectives. It was about 7:00 PM. I really wanted to leave. I was tired; my secretary was tired. We wanted to leave for the evening. I asked the DCM if it is all right if we left. He said, "No, I want the goals and objectives ready so we can send this out first thing in the morning." He said, "We better get it out tomorrow morning." My secretary and I stayed until 10:00 to get it in perfect form, ready for the cable to go out the next morning, perfectly proofread. In fact I ran out the door so quickly that I felt guilty. I guess I sort of had a sixth sense maybe because I truly wanted to leave the mission, and went back and offered to help my secretary lock up, which we did and then we walked out of the mission together. When we departed, the marine, his last words to us were, "Sure is hot in here tonight." We didn't think too much of it. That was about 10:00 P.M. At 10:20 that evening, there was a flash fire that broke out in the mission. The marine guard was able to call the embassy, but I think his reaction was to stay with the mission rather than to get the hell out of there. Could he have gotten out or not, it is not completely clear. I think he also may have been trained to protect the assets, protect the documents. He ended up going all the way down the hall. There was an emergency exit there, but it was one of those exits which is never ever allowed in any post today where you have a key inside a glass box. You need to break the glass, get the key out and then insert the key into the locked door. This would be very hard to do in a flash fire. Instead he escaped onto a narrow window ledge and fell or jumped to his death six stories below. So it was a tragic event. I ended up writing the cable to Washington on the OECD fire and its aftermath, talking to the French firemen and police. It turned out it was an electrical fire. At least that is what we thought it was, an electrical fire that had been slowly building up and could have broken out at any time. It could have broken out when most of the people were in the mission, too. It was building up slowly. I had felt so overwhelmed in this job, this coordinating job, with just masses and masses of paperwork, we were getting action on every cable that came in to the U.S. Mission to the OECD. After the fire, instead of being overwhelmed by this new job, I was just so happy, I think we all were, to be alive.

Q: Then you left for Hong Kong in 1980.

PLAISTED: 1980.

Q: And your job in Hong Kong...

PLAISTED: I was in Hong Kong from '80 to '83. I had the job that was described as the best FSO-2 job for an econ officer in the Foreign Service because it had so much policy content. I was the Hong Kong watcher in the economic section - a 14 person econ section. I was the only Hong Kong watcher among all the China watchers. In those days we did a lot of China watching from Hong Kong. This eventually gave me some credentials in the China group. It was also considered such a good job because it was the only non Mandarin language designated job in the economic section. I was the Hong Kong watcher. I had a very interesting time in Hong Kong. This was when the crisis in confidence in Hong Kong's future first came up. What was going to happen in 1997 when the lease on the new territories in Hong Kong ran out? It became an issue that early because many of the land leases in Hong Kong were for 25 years, it was a question how are you going to renew these land leases. I was there at the time of the Hong Kong crisis in confidence which happened in '82-'83. Also I was in charge of all of the economic policy issues with Hong Kong. The main one, of course, was textiles. I helped to renegotiate the bilateral textile agreement with Hong Kong in 1981.

Q: Let's talk about the crisis in confidence. I mean it had been agreed that Hong Kong would be turned back to China. The lease was up; the British had accepted the fact that it would go back.

PLAISTED: Well, it wasn't that simple. There was a 99 year lease on the new territories, but Hong Kong island itself was leased in perpetuity. But you can't really separate one from the other. What do you do? Do you recognize Chinese sovereignty over the whole area and turn the whole area back to China? Most people agreed that you couldn't keep Hong Kong as an island by itself, as Hong Kong island, and not have it adjoined to the new territories which is where all the food came in from and where some food was grown. In '82-'83, there was a world recession, economic problems made it more difficult for the Hong Kong businessmen. I remember writing a cable on Hong Kong's future, how actions speak louder than words, because what we were seeing were government officials, and particularly the top businessmen, making very optimistic speeches about the future of Hong Kong - how everything was going to be fine; there was no need to worry. Then if you looked at what they were doing themselves, with their own private investments, they were diversifying overseas as fast as they possibly could, investing more, many of them, in the United States. It was a bit of a mini boom for Hong Kong investment in the U.S. Later a number of the middle class in Hong Kong started resettling in Canada.

Q: Vancouver.

PLAISTED: In Vancouver, yes. My former secretary to this day lives in Vancouver. It was the middle level in Hong Kong who decided to get out. Your top businessmen, many of them had green cards or had other options, so they could remain in Hong Kong. If worst came to worst, they would leave. But they were very busy pulling money out of Hong Kong while making these optimistic speeches. The property prices, which have always been something of a yo-yo in Hong Kong, they go up, they go down, the property prices were falling precipitously at that time. There was real uncertainty about the future. It did take several years before it was finally resolved with Maggie Thatcher and the negotiations over Hong Kong's future which occurred after I had departed Hong Kong.

Q: How did you get information? I mean information is fairly easy to get wasn't it in Hong Kong?

PLAISTED: People were usually fairly willing to talk to you, but they were also terribly busy. You couldn't call on these top businessmen in their offices for any length of time. I got most of my information over the dinner table. I was quite popular on the social circuit. The good news, being a woman, you can always sit next to the principals who were the men. I could sit next to the men whereas my boss, the Consul General, couldn't. He would be sitting next to their jewel-laden wives. So I really was collecting most of my information on the dinner circuit, or socially when you could get involved in more relaxed conversations. I did have close relations with the political advisors and the assistant political advisors in the Governor's office. On trade issues, I had very close contacts with my Hong Kong counterparts. In fact, it wasn't a situation that pleased me very much, but they would hear what Washington was doing on trade issues long before I would. The Brit who was my counterpart, who was in charge of the U.S. office the way I was in charge of the Hong Kong office for the consulate, would take great glee in calling me up and saying "Joan, did you know..." And of course I didn't. When I later became the economic director on the China desk in Washington, one of the first things I did was to make certain we kept our embassies in China and in Hong Kong informed to the extent we possibly could on what was happening in Washington on the issues.

Q: I have heard the Brits have been faulted for getting religion quite late as far as really turning over power to the Chinese residents of Hong Kong. It was British run until very late in the '80s. I am talking about real democracy. What was your impression at that time?

PLAISTED: Some were saying that they acted too precipitously in calling attention to 1997 and agreeing to sit down and negotiate with the Chinese. But on the issue of democracy, in those days Hong Kong really wasn't that actively prepared to run its own affairs, no one was calling for democratic elections. The common wisdom in Hong Kong was as long as everyone is making money, everything is fine. Democracy isn't really an issue. No one was really demonstrating for democracy in those days and the British certainly were not preparing the people of Hong Kong to rule themselves. Most of the business people were really more concerned about the world recession. What did it mean for their exports to Europe, to the U.S. So there wasn't any great progress in those days toward democratization. That all came later, and then in a rushed atmosphere. I would give the British very high marks for establishing the rule of law in Hong Kong. That was something that was always very much respected. It was from my observations a very just legal system, and that is a terribly valuable legacy to leave for Hong Kong, something that Hong Kong is trying to guard today, and one can only wish them well.

Q: I would imagine many of your Chinese contacts there would be continually looking over their shoulder, saying what do you think I should do and all this, preparing a way to get out. Was this something that people were trying to engage you on?

PLAISTED: The mass exodus came a little later after I had departed in '83, but people were starting to look at their options at this time. Hong Kong in the early '80s was largely a Cantonese speaking area, I was studying Cantonese. Well, suddenly a few years later, you could see the signs on the wall, everyone was studying Mandarin to prepare for the future. Now if I were there today, I would be studying Mandarin.

Q: Did the mainland Chinese play a role in Hong Kong at that time, having offices and all that sort of thing?

PLAISTED: There was a Mainland Chinese office in Hong Kong called CITIC, but it was a much smaller office at that point. The Bank of China, which in later years built the tallest skyscraper with bad feng shui, supposedly because of the spiked towers at the top, that all came later when mainland Chinese businesses began moving into Hong Kong. The most visible links with China in those days were economic. Hong Kong was the principal port and still is to some extent for the whole southern China area. My theory was we were looking at the wrong issue, the mainlanders taking over Hong Kong. What was actually happening economically was Hong Kong was taking over China. Hong Kong businessmen were moving their higher priced textile, footwear, and toy factories, things that had become too expensive to produce in Hong Kong, to China. There was a shortage of labor in Hong Kong, so businesses started moving into the area in Guangdong Province right across the border from Hong Kong. I have seen this development from my early days of traveling to the special economic zone of Shenzhen. When I first went over there, Shenzhen was just brown barren land with a few bulldozers. Today it looks like Hong Kong. You see all these Hong Kong investors slowly taking over the southern part of China. Then I watched them over the years move up the river, getting closer and closer to Guangdong and Canton itself. That whole Pearl River delta area developed with Hong Kong money. Now it continues developing up towards Shanghai. Economically you could argue that these overseas Chinese businessmen in both Hong Kong and Taiwan were actually taking over the mainland of China economically, particularly in the area closest to Hong Kong and in Fujian province right across from Taiwan.

Q: From your contacts, what were you hearing from people running textile factories and the like in mainland China? How did they find communist Chinese rule? I mean regulations, getting along, did they find it relatively easy?

PLAISTED: We might get into that more when I am on the China desk and really helped the American business community with all their problems of investing in China. You may want to go into textiles or...

Q: I mean textiles, this gets to be very political in the United States. Well, I guess everywhere, particularly the United States. What was the status of our textile negotiations?

PLAISTED: Our bilateral textile agreement was expiring and we needed to renegotiate it in 1981. Both sides had extremely strong interests. In the U.S., in particular, I think at that time our strongest lobbies were textiles and agriculture. Textiles were exceedingly sensitive politically and economically.

Q: Mainly southern.

PLAISTED: Quite southern. Our major textile manufacturers and some of the southern congressmen came through Hong Kong and really pushed their way through and pushed their way around, and were frankly quite threatening to the Hong Kong side. The U.S. textile trade associations would always be represented and would serve as advisors to the U.S. government negotiators. Mike Smith from USTR was our chief negotiator, and I was on the negotiating team. Our textile industry, we used to call them somewhat affectionately, but not completely, "the sharks." And they were sharks. The Hong Kong government negotiators were subjected to the same pressures from their textile industry, because it was their livelihood that was at stake. What I always wanted to do was put all their industry advisors in a room with all of our industry advisors and compare the agreement they would come up with, with the agreement that the government negotiators eventually came up with. I wanted to see if they could come up with anything that would better serve the interests of the two sides. There was a lot of pressure coming from the U.S. textile industry in those days, making it a very heated and high stake negotiation.

Q: I guess you American negotiators were always being accused of selling out our side. I mean there is nothing easier than being like a Monday morning quarterback.

PLAISTED: I would send in an analysis to Washington before the negotiations began, and we had limits on each category of textiles. We used to get these long discussions on what the limits are going to be on each specific category. In general what the U.S. wanted was further limitations on Hong Kong's exports to the U.S. What Hong Kong really wanted in those days was flexibility to shift between categories, to shift from one category to another, say from men's shirts to cotton pants. You had an idea of what the bottom line was, and we weren't all that far apart. You could serve the interests of both the U.S. and Hong Kong. What I found particularly interesting is we would get in these meetings as negotiators and the talks would just become terribly heated as we were going category by category fighting for each square yard. Then we would break, and all go out to dinner together. We would have a fabulous dinner and talk about everything but textiles, our lives, the quality of the food, and enjoy a delightful time together. Then we would go back into the negotiating room and start banging our fists at each other again. I learned very quickly how to separate the personal relationship from the professional relationship in these negotiations.

Q: How do you characterize the Hong Kong Chinese, were they British we were talking to mainly or Chinese?

PLAISTED: It was always something of a mixed delegation. The top negotiator for the Hong Kong delegation in those days was Chinese, Peter Chou. My counterpart at my level was a Brit, Mike Cartland, someone I stayed in contact with over the years. I always had the highest respect for the Hong Kong negotiators. The Hong Kong administrators would always look for the best person for the job. I think there was a conscious effort later to see that more local Hong Kong Chinese were in these positions in the trade ministry.

Q: Could you characterize the negotiating techniques of the Hong Kong side?

PLAISTED: Hong Kong was always exceedingly well prepared. In almost all the negotiations I have ever been in with dozens of countries, Hong Kong negotiators were among the best. They knew their dossiers very well, had all the facts, had all the figures. I think they were sort of arguing from a perspective of righteousness: We are a poor developing country. This is our lifeblood, which it was certainly to some extent. We are a righteous little free market economy here. Please help us. You don't want to see us all go broke do you big bad west. You in the U.S. have a dying industry. Market forces would declare that you should move into something else, and let our workers work. You don't want to be responsible for the economic downfall of Hong Kong. They had their facts and figures to make this argument. On our side with Mike Smith, I would always try to start catching up on my sleep days before the negotiations began. There were times when we would negotiate for 48 hours straight. I always thought Mike's tactic because he had so much stamina was simply to wear down the other side. When they weren't looking he would slip in a good argument. We would just wear down the other side by being very persuasive and very persistent in the arguments on our U.S. side. This is what the U.S. needs. Our big, bad U.S. textile industry won't settle for anything less.

Q: In all of these negotiations you must have been repeating yourself, and they must have been repeating themselves again and again and again because there were only so many positions to take. I mean what you stated you always have to keep saying.

PLAISTED: There were a lot of industry categories to go through. We actually set what the limitations were going to be in each one of these categories, so there was a lot of detailed work involved in the textile negotiations. One conclusion I reached is that he who has the most stamina is the one who will win in these negotiations.

Q: Well much has been made recently in the training of foreign service officers to bring them up to professional standards to train them in negotiations. Where did you get your negotiating training?

PLAISTED: The same way I got most of my other training in the Foreign Service. I think it is rather hard to train negotiators, but we should certainly try. I got it by doing it for better or for worse. Over the years I got more negotiating experience than almost any other foreign service officer. I just learned it from sitting behind the microphone and from watching. At the OECD I used to watch the people I thought were the really good negotiators. I had a lot of respect for Chuck Meissner. He would lead our delegations on the financial side. I thought he was one of the finer U.S. negotiators I ever saw, so I would observe him and learn and ask him, how do you do it. He would go and take cat naps sometimes in the corner of the negotiating room. If it was 10:00 PM he would go and take a little nap for ten minutes and get his stamina back to keep on negotiating for the U.S. So watching others was key.

Also, I always had a lot of problems with public speaking. When I was first in the Foreign Service I remember making a speech on computer equipment at a Paris Trade Center show. Not only would my voice shake, but my whole body was shaking. I was wearing a little mini skirt, and my colleagues sitting behind me were just laughing, laughing. I was scared to death. So I knew I had to do something about my speaking skills and took the Dale Carnegie course on public speaking in French in Paris. I still had problems with my public speaking skills. I still was afraid to speak in public when I arrived in Hong Kong. What I did to help my speaking and negotiating skills was I went back and retook the Dale Carnegie course in Hong Kong. Thank goodness the course wasn't in Chinese. I was one of two westerners in the class. It was great. I took the entire course again and ended up helping to teach it for awhile, so I could really get over my fear of public speaking to be able to be behind the microphone to represent the U.S. It took a real conscientious effort.

Q: Well now with textiles, all these things eventually keep moving and textiles have moved certainly out there. Were you sensing the beginning of the electronics movement coming into Hong Kong?

PLAISTED: Yes, this was all happening because the labor costs were going up in Hong Kong. So many of the textile plants, the lower end of textile manufacturing, were moving offshore, mainly to China or other developing countries. Footwear was also moving out of Hong Kong. They had to get into the marketing niche where they were competitive and moved up market into electronics, the higher end of the market. At the same time, one of Hong Kong's major themes in our negotiations was Hong Kong is a poor developing country, you should treat us as a developing area. This was particularly important to Hong Kong because the U.S. was cutting trade preferences for the generalized scheme of preferences in those days. When Hong Kong got to be too successful in exporting a certain product to the U.S. like rattan, we would cut it from our GSP list. Of course it was in Hong Kong's interest to argue that they were a developing country. We had one of the top officials from USTR, an assistant USTR by the name of Doral Cooper, come out to take an overview of the trade issues between the U.S. and Hong Kong. My counterpart in the Hong Kong government, Mike Cartland, took great pride in lining up this tour for us. He lined up what I called the less developed country, the LDC tour, of Hong Kong. He found, and I gave him full credit, he found the only unairconditioned car in the entire Hong Kong government fleet. I didn't even know they had them. He had the driver take us out to some of the worst public housing projects. I had toured many Hong Kong public housing projects. I have never seen public housing so bad. The bathrooms shared by many families were as stinky as can be. He found unpaved roads, which is hard to do in Hong Kong. Most of Hong Kong is paved three times over, a highway on top of a highway on top of a highway. We were driving around out in the new territories on the back roads, unpaved roads, where the driver takes us to a rattan factory. Mike had arranged for the owner of this small shop to tell us of his trials and tribulations because the U.S. had just pulled the GSP, his preferences, for his rattan exports which he was no longer able to export to the U.S., and he and his family were going to starve. So it was an absolutely brilliant tour. This was on Saturday. Monday morning Mike Cartland calls me up at the office and says with a bit of a smirk, "Did you enjoy your tour on Saturday?" I said, "It was quite informative, and certainly Doral Cooper was quite impressed." He said, "Well what did you do with her on Sunday?" I said, "I was invited out on the yacht of Fung King Hey," a hundred some foot yacht. Fung King Hey was one of the richest men in Hong Kong. There were headlines in the Wall Street Journal at one point when he was going to buy 10% of Merrill Lynch that read, "Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Fung?" He had sizable wealth. I said, "I took her out on Fung King Hey's yacht, he served us caviar, lobsters, and champagne as we sailed around Hong Kong's skyscraper lined harbor, we had this fabulous time so that she could see the other side to your less developed country - to see how the very top lives." Mike was just furious that I had undercut his arguments for Hong Kong as a less developed country. I think this points up what a very complex place Hong Kong really is even to this day. When I first arrived one of the top businessmen that I was seated beside at dinner said to me, "Joan, throw out your economic textbooks. You just have to look at Hong Kong as it is." He was right. Hong Kong is not a free market economy at all. It is very complex. You have a large percentage of the people living in public housing in what was supposed to be the freest of the Milton Friedman free market economies. So it was unique. You have to just look at Hong Kong on its own.

Q: What about relations with our embassy in Beijing? This is always a tricky thing. At one time Hong Kong was the hub of our China watching expertise and everything else. You know time had gone on, at least eight or nine years by the time you got out there. What was your experience with what you were getting out of Beijing?

PLAISTED: I was the sole Hong Kong watcher. Everyone else in the section, all my colleagues, were all China watchers. In those days, there was a very complementary relationship between what we were doing out of Hong Kong, and what reporting was being done out of Beijing. Of course, over the years, more reporting was moving to Beijing. What we had in Hong Kong, the real strength of China reporting, and the reason we had so many China watchers in Hong Kong in the early '80s, was the mainland Chinese would talk to us when they were in Hong Kong. You just couldn't get that access in China. Nobody would talk to you in those days in Beijing. They were afraid to, so it was very hard to do your duty as a reporting officer if you didn't have anyone you could engage with in Beijing. The reporting targets all seemed to be in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Chinese of course would talk to you. They were going over to the mainland to set up businesses and to visit their relatives, and they were very perceptive in terms of what was happening. They were always willing to talk with the embassy reporting officers. It was a lot easier to get news of what was happening on the mainland in press reports in Hong Kong. There was a real argument that here is where you get access to information. By '85, when I was working on the China desk, the consulate in Guangdong really wasn't doing much reporting. It was either coming out of Beijing or coming out of Hong Kong.

Q: Did you get any feel about the, I don't know what you call it, but the military complex and party complex owning factories and being very much engaged in the commercial world in mainland China? I have heard reports the red army - the People's Liberation Army - owned a lot of factories. Was that a factor in those days?

PLAISTED: No, it wasn't something I was hearing about in '80-'83.

Q: Who was our consul general?

PLAISTED: Tom Shoemith was our consul general when I first arrived. Then later it was Burt Levin who is very dynamic and had a very informal approach. Shoemith I always addressed as Mr. Consul General or Mr. Shoemith. Of course he was the first consul general I had every dealt with. Someone asked Burt Levin at a reception, "What do you call a consul general?" He said, "Burt!" That was his approach. He was very lively, very sociable. What I really appreciated was how very supportive he was of me and my work. He put me in for the Herb Salzman economic reporting award out of Hong Kong. Burt Levin and I were among the few people in the consulate in Hong Kong who were also accredited to Macao, which I visited with him when he first arrived. Burt was going to make his initial introductory call on the governor in Macao. In those days Macao was a really sleepy, sort of seedy, backwater. I thought it was delightful. Burt and I went in and I introduced him to the governor, whom I had met earlier. The lights went out in the governor's office. This is in the middle of the afternoon. The air conditioning went off, and the governor just kept on talking as if this happens every day, which of course it did. We were sort of looking around wondering if we were going to sweat to death. Then about 20 minutes later on come the lights and the air conditioning again. This is Macau - or once was.

Q: Did you find, you wanted to be an Asian hand, did you find that you were up against in foreign service terms the Chinese Mafia, people who learned the language and all and that you were an outsider or was it more welcoming?

PLAISTED: Something of a combination of the two. Here's how I always saw my role, and they always joked about it. My role was to keep the China hands honest, because I was the one non Mandarin speaker, not having devoted my entire career to China. There were times when I thought my colleagues were getting a little too close to the subject or were getting too down in the weeds about who is going to get this or that low position at the next party congress. I was always asking what does it mean for U.S. interests? That is what I wanted to know. That is what the Washington policy makers needed to know. Most didn't really care who got the 20th position in the ranking politburo picture, which is what China watchers get hung up on. The number two position in the economic section came open during my time. The argument came up in the office, who should be the deputy. Should it be Joan? She is only slightly more senior, but she is not a full fledged China watcher. We are all China watchers, shouldn't it be a China watcher? The decision had to go up the ladder to the Consul General. I became deputy of the econ section. So that was something of an issue for awhile.

Q: While you were there, was Taiwan a factor in things you were thinking about, working on?

PLAISTED: No, not really. I think the feeling was everyone was focusing on Hong Kong, on Hong Kong's future. What is going to happen in Hong Kong. There were times I thought we were too narrowly focused. I did a lot of traveling on my own around Asia because I just love Asia. I would go to all these other countries and explore what was happening in Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Singapore, and Burma. The first thing I noticed when I would get off the plane is hey they are not all totally obsessed by what is going to happen to Hong Kong in 1997. I don't think most people outside Hong Kong were even very aware of this issue when it was so all encompassing for those of us in Hong Kong. It was good to get off island every once in awhile just to realize there were other issues out there in the world. The rest of the world was not worrying about this and had its own concerns.

Q: Kicking that island complex is always a problem. From the economic side, were you all looking at the growth of these little tigers, or was that even an expression at the time? I am thinking of particularly Korea, Singapore, Malaysia to a certain extent, Thailand, which now could turn into real economic powers.

PLAISTED: We were looking at them more from the perspective of Hong Kong. How much competition would say Singapore be to Hong Kong - the world's third largest financial center. I remember doing reports comparing the competitive positions of Hong Kong and Singapore. Your U.S. businessman is able to invest anyplace in the area. Does Singapore have more to offer than Hong Kong from a competitive position?

Q: Did you find yourself caught up in promoting Hong Kong as a place to invest vis-a-vis say South Korea or Singapore or something like that?

PLAISTED: It wasn't really my job to say this is better than that. I wasn't really promoting Hong Kong by saying come here and invest. In Hong Kong it was pretty easy to explain the regulations for U.S. businesses interested in coming to Hong Kong. It was very easy to brief Americans to tell them here is what you are going to face. Hong Kong certainly wasn't that bureaucratic. The tax regulations were very clear. Corruption wasn't as much of an issue as it was in other Asian countries. It was very clear cut. You want to set up here, well your property prices are going to be very high, but your work force is going to be very well educated. You are probably going to pay relatively high labor costs. So it was easy for U.S. business to get a sense of potential costs.

Q: You are not going to have hidden payments.

PLAISTED: You are not going to experience to the extent you are in other countries these hidden costs. You didn't need 20 chops from 20 different bureaucracies.

Q: A chop being equivalent to a seal for approval.

PLAISTED: A seal. No, I wasn't trying to get the government to set up one-stop investment shops as I did in other places. It wasn't an issue in Hong Kong. It was so straightforward. It was an easy place to know the regulations and to grasp the cost figures to set up an office. Of course, many companies in those days were setting up in Hong Kong to serve the China region because it was so much easier to do so out of Hong Kong.

Q: Was it the Hong Kong Financial Times or what was the major economic paper that was published in Hong Kong, or was it Singapore? I can't remember.

PLAISTED: The South China Morning Post was the major newspaper. The major economic paper out of Hong Kong was The Asian Wall Street Journal. The editorial staff of the journal was based in Hong Kong. This was another reason for doing so much reporting on China in those days out of Hong Kong. We could talk to all the journalists who were covering China. They were all based in Hong Kong in those days. Of course they aren't today, but they were then. You could share ideas with journalists running around the mainland.

Q: Well, in '83, you were ripped untimely from this delightful place. Were you ready to go?

PLAISTED: I was never ready to leave any of my posts. I always liked them so much, but professionally it was certainly time to move on. It was getting a little frustrating in the economic section. I always felt I was doing half the reporting and then I would go off on leave with one small report to be edited. My boss would jump all over me. I said, "There are 14 officers in this section. I am doing half of the reporting. Keep the report until I get back. But yes, I have a few reports here that are almost done." So it was time to move on professionally.

Q: Did you take Chinese cooking and all that while you were there?

PLAISTED: Goodness, no. I am never going to make it as a chef in life. I did enjoy some of the finest restaurants in the world in Paris and in Hong Kong. Your finest Chinese cuisine is in Hong Kong and Taipei. At least it was in those days. I would go out and sample all these little restaurants. With a good friend of mine, we would take turns each Tuesday night selecting a restaurant. We would go and try some little unknown restaurant. The other person didn't know where we were taking them. It would have to be one that neither one of us had been to before, so we were always looking for new little restaurants. They were all holes in the wall, quite inexpensive, and absolutely delicious. So that was a great way to explore the culinary life in Hong Kong. To give you a little bit of the atmospherics: when I lived in Paris for Christmas eve, I managed to get tickets for midnight mass at Notre Dame. Normally only the ambassador and his wife get tickets. I managed to negotiate 10 tickets as a junior diplomat. Well, I did that for six Christmases with my friends in Paris. So when I got to Hong Kong, the big question was, what am I going to do for a Christmas tradition here? What we did, we had access to a junk - an old Chinese wooden boat - through a friend of mine who worked for one of the major banks. We would sail out to a little restaurant area in an older, more traditional part of Hong Kong where they had live fish swimming around in fish tanks. We would pick out our live fish for dinner, and, with the fish flopping in its plastic bag, walk down a narrow path to pick out a restaurant to cook our fish on Christmas Eve. This became something of a Christmas tradition for me in Hong Kong.

Q: Well then in '83 you finally had to move on. Whither?

PLAISTED: Yes, in '83 I was offered a position with USTR because I had gotten to know Ambassador Mike Smith quite well through 48 hours straight of negotiating textile agreements. He offered me a job in Geneva. In fact he used to call me up from Washington at two or three o'clock in the morning in Hong Kong and give me instructions on what I was going to negotiate with Hong Kong. I said, "Mike, it is two A.M. I am not working." He said, "When you work for USTR, you work for USTR 24 hours a day." I said, "Mike, I work for the State Department. I don't work for USTR." He said, "You will." He was very persuasive, so he convinced me to work for USTR in Geneva as a trade negotiator from '83-'85. USTR stands for the Office of the United States Trade Representative. It is a White House office with a very small but important office in Geneva. Here the main function is to handle all the negotiations in what today is the World Trade Organization, the WTO. In my day it was called the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the GATT. We had some responsibilities in the United Nations Office - in the UNCTAD - the UN Conference on Trade and Development. I was the UNCTAD negotiator. I don't know if that was a blessing or not, but I handled this portfolio when I was with USTR. I did the developing countries' portfolios in the GATT and UNCTAD. I did all the commodity negotiations in UNCTAD. I may not always have been the main negotiator, but I was the one in USTR who oversaw and was involved in all the commodity negotiations in UNCTAD.

Q: What is commodity?

PLAISTED: Commodities, these are talks on just a whole host of products from jute to tropical timber. There is a lead and zinc study group, a coffee agreement, work on nickel. I was also in charge of the meetings in the GATT for the MTN codes on import licensing and civil aircraft. Probably the most important thing I did, the legacy I left, was to help launch the work on services in the GATT so we could move forward and have trade negotiations on services. This became a more important area for the U.S. It is insurance, banking, shipping, an increasingly important segment of our trade in addition to the traditional export goods. I came up with a plan on how we could get service talks launched in the GATT which eventually led to a successful agreement in the WTO on services that took many years to negotiate.

Q: How were things constituted in Geneva? How did you operate? Would there be different subjects that would come up or was it an ongoing move from one thing to another?

PLAISTED: It was a very heavy demanding meeting schedule in the GATT. There were constant meetings of these different committees on civil aircraft and import licensing. There would be meetings or negotiations on commodities in the UNCTAD. I think I handled more meetings than most of my counterparts. I had a more diverse group of subjects to cover. Sometimes I would have overlapping meetings and be jumping in my car going from one meeting to another in the GATT and the UNCTAD. Sometimes I had to call for the help of a colleague since I couldn't physically be in two places at once. It was a very hectic meeting schedule. Of course you had to get your instructions from Washington for each meeting. The issues were often very technical, and I had to become an overnight expert on some of these topics. I made a big mistake when I first arrived in Geneva. I went directly to the office. The phone rang and I picked it up. Someone asked, "Who is going to represent the U.S. tomorrow on tropical timber?" I sure didn't know, I said, but let me find out. I will get back to you. I went and asked my boss. He said, "Oh I forgot about that. You better represent us." I said, "What's tropical timber?" He replied, "I don't know much about it. Go look in the files." I stayed up most of the night and became an overnight expert to the extent one can to prepare for the meetings the next day. To give you a little idea of the atmospherics, there was often a problem of obtaining cleared inter-agency instructions from Washington for these meetings. I have the highest respect for my colleagues at USTR. Of all the government agencies I have worked with, USTR is the most efficient little organization. But there often would be problems in getting cleared instructions. They would call me at home from Washington the night before the negotiations and start trying to give me instructions over the phone which isn't exactly what you want when you are speaking over the microphone the next day for the U.S. government. So that could be a problem. I have seen our ambassador, Peter Murphy, at one point receive his written instructions about five minutes before the meeting started. I was walking across the street to the GATT with him as he was reading his instructions. He read them, folded them up, and put them in the trash can on the street and walked into the meeting. Now I never went quite that far in treating my last minute instructions that way, but that is often when we got our instructions because of the interagency coordination problems back in Washington. Colleges offer courses on "How to Negotiate." I always chuckle wondering if they only knew how it sometimes really happens.

Q: Well, the other delegations since it was such a varied thing must be having somewhat the same problem. In other words you didn't find a tropical timber group of experts arriving and sitting there and negotiating for Singaporeans or did you?

PLAISTED: It could be an issue for other delegations too. Do you or do you not bring in the experts from capitals? It depended on how important the meeting was. It depended on our budget limitations. Sometimes these commodities were the absolute lifeblood to these countries, so their delegates knew all the arguments quite well. I was often learning just as much as I possibly could in a very quick period of time. There were delegates who knew these subjects cold, and who had been in their positions for years and years. In the U.S. we shift our people, so by the time I became an expert two years later, I was off to my next assignment.

Q: Well I would imagine there would be a time when you would be finding yourself in a group talking about left handed widgets or something when somebody would say does anybody here know what we are talking about?

PLAISTED: If we didn't know, I would quickly figure out what it was or find somebody to explain it to me because you had to know these commodities. I also, this is a little more on the atmospherics, noticed an incredible difference in U.S. administrations. It was so much easier to represent the U.S. in some of these meetings when Reagan became president as opposed to the Carter administration. I think back to why it should have made such a difference in these meetings in the UNCTAD. It was just very clear to me and probably to the other countries what our position was under President Reagan in many of these commodity negotiations. It became more of a negative position, more of a no, we are not about to agree to anything like a compensatory financing facility for commodities. If I didn't receive instructions from Washington, I still had a pretty good idea of what the U.S. position was. Almost overnight under Reagan, it became much clearer to me just what our U.S. government position would be.

Q: I would think under Carter with Andy Young in the U.S., somebody could say, poor little us and big you, can't you give us a chance, so our positions were a little bit loose.

PLAISTED: A little more nuanced, for example, on the compensatory financing facility.

Q: Which means what?

PLAISTED: Explaining it very simply, if developing countries had a down year in coffee or jute, the countries aren't able to produce that much, or the world market price had fallen for these commodities, developing countries would be able to make it up through dipping into this fund to subsidize their economies that year. I was quoted in the Financial Times as being very tough, with the U.S. taking a very critical attitude on these commodity pacts.

Q: You know looking at our trade, we often take a stand we are opposed to subsidies, and yet we in one way or another subsidize a lot of our products, don't we?

PLAISTED: Yes, particularly in agriculture. We could argue that the EC does this to a larger extent. It always made it quite a challenge. How can you liberalize trade dealing in a world of subsidies? One of the issues I was working on, it was one of the few trade liberalization agreements in those days, was to reach agreement on expanding the duty free treatment of aircraft parts under the MTN code on civil aircraft. It was one of the few concrete trade liberalization actions the U.S. was able to take at that time. This was an area where countries were certainly subsidizing their aircraft exports.

Q: What role was the EC playing? What was it called? It keeps changing names. It is the European Union, but was it the EC at that time?

PLAISTED: The European Economic Community, the EEC.

Q: Were they acting as one or did they sort of split off?

PLAISTED: It's a good question how they negotiated in those days. In the GATT there was an EEC spokesperson. It was based on a six month rotation among EEC countries. Whoever was in the chair for the EEC for that period of time would be the spokesperson. Then if other countries wanted to say something individually after the EEC spokesperson spoke, they could. Britain would speak as Britain if they wanted to, or the French ambassador would pipe up if he had something to add after the EEC spokesperson had made the opening remarks.

Q: Did the Soviets play any role at this time?

PLAISTED: They weren't in the GATT. They were very much in the UNCTAD. They would play quite a negative role at times. They would really take me on. Most of the time we would just ignore the Soviets because they were ranting and raving over something polemic and I wouldn't take them on. I remember one day, the Russian ambassador took on the U.S. in a most outrageous manner and I was representing the U.S. I absolutely had to go charging back at the Russian ambassador. It became well-known within the Geneva community. Everyone came up to me and said great. We are pleased to see the U.S. challenge the Russians who were getting a little out of hand every once in awhile in the UNCTAD. The Russians are still looking at how to join the WTO today. Talking about the different delegations in the GATT, it was always something of a gentlemen's club. The draft minutes of the meetings that were held would be sent to you, so you could double check your remarks. The minutes were usually quite accurate, but were not perhaps what you should have said based on the instructions you had received from your capital. You could adjust what you said for the recorded record.

Q: Just like an oral history when they get back.

PLAISTED: The GATT secretariat would send the draft minutes to me for correction. As I said, they were always quite accurate with the exception of one thing I would object to, I would call them back and say, "Excuse me, you may not have noticed, but I am a she. You always have me down as he said, and he, he, he. Please note I am a she." "Oh, we can't. We know you are a she, but we can't. You have to be a he in our minutes." I said, "Why do I have to be a he in your minutes?" He said, "Because we have a policy of non-identification of countries, and if we said she, everyone would know it was the U.S. because you are the only female." So I literally went into the minutes as having had a sex change operation. It was a problem to be a female representing the U.S. in terms of the GATT minutes and their non-identification of countries policy.

Q: What was the social life there? I am talking about among the delegates. I mean was this the sort of thing where you were fighting hammer and nails and then go out to a restaurant and chat, or did you go your own way? Were you too busy to socialize?

PLAISTED: At that time we would socialize informally. I remember doing a lot of work around the coffee bar at the UNCTAD. They had a great coffee bar. It was probably the best coffee in Geneva. On a clear day, which wasn't very often, you had a spectacular view of Mont Blanc. I would usually go a little before the meeting and pick up what I could hanging around the coffee bar. I would talk to my friends and colleagues to see what they were picking up. Again I would pick up some information on the dinner circuit. It was always very useful to speak French. The French would sometimes note that French was an official language of the UN and insist on working off French texts. It was very useful to have French and be able to negotiate in French, using the "tu" form with the French speaking delegates.

Q: How did you find the role of the French in these negotiations?

PLAISTED: I think in general they were playing a fairly positive role in the negotiations although they weren't the most active country. In some of the commodity negotiations the French would get very actively involved, defending the interests of some of the African countries where these were the major exports of their former colonies. Of course the French were very interested in what went on in aircraft. They were quite active as you can imagine in the aircraft area. It depended to some extent on the meetings we were in.

Q: Well, did you have delegates coming, essentially industry spokespeople coming over to act as delegates on some of these issues from the States?

PLAISTED: Yes, depending on the meeting. We would definitely have U.S. experts come if it was a major commodity negotiation. Some of the commodity negotiations were based in London, but most of the work would take place in Geneva. It was always a question if it was something I could handle, or if we should bring in the real experts from Washington. When we would bring in the real experts, I was often still be the head of delegation, so I was keeping a close eye on what was happening in all the negotiations.

Q: I think it would always be a problem if you brought in somebody who was an expert in something. They are fine, but they really don't understand the dynamics of the conference and how to get things done. It is not just speaking your piece, but how to work it. I imagine you would have to be the watchdog or something to keep them in line and be effective.

PLAISTED: Depending on who it was. I found that most of the delegates I worked with were real professionals. Many of them had been working on say tin for the last ten years and knew this better than I was ever going to know it. They knew their counterparts in all the delegations because they had been in negotiations for the last ten years together, and they had been together in the meeting in Malaysia, and they had been out to dinner together quite often. They were often informing me of what was going on behind the scenes because they had developed the personal relationships with these people for many years and were giving me some of the inner dynamics of what was happening in the other delegations and where the conference may eventually come out. I was always looking at it from the U.S. policy perspective.

Q: I assume the Canadians are part of this structure.

PLAISTED: Yes.

Q: Because often I have been told by people who have dealt with Canada they are very difficult, not difficult but hard negotiators. Did you find this to be true or in this particular milieu perhaps it didn't many any difference?

PLAISTED: I didn't find them particularly hard negotiators. Particularly in the GATT, their position was almost always very similar to the U.S. position. The Japanese when they would become engaged could sometimes be more difficult in negotiations. I have worked at the U.S. mission to the UN in New York three times now. I have represented the U.S. at the OECD and the UNCTAD. The Japanese had the most difficulty in dealing with me as a woman. I remember once we were very engaged in tropical timber negotiations. The Japanese wanted the headquarters to be in Japan. Eventually they got their wish, but at one point the U.S. instructions were that we not agree to this. As a courtesy, before I took the microphone to announce the U.S.' formal position, I went over to tell the Japanese delegation informally about our negative position. It was a fairly high level delegation, and I explained to their all male representatives the position the U.S. planned to take and why we were taking it at that time. They all sort of looked at me, and they all started bowing in unison.

Q: Putting their heads together.

PLAISTED: ...and said, "It is too bad your position is not as beautiful as you are." One of my great moments in diplomacy, the Japanese bowing and saying it is too bad your position isn't as beautiful as you are. They later succeeded in getting the U.S. position reversed.

Q: As if you could go back and say I would like to change our position as a personal favor.

PLAISTED: One of the things I mentioned, my Geneva days...

Q: This is tape three side one with Joan Plaisted.

PLAISTED: One of the things that was very important in the future negotiations that we were trying to line up on the new round, what became today the World Trade Organization, was to try and move forward with work on services in the GATT. The developing countries were having none of it. They were blocking the U.S. and the Europeans, the developed countries, from moving forward. Services were very important to us. Our exports of services were increasing. The developing countries were doing very little in services, they were very suspicious of the developed countries, and they just wouldn't agree to move forward. Part of the problem was one of our top U.S. negotiators, for whom I have the highest respect, did not want any work to go forward on services in UNCTAD. The developing countries considered UNCTAD as their organization, and it was. They really trusted that organization. I became convinced that if we were ever going to move forward on services in a new round of negotiations in the GATT, we had to let the developing countries do some preparatory work in the UNCTAD. It probably wasn't going to hurt us too much. It was going to hurt us a lot if they would never agree to allowing work on services to move forward in the GATT/WTO. We were never going to get what we ultimately wanted. So I came up with a strategy of how to turn Washington around to get Washington to stop blocking work in the UNCTAD so we could move forward with the negotiations. During a well-timed business trip back to Washington, I got some of my colleagues on board, and then we all took on the main opponent in the U.S. government. Plus, I sent in a cable outlining a strategy on how we could move forward on services in the GATT/WTO by approving work in UNCTAD, and eventually got the top negotiator to change his position. Once the developing countries were able to start studying the issue, I think they started to realize that this really is an area of the future not just for the developed countries but for the developing countries, too. We were able to move forward with what today has become one of the major agreements in the World Trade Organization.

Q: Was third world debt at all an issue while you were there? Was this becoming a concern?

PLAISTED: All the third world issues were discussed in general, particularly in UNCTAD and to some degree in the developing country forum in the GATT, but we really didn't get into debt negotiations per se. Those were taking place in Paris, where the Paris Club was the real forum for developing country debt issues. Any rescheduling of the debt was taking place in the Paris Club.

Q: Did you ever get out and sort of have a busman's holiday and go off and see tropical timber and anything like that? I mean were these things all sort of paper things that you were learning about.

PLAISTED: Unfortunately the U.S. government never sent me to a coffee plantation; they never sent me on a tropical vacation to go look at tropical timber. They never sent me to some Club Med that had jute growing outside of it. No. So it was more theoretical. But I think our real experts on these commodities actually set foot on plantations at some point.

Q: Well, I think this probably is a good place to stop. Is there anything else on the UNCTAD that you would like to cover.

PLAISTED: I would just add in general I had a reputation at UNCTAD of being the iron lady of UNCTAD - always fighting so vociferously for the U.S. positions in UNCTAD. One of our meetings was going on endlessly. I raised the U.S. position and tried to get some support. Nobody was on board, particularly not the Scandinavian countries. They pounced all over the U.S. position. The dialogue went on for another two hours without any conclusion. I slightly rephrased the U.S. position, slipped it in again, and made it a proposal. It was essentially the same proposal of two hours earlier, with a slightly different nuance to it. This time I got everyone to support it. They had been sleeping for those two hours. Perhaps I deserved being known as the iron lady of UNCTAD.

Q: I was thinking, the level of threshold of patience or boredom or something like that must really come into play. You must have people where you know exactly what they are going to say and when they are going to say it ad nauseam. I mean, this must be quite something to keep you going.

PLAISTED: Yes, these were the days before UNCTAD was reformed which it has supposedly been now. Our meetings would literally last around the clock. I spent many a Friday night at UNCTAD until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. There was something of a slogan at that time about what UNCTAD stood for, "under no circumstances take any decision." Another slogan was "A day in UNCTAD lost is a day in UNCTAD gained." You had to pay attention to what other delegations were saying even if you knew what they were going to say. You would get just awfully bored. I remember sitting there and just wishing that some day I would see a punk diplomat, not just everyone dressed in three piece suits. I wanted to see a diplomat with a mohawk with a green stripe in his hair and a ring in his nose. Now I do sometimes see in the British foreign office someone with a facial ornament, but I would pass my nights in Geneva just dreaming of my becoming the first punk diplomat.

Q: Why don't we stop here, and we'll pick this up in '85? Where did you go?

PLAISTED: All right. I go to China. I was on the China desk in Washington from '85-'87. Then I attended the National War College. You are really doing all this in great detail.

Q: Today is August 1, 2001. Joan, China desk, you were there from '85-'87. When you say China desk, did you have the economic slice of the pie?

PLAISTED: Yes. There was the director of the China desk. I was the deputy for economic affairs on the China desk.

Q: Who was the director?

PLAISTED: The director was Dick Williams. There was a deputy director, too, Chris Szymansky. I was the head of the economic side and a colleague of mine, Gene Martin, was the head of the political side.

Q: Now, how did we view China when you arrived on the desk? Whither China at that point; how did we look at it?

PLAISTED: China was just really beginning to open up. Economic reforms were underway. The Chinese were at least giving lip service to wanting to attract more U.S. investment. We were starting to formalize more of our economic relationship, trying to conclude a tax treaty with the PRC. We had negotiated a civil aviation agreement, but it wasn't being carried out correctly from the U.S. perspective. At issue were landing rights. The U.S. wanted to carry forward some of the agreements that we had begun to negotiate with the Chinese. It was also the time when China wanted to join the Asian Development Bank. Taiwan was already a member, so we needed to figure out how China could become a member of the ADB with out ejecting Taiwan. It was the beginning of China's application to join the World Trade Organization which only today is being finalized some 16 years later.

Q: At the desk level was it an optimistic time as far as the China was concerned with China entering the world and all that?

PLAISTED: I always saw my role as not being 100% optimistic. My role was more to inject a healthy realism into the relationship with China. I did see in a number of American VIPs and congressmen going to China and almost kowtowing to the central kingdom, whereas to me tribute, the concept of bringing tribute to the Chinese emperor, was supposed to have ended with the Ching dynasty. I don't know if it was because the Americans drank too many maotais, a terribly strong liqueur served at the banquets, or if it was the tradition of being very polite with the Chinese, but we seemed to let the Chinese really beat up on us. The Chinese would complain loudly about U.S. protectionism, about China wanting to export more to the U.S. No one on the U.S. side really defended U.S. interests with the Chinese. I considered it as my role on the desk to see that our top officials visiting China not only listened to the Chinese perspective with great respect and replied to what we could to meet any just complaints, but also emphasized the need for China to open up its markets to point out that there were problems on both sides. We needed to defend more firmly U.S. interests at that time.

Q: Well, Americans, including official Americans, tend to go overboard on this. There is something about China, and this goes back throughout history. We tend to get entranced with China, not always to our advantage. Did you find yourself being somewhat at odds when the people on the desk beat that around and were you always the person who said yes, but?

PLAISTED: No, I think my boss at the time, Dick Williams, was certainly very receptive to this and to my making certain that our top people visiting China were armed to defend U.S. interests. Vice President Bush visited China in October '95 when I was on the desk. Secretary of State Shultz visited. I accompanied the Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige when he visited China for the Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade. Secretary James Baker who was then Secretary of the Treasury went to China where I joined him in '86 for the Joint Economic Committee, to be certain he was fully briefed for these meetings. I often briefed the principals. They had all the information so when China started accusing the U.S. of not having balanced trade or not allowing China to export more textiles to the U.S., the U.S. side could bring up the fact that China's market was anything but open. The U.S. has one of the freest markets in the world. Just try and get foreign exchange to export textiles to China. There was a need for China to really open up its market, too.

Q: How did the Chinese reply to this?

PLAISTED: I have negotiated with the Hong Kong Chinese, mainland Chinese, and people on Taiwan. The mainland PRC Chinese always had a script, and in those days they were very afraid to deviate from their script. They would have opening statements that would sometimes go on for an hour, and would say almost nothing. Occasionally my Chinese counterparts would engage in fairly hard headed attacks on our economic policy. But it was very difficult to get a real good give and take with the mainland Chinese. You couldn't have a spontaneous exchange at the negotiating table the way you always could with the people from Hong Kong or from Taiwan. The PRC representatives were speaking on instructions and were very afraid to deviate from their text.

Q: Well if something came up would they say excuse us and let's meet tomorrow, and then go back and send off to ask for instructions? Was it that sort of thing?

PLAISTED: Things usually didn't happen that quickly. It was a very slow painful process. When someone would call for a break to get new instructions they would want to meet much later at some future date. One way to deal with them that I discovered was to try not to surprise the Chinese, to let them know ahead of time what issues we were going to raise to the extent possible.

Q: How would you do that?

PLAISTED: Let's say we were preparing for the annual Joint Economic Committee meeting to be headed by Secretary of the Treasury Jim Baker. I would go into detail with the economic officials at the Chinese embassy. I would outline for them what the U.S. was going to raise. Here is what we are going to ask you to do on this item or that, so you can prepare. They could do all their interagency paper clearing processes before the U.S. delegation arrived in Beijing.

Q: I am told that one of the problems, one of the weaknesses of American delegations, was a certain amount of impatience. They want to get something done. Did that play to our disadvantage?

PLAISTED: I think it always does with the Chinese because they had been around for many millennia, they know they are always going to be there, and they take a very long term view of the world. I remember going to Beijing on the initial GATT negotiations. We were trying to make some progress. I don't think any of us would have guessed at that point it was going to take 16 years, and negotiations today are still not completely concluded. It is in the American nature to say let's move forward and try to resolve this issue which certainly wasn't the Chinese mindset.

Q: When you were dealing with them, what were some of the basic issues that were foremost on your plate when you got there in '85?

PLAISTED: One of the really main issues was trying to improve the investment climate for American firms in China and for new firms that would be coming to China. The Chinese were always making general pleas, please give us more American investment, when what they really wanted was please bring the money to China and don't insist on repatriating any profits if anyone is lucky enough to make a profit. Something I always emphasized with them was that the first thing an American businessperson is going to do, someone who is interested in the China market, is to talk to the investors who are already there, so you had better treat the investors who are already in China well because they are going to determine whether or not new firms come into the China market. I was on a presidential aircraft with the Secretary of Commerce, Malcolm Baldrige, flying to Beijing for the Commerce Ministers Meeting. Baldrige was great, he mixed with all of us, he knew his experts were in the back of the plane. He would sit down with each one of us to pick our brains. The idea I had with him was for the United States to present to the Chinese a comparison of the investment climate in all of Asia. What was the tax treatment for foreign firms? How many stops did a foreign firm have to make to get an investment approved? How difficult was it? What were the land and labor costs? The Secretary of Commerce quickly grasped this concept and thought this was a good idea. We did make a presentation together. Actually China turned out on paper a little better than I thought they might. But we did manage to make the point to the Chinese, I think they got it to some extent, that you are not the only country in the world where foreign investors can invest, they can invest any place in the world, so you have to make the climate very attractive in China to attract them. One of the problems that our firms were having in China that we were working on at the time was price gouging that was going on. The cost of office space was going up precipitously. In those days many of our business people had to live in hotels. The hotels were trying to get as much as they could out of the foreigners. The cost of laborers would go up say 20% in no time. Businessmen always want to know what the regulations are going to be. They want certainty. Instead, there was a lot of uncertainty, there were a lot of changes in the regulations. At one point China put new taxes on representative offices. How much control you had over hiring workers for your plant varied by company. Some companies were able to go out and hire workers directly. Others had to work through the labor bureau, and they would be sent workers from the labor bureau to interview and to hire. The question was do you have the right to fire workers once you have hired them. It was very difficult to fire workers at times in China. In those days there weren't many U.S. firms that were making a profit, but if you were so lucky as to make a profit, the whole question of being able to repatriate your profits was an issue. So I spent a lot of my time trying to improve the investment climate for the firms that were already on the ground in Beijing and in Shanghai.

Q: Did you find that with these problems the Chinese authorities finally came around to realize that they were screwing up the works by price gouging or putting on too many regulations and that sort of thing?

PLAISTED: They are never going to come out and say, hey, we are not doing it right here, but I think they had to realize they had a problem. You could see a big chart that shows you Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, what the comparative investment climate is presented to them by the Secretary of Commerce. China had to realize there were other options for U.S. firms to locate elsewhere in Asia. But the Chinese were not going to make changes overnight.

Q: Say a middle sized firm came to you and said what do you think about putting up a factory or selling our product here, what would you, how would you respond?

PLAISTED: I would outline the pros and cons of investing in China, and then tell them, of course most of the firms were savvy enough to know it, to get in touch, too, with the American Chamber of Commerce in Beijing that was very active. The AmCham members were willing to talk to businesspeople who were considering the China market. I would also tell them to talk to some of the major firms in similar industries and would suggest certain people to talk with to see what their experiences had been, and to warn them about pitfalls. Most American firms at that time were going into the market for the long term. They knew they were going to have great difficulties in the short term, but they were looking at the long term potential.

Q: This is really mainly the name of the game.

PLAISTED: Yes, see we are talking about '85 - '87, just when China was really opening up economically.

Q: How about the American Chamber of Commerce? I would think that they would have almost a stake in presenting a slightly rosy picture of investment because they are there, and it would make the Chinese authorities mad if they gave too pessimistic a view and all that, but maybe it didn't work that way.

PLAISTED: The problem with U.S. chambers of commerce the world over is they usually don't want to be openly critical of the foreign government at least not in public conversations. Many of these businessmen who have been living in these countries for some time start adopting themselves the country's view. However, speaking privately, they go off and have tea with the newly arrived businessperson, then they can be much more open in their assessment of the market in China. The chamber itself can be more conservative. When there were issues that were really important for the business community, they could take a unified stance.

Q: Were you seeing a problem with the cadres of local provinces? I understand that one of the big problems, maybe it is more now than it was then, was the cadres of communist officials in the county had to generate their own money so they were coming out with all sorts of self-generated taxes. They have a light bulb tax or something like that just to get money to support the cadres. Was this a problem?

PLAISTED: It always has been a problem in China. If you could convince the central authorities to liberalize a regulation and they issued the decree, it is often not carried out at the local level. It never infiltrates down to the local level, and, even if it does, you have all the vested interests. As you say, local cadres are interested in raising their own foreign exchange by their own methods, so yes, that is a problem in China.

Q: How about intellectual property?

PLAISTED: Intellectual property rights were very much an issue at that point. The Motion Picture Association of America, Jack Valenti, was very active. There was a lot of computer software pirating, a lot of pirating of music and videos. We were working very closely with the Chinese at that point to conclude an intellectual property rights agreement. But then again, once we concluded an agreement, the real problem with the Chinese was enforcement. Okay, you have an agreement on paper but now you actually have to enforce what has been signed to crack down on some of these pirates who were particularly active in the area around Guangdong province because of the ability to export pirated goods to Hong Kong. So it was also a question of being able to enforce the agreements that we had.

Q: One has the feeling that in China today, and maybe then, the old plague of China was warlords. Now it is market lords. But I mean the writ of Peking doesn't weigh very heavily out in the hinterland.

PLAISTED: Then there is also the issue, I think, of the U.S. being a very legalistic society. If we sign an agreement, we usually take that agreement very seriously. American businessmen would say, ah, it is concluded now. The American thinks it is over because the negotiations are over. For the Chinese, now it is time to really begin the negotiations now that you have signed the agreement. Another trade issue I got deeply involved in was our civil aviation agreement with China. Northwest Airlines wanted to fly cargo flights to Beijing, and they needed a permit from Beijing to do that. This was allowed under our civil air agreement. We spent many months trying to and eventually getting the cargo flights approved for Northwest to fly into Beijing, but it wasn't easy. Also U.S. airlines wanted to fly passengers directly to Beijing, not to have to stop in Shanghai. That was a major issue that dragged on for some time. But after many demarches the Chinese finally overturned their refusal to allow U.S. cargo and passenger flights to fly into Beijing. We really were opening up the market at that time.

Q: Were members of Congress weighing in, you know people from the state of Washington saying Boeing isn't getting enough market or what have you?

PLAISTED: I was dealing with the airline representatives directly. I don't remember letters coming in to the Secretary of State urging us to do more, that would usually be if Northwest wasn't satisfied. Northwest knew we were absolutely fully engaged, as they were, trying to open up the China market. The thing that was interesting in those days was that Congress was not at all involved in the issue of most favored nation treatment for China - an issue that later became a major one. It was not so much a political issue then. MFN had to be renewed every year, and it was not something that went to Congress in those days. It was such a routine. I actually drafted the renewal document on the China desk and sent it up to the Secretary of State to approve most favored nation treatment for China. It was so routine that I had to write myself a reminder to do it again in May or June the next year. When I met with my successor, I had to brief him to remember to renew this - to get the documents up to the Secretary of State. I assure you in later years, when this issue became entangled with human rights, no one had to draft reminders on the issue of should we renew most favored nation treatment for China.

Q: Well, 1989, of course, was Tiananmen Square. That changed the whole landscape, didn't it?

PLAISTED: Yes.

Q: Prior to that, correct me if I am wrong, we were looking upon China as developing into a healthier relationship and things were maybe moving slowly, but things were moving along. Were we concerned about human rights or did this intrude into economics?

PLAISTED: At that point, it was the Bush administration, but human rights were always part of the agenda to one degree or another. When you talk about views on China, well China is such a complex area that it gets very difficult to sort out. You get as many views on China as you have China watchers in the U.S. government, of which there were many. I think there were always people all over the spectrum on China. Maybe after Tiananmen everyone saw China with eyes slightly more wide open than before. There were certainly pre-Tiananmen many people in the U.S. government who knew the pros and cons of China and understood its history quite well. China's history consists of a whole series of swings from opening up to cracking down, from power flowing from the central government in Beijing or wherever it is located to the provinces in the south of China.

Q: Were there other issues you were working on at the time with China?

PLAISTED: Yes. The U.S. Senate was blocking a tax treaty the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the business community really wanted concluded with China. We on the U.S. side drafted an amended protocol to the tax treaty, an amendment addressing expropriation that Jessie Helms was insisting upon. Then we had to convince the Chinese that for U.S. domestic political reasons, if we were ever going to get a tax treaty concluded between our two countries, China had to sign on to this protocol on expropriation. It was a pretty technical issue. Jim Baker was then Secretary of the Treasury. I accompanied him to the Joint Economic Committee meeting in Beijing. Baker did a masterful job of explaining to the Chinese the U.S. political realities and where Jesse Helms was coming from, and that for our larger interests would the Chinese kindly sign this protocol, which they did. So we were able finally to get the tax treaty implemented. The Senate ceased blocking it. The treaty passed the U.S. Senate and was ratified. Another issue that came up in my time was China's membership in the Asian Development Bank. How do you identify Taiwan so Taiwan doesn't have to be kicked out of the ADB when China was anxious to come in as a member? I was working out language very closely at that point with Treasury and with the economic policy side of the State Department, with EB. We were able to come up with language that allowed China to come into the Asian Development Bank and for Taiwan to retain its membership.

Q: What was the problem?

PLAISTED: It was a question of what you list as the main name and what you put in parentheses, or with a comma afterward. It was all a question of how closely you tie Taiwan to China. Is it China Taipei? The name finally agreed upon was Taipei, China. This involved quite a bit of technical negotiating. Another issue that came up was technology transfers to China. Various controls existed on sophisticated equipment being exported to China. U.S. exporters were rightly irked because there was a heck of a long backlog particularly in the Commerce Department that needed to review their requests to export technology to Beijing. At the same time China was arguing they shouldn't be subject to any controls at all. Of course we thought they should be subject to some controls. At that point we were working very closely with our partners in COCOM, the coordinating committee on export controls in Paris, and came up with a list of items subject to control and were able to speed the approval of non-strategic technology transfer cases to China.

Q: Were there any people who were dealing with policy when you were going through, saying we had to be careful about China because, while everything is fine now, China may be a major adversary of ours at some point or other. Were people thinking that way?

PLAISTED: There were some forecasts that China would surpass us - if you take their growth rate and multiply it by so many years, China is going to surpass the U.S. in such and such a year. They are going to become a major economic competitor. That was always something that came up in very optimistic articles on China's economic potential. Most economists, however, realize one has quite a challenge in developing all of China to the point where it truly becomes a highly competitive economic power.

Q: Moving away from just trade relations, we were also looking or was somebody looking at China as an economic creature itself and how it was coming along? I mean whither China economically?

PLAISTED: Yes. We were looking at China's economic reforms, and looking at the whole state of China's economy. This is something that both the U.S. and China started to do, especially looking at China's application to join the world's main trade body, the GATT. You had to do an overview of the Chinese economy. It was so hard in those days. It still can be difficult today to get anything like reliable trade statistics or economic statistics. We always had a running argument with the Chinese. They would argue they were running a huge trade deficit with the U.S. which was very interesting because our figures always showed no such thing. Our figures showed China was running quite a healthy surplus, healthy from their perspective, with the U.S. They weren't counting trade that was going through the port in Hong Kong. One of the things I did in those days was to get the Chinese to agree to have their statisticians sit down with our statisticians and at least figure out what each side was counting. So, yes, we were focusing on the overall economy, but even for the Chinese I think it was difficult for them to get a grasp on what was happening. But you could see it visually. Driving through China, waiting a year or two, going back through the same area again, visually you see enormous progress, the number of new little factories that were being set up, more cars as opposed to bicycles on the streets of Beijing, a real increase in pollution. Whether that is a sign of advancement or not, you could visually see dramatic change.

Q: Were you seeing an increase and increasing Chinese influence of Chinese who let's say were involved in economic business management coming to the United States and getting degrees and then going back? Was there an American educated economic cadre developing?

PLAISTED: There was. It was very much the thing to do if you could possibly afford it - for the Chinese to come to the U.S. at that point. But many of them were staying, and the Chinese government would complain. Of course, the U.S. government had very little control. We were hardly going to be able to track down all these Chinese students and send them back to China. But what you would find is many of the Chinese students came to the U.S. to study medicine, and said I really don't think I want to go back and be a barefoot doctor in the provinces. That was the problem. They were coming to the U.S. to be educated but many of them were staying here in the U.S. for the professional opportunities afterwards.

Q: While you were dealing with this, did you find yourself in the whole China operation in the State Department? You mentioned before in Hong Kong that the China watchers got into who is number 14 in the picture showing the politburo and how things are going. Did you find that the China watchers were sort of up in the air looking at who is doing what in the political sphere whereas you had the feeling that this is all very cute, but what does that mean for major relations which were economic?

PLAISTED: Yes, very much so. I think in Washington we were all more focused on the policy process whereas, out in the field, you are not quite as focused on doing things that are going to get results. But, yes, there was always someone who was saying what does this really mean and what can we do with it? Also I remember discussing, arguing to some extent with my Chinese colleagues. I had been in China and had met Li Peng who was then Energy Minister. This was the U.S. Secretary of Energy's trip to Beijing where he met with his counterpart. Li Peng had made a point of saying he really wanted to visit the U.S. He had been in the U.S. only once before. When we looked into it, he had been very critical of the U.S. when he first visited. So I was arguing with my bosses that we should arrange a USIA-type sponsored trip for Li Peng because I really think he has a great future, or he may have. It is a worthwhile investment just to bring him here, give him a three week trip, show him whatever cities he wants to see so he would understand the U.S. a little better. If he wants to criticize us, fine, but he should do so from an educated basis. Let's pay some more attention to Li Peng. I remember really arguing with the China hands. They said no to any trip, they were not thinking at that point he had much of a future. He truly did.

Q: Where is Li Peng now?

PLAISTED: He rose to become premier in China and Chairman of the National People's Congress.

Q: Did you get the trip for him?

PLAISTED: No, I never did. The real China experts thought someone with a brighter future should get the trip.

Q: While you were again with the China watchers, was there concern or consideration to the fact that you are getting a lot of students and other people who really...? Was there concern you have a very elderly central committee in China at that time and growing aspirations of many of the people? Revolutions usually don't start when everybody is poor; they start when aspirations go up, and there might be another revolution and the aging central government might not be able to cope with it. Was this part of the discussion while you were there?

PLAISTED: Yes, it was an issue that was raised particularly at China conferences where we had some time to reflect on what's happening and also on what are the political views of the new generation in China. How educated are they? How free are they to express their views, and how would that new generation seize power? I don't think anyone had any real answers on how the transition is going to take place, and also how quickly is China going to be able to democratize or open up - whatever you want to call it. That was something that was very interesting during the time of Tiananmen. There was an embargo at the top in China that no information was to get out to the news media, but they didn't turn off the fax machines. There were any number of fax machines in large businesses, and news reports on what was happening at Tiananmen, the deaths, the brutality, were being faxed out of China at that point. You get to a point of westernization or modernization with the Internet, with mobile phones, where it is very hard for the top cadre to cut off all communications.

Q: Was it an article of faith, maybe I am overstating it, but among the people in the State Department who were dealing with China that as economic policy liberalized this would eventually bring democratization in government? Would economic opening work down to political liberalization?

PLAISTED: No, I don't think that was an absolute. There was always an expectation once their economic policy liberalized it would open up the country more. There were also many discussions in policy circles that what is really predominant in China is political. You know when push comes to shove what you see is political control. Once Tiananmen started getting out of hand, from the perspective of the aging Chinese leadership, they really had to crack down to maintain political control. They weren't concerned about all these western contracts. They were not asking, "What impact is this going to have on China's economy? Will there suddenly be export controls that are going to be placed on us? Is the U.S. going to block our ADB loans?" No, it comes down in the final analysis to we are losing control of the country. It is time to crack down.

Q: What about the People's Liberation Army, the PLA, as far as its control over sources of economic machinery? Was that anything we were looking at at that time?

PLAISTED: It wasn't that much of a political/economic issue then. I know subsequently it became an issue of what the PLA was selling, what goods are being manufactured in jails, what's being manufactured by free or forced labor. The labor unions in the U.S. later became active. I don't remember that as being a really major issue in the mid-1980s.

Q: How about trade complaints? Did there seem to be a disparity about how trade complaints were settled in the United States? I am talking about say a Chinese who was having trouble with Sears Roebuck or something like that. We have our courts and it is fairly routine, but what about if Sears had a complaint about its supplier in China and wanted to do something about it. Was that a problem?

PLAISTED: It was always an issue of how you deal with problems. For example, McDonald's had a great location near Tiananmen Square; the Chinese wanted to take the land. McDonald's had the legal right, I believe, but that can mean little. In the final analysis what we did and what I tried to do was to have the next secretary or cabinet level official going to China raise it at the highest level. Ultimately the best way to deal with the Chinese we always found was to raise issues at the highest level. You really need to bring it up to the highest level to get attention. You might take something to the Chinese court system, but that is a losing battle. It wasn't the way to go. If it is a major issue that happens, a big trade complaint, you have to go in and make a demarche at the very highest level.

Q: That must have meant that our cabinet officials when they went to China were handed a huge pile of situations. They must have said oh my God.

PLAISTED: It's true. We just had the Secretary of State's visit to China. He raised human rights issues at the very highest level. My point is you have to make a demarche at the very highest level to get China's attention. I'll give you another example of how we handled big problems. The China desk was about a 14 person desk. There was a major conference taking place in another agency. Someone had to stay behind on the desk to be in charge if anything came up. So all my colleagues, all the true China hands who spoke Mandarin, went off to the conference, and I volunteered to stay behind, to be the one to handle anything that came up. The New York Times journalist, John Burns, was arrested in Beijing on my watch. I got a call from the editor of The New York Times, A.M. Rosenthal, to call this to our urgent attention. Of course we immediately got on it. I called in the middle of the night to our political counselor in Beijing who confirmed that yes indeed this had happened. I called the Chinese embassy in Washington to alert them to what had happened. I alerted the op center and called my bosses at the conference. But by the time they came back, I had already drafted a demarche, knowing this should be raised at the highest levels. I drafted a demarche so that we could start the process to protest and to free the journalist.

Q: What happened?

PLAISTED: It was a time consuming process. This went on for many days after we were notified of the arrest. But John Burns eventually was released.

Q: What was the problem? What did he do?

PLAISTED: It was a general charge that the journalist was spying. He may have been a little too close to what was a military facility. From our perspective there was never any thought that this New York Times journalist was out there spying on the Chinese.

Q: As you were observing the Chinese, the mainland Chinese, how were they treating the Taiwanese, because China, I believe, had opened up by that time to investment from Taiwan?

PLAISTED: Yes, Taiwan investment at this point was really beginning to flow into southern China and into Fujian province. It was a time when you couldn't trade directly, you still can't, between Taiwan and China, but there was a lot of trade flowing indirectly through Hong Kong. Taiwan investors were going into China because this was the time where from Taiwan's perspective their dollar had appreciated so much it really made economic sense for them to relocate their factories just right across the Taiwan Strait to China. So it was a time of a real boom in southern China with investment flowing in from Taiwan.

Q: You know we have this peculiar relationship, American interests, with the Taiwan people - I mean our own Americans dealing with Taiwan. Would you compare and contrast and all that? They were located where? What was it called then?

PLAISTED: The American Institute in Taiwan, in Rosslyn, Virginia, and in Taipei. We would see reporting on the China desk from the American Institute in Taiwan in Taipei, and, of course, the American Institute in Taipei would always see reporting coming out of Beijing and Hong Kong. There's always in the State Department someone who follows Taiwan from the policy perspective. There was a Taiwan section in State to follow the policy issues. The relationship with AIT in Rosslyn depended on who the director was - whether it was more than an administrative function on staffing issues with AIT in Taipei. There was a hall connecting the China desk and the Taiwan section in the State Department. We always referred to that little narrow corridor as the Taiwan Strait. They were there. They were there to consult with if there was some issue with Taiwan.

Q: I think our people in Taipei, for example, I am talking about your particular bailiwick, the economic side, would be getting some very good information because here were people who were much more open. I am talking about the Taiwanese going in and investing and coming back and telling our people, so in many ways it would be a very solid source of information about how economics were working from this particular source.

PLAISTED: That is very true, and, as I was mentioning earlier, too, we were getting the same type of information in Hong Kong. This is why we have China watchers in Hong Kong because it is a much more open place to get information. People are willing to talk to you, and you can pick up a lot of atmospherics.

Q: Did you find that our economic people in Beijing were somewhat inhibited about getting out and around and being able to have good talks?

PLAISTED: It was very difficult for them to get information. I think the Chinese at times were hesitant to talk with them on anything other than a real formal basis and to engage in a give and take with U.S. government officials. Once the Chinese got beyond their instructions they were a little lost for words. So it was difficult to get that same type of exchange. Of course language was always an issue. The Americans had to speak good Mandarin because once you get down to the middle level of the Chinese government not everyone is speaking English in Beijing or has an interpreter.

Q: What about the academic world? People in the academic world are looking at China, and at other countries in the world but particularly China, and writing things, whither China? The political scientists and economists are looking at China. Were you able to sample much of this?

PLAISTED: The academics would come in sometimes and talk to us on the China desk and we would sometimes go out to lunch. But frankly we were so busy pursuing all the day-to-day policy issues on what was happening. We didn't have much time to reflect. It was always a great luxury to be able to sit down with China scholars and enjoy an intellectual discussion on whither China, which of course we are still debating today. There were often China conferences at Brookings and other institutions taking place in the area. It was great if you could break away and attend them which we were always quite welcome to do if we had the time to do it.

Q: This is one of the things, with this oral history project. We are supplying some ammunition for the academics of the future. But I have always been struck by the fact, and this goes back to when I was in the Foreign Service, too, of how little time there is. Academics are writing about this or that, but the people who are actually dealing with policy, usually there is not much of a connect because they don't have time, and after awhile, they haven't found what the academic is writing that useful. I mean it would be nice, but it is almost a luxury.

PLAISTED: It depends on your academic. There are always some I have a lot of respect for. If they would write something, they would send it to me and I would read it on my own time depending on the academic. But there wasn't always the luxury of taking off to go to a China conference. I was always quite professionally free to do so and my staff was, too, but we had to get our briefing papers up to the seventh floor for the next cabinet meeting or to go brief someone who was going off to China. Alas there was always something more urgent to do.

Q: Did you get any feel for Secretary Shultz and his interest in economics of China?

PLAISTED: It was our office director who accompanied Shultz on his trip, so he had more of a feeling for the Secretary of State. I accompanied the Secretary of Commerce, Matt Baldrige, and the then Secretary of the Treasury, James Baker. We also backstopped Vice President Bush's trip to China in October 1985 and briefed him before his trip. I was impressed by a question Bush asked about what the U.S. would do if Taiwan sought independence from China - a very foresighted question.

Q: How did that trip go?

PLAISTED: It went quite well. Of course the Chinese treated Bush royally as they always do. It was his return to China after having opened up the mission in Beijing, so it was quite a historic return.

Q: Is there anything else you think we should cover here? In '87 you went to the War College. Which war college?

PLAISTED: The National War College at Fort McNair, the top military academy.

Q: So that would be '87 to '88. How did you find your experience there?

PLAISTED: Well it was very interesting on a couple of fronts. When I was first assigned to the War College, my reaction was Great! I am going to have a year off, and I can pursue my own interests. There are no grades at the War College. No one really checks on you. You do have to attend classes, but this is going to give me time to do what I want to do. I really was very interested at that point in reading a lot of history and trying to integrate what was happening in western civilization with what was happening in the eastern world. I don't think anyone had ever written a book really integrating eastern and western civilization. How could Kenneth Clarke entitle his book Civilization and not say a thing about China? That was going to be my personal project during this year of freedom. Well, once I started attending the War College, sitting in the auditorium, I was absolutely enthralled by the quality of the speakers we were hearing. We would have a session on the Presidency and every chief of staff going back to Ed Meese, in Nixon's days, and even the Eisenhower administration would come and speak to us. Every 45 minutes here comes another chief of staff for the former President of the United States to talk to us. We just had such top exposure. We would go to the Supreme Court and talk to some of the justices. I started getting really involved in the academic program at the War College. You could take elective courses in the afternoon. Everyone took three electives. I asked why can't you take four? They said well you could. No one has ever done that. Well the price was right. I wasn't paying for this and the courses were fascinating, so I was adding an extra course each semester because it was just such a fascinating place to study. Some of the professors were superb, including Mel Goodman on the Soviet Union. The professor who handled the Middle East taught me a lot about what I knew about the Arab world before my tour in Morocco. Academically I took full advantage of the War College. I went on almost all of the voluntary trips. I crawled around the back of a B-52 bomber when we visited the SAC, the Strategic Air Command, in Omaha. I went to Colorado Springs where we visited NORAD and Spacecom. I visited the scenic Coast Guard facilities in San Francisco. I descended down into the missile silos in Minot, North Dakota, at the Minot air force base. So academically it was a fascinating place. As a woman, all of a sudden at the War College, my antenna was sort of raised, because of the things that were happening all the time. Little things. I was always getting Mr. placed on my name tags. There were 14 women at the War College at that time, but they just didn't seem to be prepared to deal with women. It would come up in very small ways. At one point, I probably could have made a name for myself at the War College, I was going to write to the commandant who is in charge of the War College and tell him how delighted I was with his policy of topless bathing at the swimming pool, that I felt right at home just as if I were on the French Riviera again. I wanted to congratulate him on his liberalism that I would not have expected to find at the National War College. The student handbook read, "upper garments must be worn at all times except at the swimming pool." I would have made quite a name for myself at the National War College testing the commandant's policy. But those are the type of things that I was running into all the time at the War College.

Q: Could you give a few samples?

PLAISTED: The head of the Marine Corps came in to address us. He starts talking about the role of the wives in the military being to support their husbands and how wives are expected to work for the military and it should be voluntary. They shouldn't expect to be paid for it. This is part of how the husband is going to be judged in his career. I guess there were no women in the Marines, he could say this. This was at a time when the State Department was starting to pay spouses for their work overseas. It was no longer expected to be completely on a voluntary basis that spouses were going to help others integrate into the society, the post. State was moving a little beyond expecting spouses to be unpaid laborers overseas. When the Marine Corps commandant spoke even my colleagues in the military were startled at some of the remarks he was making.

Q: In my generation in '55, almost all of us were male, and almost all of us had served in the military. So we had a feel for the military. You came in at a time when very few new incoming officers had military experience. You had none. Did this give you a better feeling towards the military and how it operated and so on?

PLAISTED: Oh very much so. I think this is what happens with every class at the War College. At the beginning, you have the civilians on one side - the civilians are from the State Department, CIA, AID - and the military on the other. We are looking at them suspiciously, and they are wary of us. Well, you can't fly an F-16. You don't have much policy sense and are afraid to write a five-page paper. By the time you run all these exercises together and realize the skills we can draw on from the military and the skills they can draw on from the State Department types, eight months later, you have developed a real healthy respect for each other. But it evolved gradually working together, jogging together. By the time you completed the War College you are looking at your colleagues in a very different way.

Q: Well, it is a very important project I think.

PLAISTED: Oh, yes, it was just a fabulous experience, a very useful year. I feel very fortunate to have had that year at the National War College. There were field trips. Everyone was bidding on China. You know, you bid on trips. Everyone's first choice was China. Well I don't know how many times I had been to China in the last year. I had ranked it as number 13. The last place in the world I wanted to go to was China. I had never been to Central America or Latin America. I ended up going to Central America.

Q: A very hot time.

PLAISTED: Yes. We went to Costa Rica and called on President Oscar Arias, the Nobel Peace Prize winner. I remember he sat there at the head of the table with his arms crossed in a defensive position and said, "National War College! Why are you called war? Why don't you call yourselves National Peace University?" I had to explain to him how you have to be prepared to fight the war in order to ensure a world at peace. After he talked to us for awhile and realized we weren't all cold warriors, then he started to open up, uncrossed his arms, and gave us a fine briefing on what was going on in Costa Rica at the time. We also called on Duarte of El Salvador. We were riding around in bulletproof vans escorted by armed guards. It was a very frightening time to be in El Salvador. I remember Duarte seemed to be quite pessimistic, quite sad. Just a couple of weeks after we left, it was announced that he had a very serious health problem.

Q: This is Napoleon Duarte.

PLAISTED: Yes. So the War College overall was a very positive experience that I would highly recommend to anyone who is selected. At the beginning I really wanted to go up to Harvard. There was one slot at Harvard. After I was at the War College for a few weeks I thought I can't imagine Harvard would be any better than this.

Q: Harvard, or at any university, you get good courses, but that is just a continuation of where we all came from. You go to the War College and it is a full grown exposure to another culture, plus the fact you are getting top rate people from all places now. Okay, in June of '88 you were getting out.

PLAISTED: Let's move on to Taiwan.

Q: Okay. Then you went to Taiwan in 1988 and you were there from '88 to when?

PLAISTED: To '91.

Q: What was your job?

PLAISTED: I was the head of what was one of the very few combined economic commercial sections that were still left, because most of the Foreign Commercial Service had been set up, most commercial sections had been split off at that point. So I headed about a 40 person economic commercial section. We had a trade center in Taipei putting on exhibitions, with a large commercial staff. Taiwan was our second largest trade deficit after Japan in those days. It was very clear Taiwan's market had to be opened up. Even Taiwan was starting to realize it. I headed all the trade negotiations, and there were endless trade negotiations, to really open up Taiwan's market. I was very pleased that by the time I left Taiwan had fallen from number two place to number five. It wasn't completely due to our hard work at the American Institute in Taiwan, but Taiwan had fallen to fifth place in terms of our trade deficit, behind Japan, China, and others.

Q: Before we go into that, could you explain because I think it needs explaining what you and everyone who serves there had to go through and your official status when you went to Taiwan?

PLAISTED: This is the American Institute in Taiwan. To serve there, you have to resign from the Foreign Service. We only have economic, commercial, cultural and other relations with Taiwan. After we recognized mainland China, we ruptured relations quite precipitously and quite rudely with Taiwan. So I had to resign from the Foreign Service, to turn in my resignation. I think it actually appeared in the State Department magazine that I had resigned because I was getting letters from friends saying, Joan, what happened? They knew I really loved my career. I think they thought I had a terminal illness to resign. But then about three years later I miraculously reappear on the rolls of the State Department. You continue your retirement benefits although those got a little messed up. You continue the same benefits, the same health benefits, but you do formally resign from the Foreign Service to serve in Taiwan.

Q: Well then who was the head of the institute?

PLAISTED: David Dean was the director of the American Institute in Taiwan in my day, and Scott Hallford was the deputy director. Since we do not have official relations, we do not have an ambassador.

Q: So basically you were a regular embassy with an economic commercial counselor.

PLAISTED: Yes, but because of the importance of our economic work there, I was the number three, the third ranking person in AIT.

Q: Who was the top economic person?

PLAISTED: I was.

Q: Oh, you were. Now you were number three...

PLAISTED: After Scott Hallford, the deputy, or the DCM.

Q: Well now, you go out there. I am sure in your portfolio you are saying look at this deficit, do something. How do you go about doing this?

PLAISTED: Look there are so many different areas where you can start opening up the Taiwan market. I think one of the first messages we had to get across to Taiwan was to really make them realize it was in their own interest. The time had come. They always wanted to be a more active member of the world community. My message was, it is in your own interest to open up, to liberalize. Then you start attacking the deficit in every way possible from negotiating with them on reducing very high tariffs to endorsing intellectual property rights. We signed a copyright agreement, renegotiated a textile agreement, concluded agreements on strategic trade controls, steel, machine tools, opened up the banking, insurance, and securities markets, negotiated a drift net fishing agreement, several agreements on nuclear cooperation, and a beer, wine, and cigarettes accord. These are all negotiations that I was heading. We would often have delegations coming from Washington. I think one of the most important things that happened during that time is Taiwan's action in response to U.S. pressure because the omnibus trade act was coming up. Taiwan's president announced, and put his personal imprimatur on it, the President's trade action plan, a Taiwan initiative to liberalize trade, which is something that we really supported. He left out intellectual property rights, a most important area. I very quickly called up my then counterpart, who was Vincent Siew who later went on to be the premier of Taiwan, and said, "Vincent, this is really great. This is a good Taiwan initiative. Obviously you are targeting this at the U.S. Don't you think you want to include intellectual property rights?" He knew the atmosphere and very quickly realized this was quite an omission.

Q: This has been sort of a hallmark. Everybody who thinks of Taiwan in the old days thinks of it as being the source of cheap books and all that. That is what they focus on.

PLAISTED: So Vincent very quickly grasped the problem and said, "Well, let me discuss this and see if it could be part of the President's trade action plan." Of course it was added. So my main thrust is trying to get Taiwan to realize it is in its own interest to open up and then to say let's work together.

Q: Well, had they sort of picked up old habits from their mainland days, or was this a revenue issue? Were they thinking in terms of infant industries and trying to develop them and maintaining all these various barriers?

PLAISTED: Well they did in those days have the world's second largest foreign exchange holdings. So they were a very wealthy area. I think a lot of these barriers were just left over, too, and they had gone through very hard times right after the war. I think now they realize it is very much in their interest to export more globally, and they were going to have to open up their markets, too.

Q: Did you find that in China, I mean in Taiwan, that when something came out of the ministry it was more likely to be enforced than when you were dealing with mainland China?

PLAISTED: Oh yes, very much so. And Taiwan had the means to enforce it, too. So if an agreement was concluded with Taiwan, we never had to really worry that it would not be enforced. We could quickly go over and make a demarche. Taiwan would know if there was some political reason an agreement was not being enforced, would figure out why, and identify the problem. There was always a real exchange of views.

Q: Did you find for example that as you sat down and were negotiating, you were close enough to the seat of power that you didn't have to wait forever in order to notify them, to get instructions and all. Were they more flexible?

PLAISTED: Very much so. They were always exceedingly well prepared. Something I initiated that helped us, I think, to make progress in all these negotiations with Taiwan was something I had done with textiles in Hong Kong. Before the talks, if it was at all possible, we would exchange papers with them or at least give them a one or two page paper saying this is the U.S. position, this is what we are asking you to do, here is why we think it is important. So Taiwan would know in advance what we were going to say at the negotiating table and where we wanted to come out. So that gave them before the talks the ability to go and do their interagency clearance processes. Also I'd always send a cable to Washington before the talks. My staff who handled each of these areas would draft a cable explaining what we thought we should try to get out of the talks and what we thought Taiwan's position was going to be. So that really speeded things along. And again Taiwan didn't like surprises, so it helped them prepare. And they had some brilliant people on their side. I remember there was one lawyer who was so good who took part in almost all of their trade talks. We always wanted him to come and join our side of the table.

Q: Did you find a lot of Taiwanese students went to the United States? At that point were they beginning to come back?

PLAISTED: Yes. The Taiwan students did go back in general. Of course I am speaking in generalities, but the Taiwan students seemed to go back. It was also very important to the people on Taiwan to go to top name U.S. universities. Their calling cards would often note the school they had attended if it was prestigious. When someone would present me with his calling card, it would often give the name of the person and then underneath his name, not his job title so much as where he graduated from - which university. They always liked it to be a recognizable name. So if you received a calling card, you could see where the person went to school, thus emphasizing the importance of education which I have always highly respected. I think it accounts for some of the success of Taiwan and Hong Kong, the importance of education.

Q: Korea, too, and obviously Japan. Did we ever use that sort of not as a policy instrument but to have the University of Chicago alumni group, I mean university and college alumni groups, getting together in Taiwan and the embassy sponsoring them?

PLAISTED: I remember getting together with my best Taiwan girlfriend who graduated from Wellesley, getting together with the Wellesley University group and meeting with the president of Wellesley. But it was done informally, more informally than through the American Institute in Taiwan.

Q: Did you find once you settled in there that being an institute rather than an embassy, did that really change things at all? Was it a delicate relationship with Taiwan?

PLAISTED: Yes, you had to be really careful about the terminology. We were never to refer to Taiwan as a country since we recognized Taiwan as a part of China. We did not meet in government officials' offices. This led to frequent lunches and dinners. We had to be certain that someone wasn't going to go running off to call on the president of Taiwan in his office. There were things that just weren't allowed that visiting U.S. government officials just were not meant to do. I remember we would have top level congressional visitors and Taiwan would always try to get more recognition. We would always want congressional members and USG officials to start with a briefing at the American Institute in Taiwan. Part of it was I would brief them on the substance of where we stood in terms of trade liberalization, always telling them the glass was half full or half empty. It depends on how you look at it. But at the same time we wanted to brief them very early on in their visit to Taiwan on the do's and don'ts, on just how one goes about business in this very strange set up we have on Taiwan where we don't have government-to-government relations.

Q: How about the service industries? I am thinking of insurance, banking, advertising, you name it, legal firms. Was there much of an opening for these in Taiwan at that time?

PLAISTED: It was a section that did have to be opened up. Taiwan's service section wasn't that open to U.S. firms. So it was an area where we were negotiating to really open up the banking market, the securities market, and the insurance market. This was all very much in the vanguard in those days.

Q: Did they see that by opening up that would open things up for them, too?

PLAISTED: Yes, and they were always looking for ways to ally themselves closer, to establish a closer relationship with the United States. I think Taiwan realized that if they could get more U.S. firms to locate in Taipei that could lead to a lobby promoting closer ties.

Q: Were we seeing their surplus as a target to get them to invest in the United States?

PLAISTED: We weren't asking them to invest in the U.S. We were seeing their surplus as a need to appreciate their currency, the NT, the new Taiwan dollar. We were often writing reports on exchange rates for Treasury, and Treasury was pressuring them to appreciate the new Taiwan dollar. I talk about this great success in getting Taiwan to drop from number two in terms of the U.S. trade deficit after Japan to number five. If you want to know the real secret of our great success, it really wasn't all these great trade negotiations I headed across the board. You get Taiwan to reduce their tariffs, open up services, crack down on copyright violations - that takes a long time before it shows up in trade statistics.

So the real secret of how we dropped, how Taiwan dropped to fifth place, was not my great, brilliant negotiating. It was that the new Taiwan dollar through various means appreciated so much it became uncompetitive for Taiwan firms to continue manufacturing and exporting from Taiwan, so they all moved over to China, Fujian province, and started setting up textile plants, footwear plants, light electronics goods factories, and exporting to the U.S. from China. We no longer had a Taiwan problem, we now had a China problem with our trade deficit, but it was no longer my problem.

Q: As a consular officer, if there is an accident, and you ask very carefully just where did it happen, and if it is somebody else's district, well I will tell my colleague to take care of it. You really have been in the field of negotiating for a long time, and the United States in the beginning was sort of benevolent in negotiations and not very insistent. You came early on the scene when all of a sudden we discovered this is costing us money. Did you find that by the time you got to Taiwan they kind of had book on you and knew who you were and were familiar with your negotiating technique. "Oh, my God, here comes the iron lady..."

PLAISTED: No, I don't think I came to Taiwan with a pre-established reputation as a really tough negotiator. I had not worked with Taiwan in the GATT, UNCTAD, or the OECD. They weren't members. The Americans in the American Institute of Taiwan had heard of me by reputation, but the Taiwan negotiators, I don't think they had gone out there and actually studied my tactics and battle plan.

Q: Well, you were there in '88-'91, and of course there was the whole Asian thing particularly in '89 in June with the Tiananmen Square incident. How did that hit you all? When you all were watching it, particularly China watchers, what were they saying as they saw this, because this went on for some time. The demonstrations weren't a short term thing. It took quite a while to develop. Was there concern or what was the feeling?

PLAISTED: I remember watching this slowly build up and the demonstrations became larger and larger. I just remember myself about two weeks before the Tiananmen crackdown thinking and mentioning to some of my China colleagues that China was going to crack down. Others weren't too certain if Beijing was going to crack down or not. I sensed they would. It is just not in the Chinese nature in Beijing to let things get so much out of control. Unfortunately, they did as I had predicted and cracked down hard. I remember I had gone outside of Taipei for the weekend. We had a little guest house up in the mountains. The worst part about living in Taipei is the horrible pollution downtown, so I would flee on weekends to get a bit of fresh air on the top of the little mountain up in our director's guest house. He would kindly open it up to the embassy staff when he wasn't using it. Coming back into Taipei, there were suddenly armed guards at almost every intersection. We hadn't heard what happened over the radio. We had been rather isolated. I don't know if anyone had yet heard over the news what had happened, but it was obvious something was going on with the stepped up security. It only lasted for a day or two. I think at that point Taiwan was a little concerned about a possible spillover to Taiwan when the mainlanders cracked down in Beijing.

Q: You had this peculiar thing when the mainland Chinese were looking very carefully at who visited the United States and vice versa, Taiwan. Were there any difficulties? You want to get the economic ministers together. How did that work out on your side, particularly with the Secretary of Treasury or the Secretary of Commerce? Could they come there and talk?

PLAISTED: No, they couldn't, not in my day. We really did not have cabinet level exchanges. You are not going to have U.S.-Taiwan commerce ministers meetings. We didn't have that high level of exchange. If we were going to meet with them we would meet more informally in Washington. We would always meet outside of the State Department on some neutral ground such as in a restaurant.

Q: You have American departmental secretaries who have over time been able to call on their colleagues as they met them in these international meetings. This whole line of communication, was it dead or was there sort of an informal way of doing this?

PLAISTED: In my days, the top levels in the State Department were not getting engaged with their Taiwan counterparts. The American Institute in Taiwan in Washington, the director of the American Institute, would come through Taipei a couple times a year. Of course he was a non-State Department person, and he could go and call on various people, the Taiwan authorities. But you certainly were not going to have a Taiwan official meeting even informally with the Secretary of State or the Under Secretary.

Q: I would think that in the long run you might say the mainland policy of monitoring this very closely would have a certain effect because it was cutting down on the contacts between high officials. You know they get together a lot more than they used to, and they talk to each other, and that is the way a lot of business gets done. Did you notice this?

PLAISTED: Certainly on the political level it is an inhibiting factor which China has meant it to be.

Q: How about on the economic level?

PLAISTED: Economically it was inhibiting to some degree. We can have economic relations but we were very careful to some extent about not letting it spill over to the political realm.

Q: You know when you are doing this, you are negotiating, you are really looking at State, Treasury and Commerce these are sort of your...

PLAISTED: And USTR.

Q: USTR yes because I was thinking of the White House. Was there a filter or basically were you talking to them? How did you work this for your instructions?

PLAISTED: We have economic relations, we have commercial relations with Taiwan. My instructions were coming from the Washington interagency clearance process. Everyone had signed on and, you know, I would often have a say. I would cable Washington and say this is what I think the instructions should be. They were very much cleared interagency U.S. government instructions.

Q: So in a way...

PLAISTED: That was the normal economic relationship, commercial relationship that we did have with Taiwan. I would head all the trade negotiations as the AIT representative.

Q: Who could you deal with on the Taiwanese side?

PLAISTED: With our counterparts across the table. Their chief trade negotiator was Vincent Siew who became their economic minister and later the premier. We dealt with the people from their Ministry of Trade and their Economic Planning Commission. We dealt with all of their economic people.

Q: One always sees lists of the ten most wealthy people in the world, and there are usually a couple of Taiwanese on it. Were there big, would you call them shoguns or the equivalent?

PLAISTED: Yes absolutely. One is the Chairman of Far Eastern Textiles, Douglas Hsu. I think he still shows up on the Fortune 500 list. Another is Formosa Plastics, the Wang family, who are very wealthy and very well established in Taiwan, Asia, and the United States. I developed close friendships with some of these people.

Q: I assume they were closely tied to the government at least I mean on economic matters.

PLAISTED: Most of your top people in Taiwan are very politically savvy, economically savvy, but they weren't always very political. Some were apolitical at times.

Q: On to politics, we didn't have a political section, was there a cultural section? How did we cover the politics of Taiwan?

PLAISTED: There was a political section, a relatively small section that would report on what was going on politically. In those days, our deputy director (the equivalent of the DCM) was Scott Hallford. He was a great golfer, still is to this day, and it was a fabulous talent to have. There was a long period of time when we didn't have a director. I was acting deputy director in Scott's job, and he was acting as director. If he wanted to find out what was happening politically, he would take the afternoon off and go off to the golf course, and the next day he would come back and write a great cable about what he picked up on the golf course. He didn't report where he picked up his information, but that was the best place to find Taiwan's movers and shakers.

Q: That was the same in Korea. In Korea you really needed to be a good golfer too. I am a terrible golfer and would be humiliated by my Korean counterparts. Even in Burma.

PLAISTED: I used to get a little concerned because every time we would get some urgent missive from the State Department, that the Gulf War had just broken out, or a call to hold an emergency action team meeting immediately to step up security, he was inevitably on the golf course. I was always chairing the emergency action team. He was much more relaxed about it than I was because I would call him and he would say, "Oh, you can handle that."

Q: Did you feel under any particular threat or anything like that when you were there, or was it pretty tight control?

PLAISTED: I didn't. I did feel relatively safe in Taiwan. It was the time of the Gulf War. I had a house in downtown Taipei with some red gates. I remember walking out of my red gates one morning, and some guy in the neighborhood points his fingers at me like guns and goes, "Pow, pow, Gulf War," shooting me. I sort of looked at him, but I knew I wasn't under any great threat.

Q: I understand from people who were in African countries during the Gulf War, they practically shut down. Everyone was watching the war on TV.

PLAISTED: Oh, absolutely. It was what I was doing to the extent I possibly could. We had the TV on in the cafeteria which was around the corner from my office at the AIT. I announced at a staff meeting that the place to find me if I am not in my office is the cafeteria. I will sign cables or if you need me I will break away from the Gulf War. And please feel free to watch the war yourselves. This is a pretty exciting moment in history. We all need to get our work done, but you can do it whenever you want to. You know what you are responsible for. You are professionals, and if you want to sit there and watch the Gulf War, go ahead. It was a fascinating time. If we weren't watching for awhile, we would ask our colleagues in the hall or the cafeteria for an update. So we were absolutely glued to the TV as much as possible. I was absolutely stunned when President Bush suddenly called off operations.

Q: I think most of us were. I feel it was a day too soon.

PLAISTED: I was trying to understand what happened here.

Q: What about the Gulf War? I mean we were running around trying to get money, get support and all. Did you get involved in that? Did Taiwan get melded into that at all?

PLAISTED: I certainly didn't get involved in it.

Q: Because we were sort of passing the hat among a lot of countries, but Taiwan was maybe somewhat off limits. Did the Bush administration which came in while you were there, did that change anything, or did you have any feel for a difference in thrust from Reagan to Bush?

PLAISTED: No, it was very much the Bush administration. I don't think the change in administration made any real difference. '88-'91, it would have mainly been the Bush administration.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover on Taiwan? I thought I would wrap it up at this point.

PLAISTED: I think that's done.

Q: All right. We will go to, you left Taiwan in '91. Whither?

PLAISTED: I was bound for Morocco.

Q: Morocco. All right we will note that you will be Morocco bound the next thing.

Okay, Joan, today is August 10, 2001. The DCMship is always something which is not a normal assignment. It has to be run through the ambassador. How did you get this assignment?

PLAISTED: I knew the then ambassador in Morocco, my first ambassador was Mike Ussery.

Q: I have interviewed Mike.

PLAISTED: I had first met him when I was living in Geneva through a mutual friend working for the White House. He told Mike to look me up in Geneva. We had drinks together. Do you want me to go into great detail on how I met this person who was later to become the ambassador to Morocco, and to select me as his DCM? It was quite a mishap when we first met. I was very busy that week, so when Mike called I suggested he come over to my apartment for drinks, and we just spend about an hour together. I got home from the office late. I lived in a lovely apartment overlooking Lac Léman. It has one of these old French elevators. I am on the 5th floor. I get back late, I am afraid he might be waiting for me. The elevator doesn't work, so I walk up five flights of stairs to the top carrying my heavy briefcase that has all the work in it I have to do for the next day. I'm cursing, which is something I almost never do. There, leaning against my door, is Mike Ussery, whom I had never met before. I shake hands, introduce myself, and said, "Oh, I can see you are not familiar with French elevators. Once you get to the top, you have to close the doors or the elevator will never descend again." We did that so the next person wouldn't have to walk up all the flights of stairs. He came in; I gave him a drink on a lovely little balcony overlooking all the sailboats in the harbor, overlooking the jet d'eau, the fountain. We are standing out on the balcony and there are glass doors on the balcony against the wall. He leans against the wall and one of the glass doors broke. So about that time, drinks were over. I thought before anything else happens, I'd best bid him farewell. A year or two later, I am walking down the halls of the State Department. I am always looking at the nameplates to see if I recognize old friends and I see Mike Ussery, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East Bureau. So I go in to ask his secretary if this is the same Mike Ussery I met in Geneva and if it is, I will wait until I get additional insurance and I will come back in and talk to him. It was a really funny misadventure when we had first met. I did talk to him again in Washington. So we got back together. When I was leaving for Taiwan he thought he was going to leave the administration and be a consultant. I got a letter from Mike months later that says, "Dear Joan," and it is on the stationery of the American Embassy in Morocco. He said, "It is a long story. I'll have to tell you someday, but I am in Morocco. I even asked the State Department if it would be too late for you if you could bid on the position of DCM. They said you are doing too valuable work in Taiwan but if you would ever like a Francophone vacation, please come and join Betsy - I knew his wife Betsy, too - and me in Morocco." I wrote back and said, "Mike, you are in one of my favorite countries in the world. Be certain you go down to Ouarzazate, to Zagora, to Marrakech." I was just so enthused about his assignment that when the incumbent DCM's tour was over, Dick Jackson...

Q: He had been there forever.

PLAISTED: Yes. Mike again was looking for a DCM. By then I was more of a prime candidate. It got down to three candidates. There had been a discussion at that point about trying to get more women into the Middle East. We did have someone in Iraq, April Glaspie, at the ambassadorial level. Maybe there were others; I can't think of any. But there was a conversation with the assistant secretary, John Kelly, and Mike, I believe, or at least the bureau was looking to place women. They thought that one of the places where it would be easier to be a female operating in the Middle East would be Morocco. There were three of us competing to be DCM. It had been narrowed down to three candidates. One was Ken Brill, who later became the executive secretary who was very talented. I went up and interviewed with him about a job in P in the under secretary's office at that point. I went and talked to him and just thought he was a very impressive individual. Then the second candidate had been our chargé in Iraq during the Gulf War. Very well spoken, and to me he deserved...

Q: Joe Wilson.

PLAISTED: Yes.

Q: Whom I am interviewing now. We are just getting to that point.

PLAISTED: Right. Get Joe's take on this. To me Joe Wilson deserved it if he wanted to be DCM in Morocco. To me he should have become an ambassador and had his own post. He had certainly proven his capabilities. My feeling was Joe Wilson gets to pick his assignment. So those were my two competitors. I was talking with Mike Ussery on the phone. I had to say to him as a friend and colleague that there is one person on the list from P who is just so impressive. You should seriously consider him. He did tell me that he checked him out too and he was very impressive. But some of the advantages I had, I spoke French very well. Once I got to Morocco I realized what an asset that was because all the foreign ministry officials spoke French. You really had to be able to run over at a minutes notice reading your instructions and translating them into French on your own to get Morocco's support. It really did come down to his selection, Mike's selection. Plus there was another person in the Department with a say in the selection process, because Mike Ussery's term as ambassador was going to be ending shortly at the end of the year, and there was another deputy assistant secretary of state who at that point was the informal candidate to replace Ambassador Ussery. I went in and interviewed with this gentleman, and the interview went quite well. So it was ultimately Mike Ussery's choice. He checked with the person he thought might replace him. I was selected. The person in P may well have found another position at that point because I know he was working on another assignment. We will have to see where our colleague Joe Wilson ended up.

Q: He ended up in places in Africa as ambassador.

PLAISTED: Right, he should have had his own posting immediately after Iraq.

Q: You did raise a question. You obviously were on trade negotiations. You worked out a reputation of your own, but there was this series of suits of women feeling they had been discriminated, I won't say feeling; they were discriminated against. Did you get involved in any of this, or were you sort of off doing your thing? It was called the women's suit or something like that. Did this affect you or did you get involved?

PLAISTED: I wasn't actively involved in it. It was called the women's class action suit. I never wanted to opt out of it. You were automatically part of the suit as a woman unless you opted out of it. I certainly did not want to opt out of it because I really was very interested in seeing how the courts would resolve this issue. I always followed it with interest to see just how the courts would come out. Had women been discriminated against? Had they not? Because there were times in my career when I felt, yes, I was discriminated against. There were other times when I felt it was very much to my advantage to be a woman. In the final analysis did it all balance out? So I followed the case with great interest.

Q: This was not, you weren't a driving force?

PLAISTED: No, I wasn't really active in the case.

Q: Okay. You were in Morocco from '91 to when?

PLAISTED: '94.

Q: First could you describe the government and the situation in Morocco, the economy of Morocco when you arrived there.

PLAISTED: The government of Morocco, the first thing to know about it, Morocco is a monarchy. King Hassan had been on the throne for thirty some years. When I was there he had almost absolute power. I always thought I wanted to be an ambassador, but after serving in Morocco, I thought it would really be much better to be a king because of the absolute power that one can wield as king. I could go into a few examples just to set the stage for politics at the top in Morocco. On the Middle East peace process there would be times when the Secretary of State really thought that something had been lined up. Morocco was set to move forward, and it had been lined up with Dennis Ross, and the Moroccan ambassador in the U.S. and the Minister for Foreign Affairs in Rabat. The Secretary of State goes in, I am with him as chargĳ½, to call on his majesty, and suddenly you know, there is no deal. Whether the king had indeed signed off on it as we thought he had or whether his advisors never dared mention it until the Secretary was actually present with the king, who knows, but at the last moment the king is king. It is his call. His word is what would run the country. How much power you had in Morocco depended on how close you were to the king, what was your access to the king. Even his very closest advisors sometimes would spend days waiting to meet with him. They would all be out at whatever palace he happened to be in. I was always trying to get hold of one of them. They may be there for days waiting to see if the king needed them or if they had something urgent they wanted to present to him. The king was very well spoken, but he had this fabulous interpreter who, if the king was speaking in French and the interpreter would translate into English for congressional visitors or groups that we had calling on the king, the interpreter would make what the king said, which was really quite fine, but when it came through this fabulous interpreter, he was even more loquacious, more eloquent than what the king had originally said. I also thought it would be fun to get an interpreter like that some day who could really say what I truly wanted to be saying.

Another funny incident with the king is that I spent about half of my time in Morocco as the chargĳ½ in addition to serving three ambassadors. There had been a bit of a gap - almost a year - after the departure of our second ambassador. The word was going around Morocco that the reason that the Clinton administration wasn't appointing a new ambassador was that we disapproved of Morocco's human rights record. Frankly I didn't think that was a bad rumor to have going around. There wasn't any truth to it, but it wasn't a bad thing to have going around. We were at the palace, with the congressional delegation I brought to call on the king, and he started going on and on about what an absolutely fabulous job Joan Plaisted was doing as chargĳ½ d'affaires. I thought this was very strange. The king was citing great details. Somebody has really done the research for him. He must have gone on for ten minutes. You don't always want to be praised too highly by a foreign the head of state. I just didn't understand this at all, but I had been in country long enough to realize the king had something in mind. Finally, I was literally blushing at the praise the king was heaping on me, and finally he got down to what he was really driving at with the Congressional delegation. "But you know, a country as important as Morocco really deserves an ambassador, and I hope you will appoint one soon." At which point I was quite relieved. That is why he had heaped the praise on me.

So you have a monarchy, very much a monarchy with the king at the top. It was at a time when there was talk of democratization, liberalization, opening up. The king was really a master of dosage, where he sort of knew how much or little to give up. This is not Thomas Jefferson, but he understood his country so well. Through this balancing act there was a constitutional referendum in '92 when I was there. There were parliamentary elections and local elections in '93 where I was very active trying to get election observers from the democratic institutes here in Washington, and we did. I had to go over to the palace to negotiate their approval. First the king said no to election observers. Then we explained how so many other countries had election observers, it really gives you credibility in the rest of the world to have outsiders observe your elections. Then the king did come around and say yes to the observers. But then I had to go over to the palace to make the arrangements. They asked me how many observers are coming. You know Morocco is the size of California. I said, "Well, about a dozen." This was the king's counselor whom I had dealt with quite often. He said, "A dozen. That's an army." We got him to calm down and agree to the election observers. It really was a good service for Morocco and for democracy. So the country was just beginning to open up.

Some of the counselors around the king were very good; some of them, speaking frankly, were straight out of Jurassic Park. They were sycophants who had been around for years. Everyone was looking at the next generation. The king, we are all mortal, the crown prince had been named as the heir apparent. Was the crown prince ready? There was no real question of whether the crown prince was ready or not, he would take over when his time came to take over. But there were many discussions at that point, was the crown prince ready. Now, he has spent two years on the throne. Was he ready to take over from his father? In my personal dealings with him I always thought he was quite intelligent, quite witty.

Q: You mentioned a couple of things here. I am sure we will come back to them, but the Middle East process was going hot and heavy at the time. There was the meeting in Oslo and Madrid. The Bush administration in particular was very concerned with this. What was the role of the king? It sounds like he was in and he was out or did we know where he stood on this?

PLAISTED: The king always saw himself as very much involved, he always wanted to be a major player in the Middle East peace process. In the past he had played more of an intermediary role, but now that the two sides, the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Arab world were dealing with each other more directly, Morocco's role as an intermediary was somewhat decreased. The king and many Moroccans had always been very proud of the Jewish heritage in Morocco. Once there were about 600,000 Jews who lived in Morocco, and many had their homes near the palaces. The homes you see now in Morocco with balconies were the Jewish homes near the Medina, because the Arab women couldn't sit out on the balconies. In my time there were only about 6,000 Jewish people left in the kingdom. The king had been in the vanguard in welcoming Rabin and Peres before it was popular. Simon Peres was in Morocco in 1986. You have to give the king a lot of credit for this, for being that open so early.

Morocco was a member of the OIC, the King was the head of the Al Kuds, the Jerusalem committee. In my day we very much sought Morocco's support for the Middle East peace process. At the very top levels, of course, it was done through the Secretary of State. I was cut out like most of our ambassadors in the day-to-day events, what Dennis Ross was doing, but there were issues, and I frankly wish they had kept me more in the loop. I probably could have been of more assistance. But there were many issues when we were asking the palace, I was asking the palace, for their assistance. Morocco agreed to chair one of the Middle East peace process working groups which was very important to us. In general, they were quite helpful in the Middle East peace process.

The one area where we did have difficulty was the Arab boycott. We were always trying to seek the king's assistance because of his contact with both sides to help end the Arab boycott. He just basically said he just couldn't do it, there was really nothing to gain. There would be Syrian resentment. It just wasn't an issue he wanted to take on - ending the Arab boycott. But he was very actively involved in the peace process.

I'll give you another example showing how diplomacy takes place in the days of CNN. It was right after the White House signing ceremony in September. It was about 6:30 in the morning, I am watching all this on CNN in Rabat.

Q: September of what year?

PLAISTED: Of '93, September '93. I am watching all this on CNN as I do my morning exercises at home. All of a sudden I hear that Rabin and Peres are leaving Washington, DC. They are flying back to Israel, but they are going to make a stop over in Rabat in Morocco to see the king. I hear this on CNN. I go, Joan you are charging 1/2. I was charging 1/2. I didn't know a thing about it. Well, it was quite possible it was lined up at the last moment. Anyway I didn't know a thing about it. I thought we have got to get right on top of this. So I called the political counselor, woke him up, and said, "John, do you know anything about this? I just heard this on CNN." He said, "No we had better call the foreign ministry when it opens at nine." I said, "Call the foreign ministry when it opens at nine! We had better track down the king's counselor or anyone we possibly can right now to know the subject of the meeting, what is likely to come out of it, and to be certain somebody gives us a report at the end of all this to let Washington know we are following it." So I, thank goodness, I was able to contact one of the king's closest counselors who was very much involved in the visit. In fact he said that he was just about to head to the airport to greet them and yes he would call me or somebody would let me know what had come out of the visit. Of course we got in touch with the State Department's Operations Center and assured everyone we were following developments, and then did send in an immediate report on this. And at the very end we did get kudos from the Department. State said that President Clinton was watching the developments. The President was watching the developments very closely and our coverage was critical. But I first picked it up on CNN. That is a little aside on the Middle East peace process.

Q: How were American-Moroccan relations during this period? I am sure you could recite line for line the litany about how Morocco was the first country to recognize the United States, one of our closest allies. I mean it is used all the time. Was this taken seriously there?

PLAISTED: Well, it is something we always liked to bring out in speeches. It always was a little overdone, but they really were the first country to recognize a newly fledgling U.S. What I always liked to add, I wouldn't say this in public briefings, but something I would use in our closed briefings, Morocco was also the country we almost first went to war with when the Barbary pirates captured a U.S. ship.

The relationship with the U.S. really was quite good in part because shortly after I arrived, the king was invited to a U.S. on a state visit. It all went very well. I think both the U.S. side and the Moroccan side were very pleased to have this face-to-face diplomacy. There were a series of high level visits. Secretary of State Baker came through Morocco. I think it was just two days after I arrived as DCM. Secretary Baker came through with his entourage. Secretary Christopher certainly came through a couple of times, but what really helped set the tone for relations I think during my time was the state visit in October of '91.

You may think the most important issue was seeking the king's support for the Middle East peace process which I am certain the President did or discussing the future of Jerusalem or the king's strategic vision. King Hassan always liked to present his strategic vision. What really was the most difficult issue in negotiating the king's schedule and his call on President Bush was timeliness. The king was not a morning person. He loved to stay up late at night, got to sleep very late, and would usually not rise before 11:00 A.M. Well, his call on the President in Washington in the White House was set for 11:00 A.M. The king had kept Queen Elizabeth waiting for 45 minutes at one point. The President did have something scheduled later, and, of course, he wanted to spend time with the king. Our main message was please get the king to the White House on time. He was going to be jet lagged anyway. He won't know what time it really is. Please do have him show up on time. And thank goodness the king did arrive right on the very minute scheduled. The king's motorcade pulled up on time to call on the President, but it could have been an embarrassing incident. I give him full credit for actually showing up on time to call on the President. So the relationship at that point was quite close because of high-level diplomacy, state visits.

Former president Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan came through Morocco in 1991 at the king's invitation. In fact I even got President Reagan to come and address the embassy personnel, something they absolutely loved. I have a great photo where I am helping him out of the car showing former President Reagan on one side where to stand and showing the former first lady Nancy Reagan where to stand. I am in the middle of the two of them with my arms outstretched. It is a fabulous photo. I accused the photographer at the embassy of touching it up. I said, "Don't show it to Nancy Reagan. She never likes anyone to outshine her." I was very pleased that President Reagan was able to address the embassy staff. Former President Bush after he left office also came through Morocco to call on the king. The overall relationship was quite positive. Morocco served on the Security Council in '92 and '93 during the time when I was DCM/Chargé d'affaires. In January of '92 they started serving on the Security Council. You never want that to happen when you are at an embassy because it literally almost doubled our workload, certainly in the political section and very much so in the front office. We were always giving Moroccan officials background on issues that were coming up in the Security Council. We were seeking their support particularly on the issue of Somalia when we wanted to deploy international troops very quickly. Morocco was very supportive. I went in at my level and requested their support. Could they send troops immediately? The President called King Hassan directly, and the king instantly promised the President of the United States that they would send troops to Somalia. They ended up sending 1,200 troops. They even extended their troops service in Somalia. I was also very active in trying to get Morocco to pull their troops out of Equatorial Guinea where they were actually propping up a bad government. Eventually we were able to convince them to pull their troops out of Equatorial Guinea. In general I think Morocco played a very positive role on the Security Council.

Q: Were there other U.S.-Moroccan political issues of concern? What about our economic ties?

PLAISTED: I should just say in terms of the U.S.-Moroccan relations, the one area where we did disagree, where the king had real concerns, was he was constantly warning us against continuing the sanctions in Iraq. He really did feel the impact on the Iraqi people. He would keep talking about the 500,000 malnourished children in Iraq. He had something of a 19th century balance-of-power view of the world that the U.S. should allow Iraq to be a counterpoint to Iran for balancing power in the region. So we did disagree over the issue of sanctions. The U.S. had also requested Morocco's help on Rwanda, on Haiti, and on ending the Arab boycott. We were not successful in those efforts. Before my time, I should say that Morocco was really the first country to send troops to the Gulf, to Saudi Arabia. That probably was a hard decision to make, but the king immediately sent troops to Saudi Arabia to another monarchy. I hope this puts the U.S.-Moroccan relationship in more of a perspective.

You were asking about the economy. From the U.S. perspective, we always wanted to increase U.S. exports. From the Moroccan perspective, they were always asking please send us more U.S. investors. They almost seemed to think that if they just asked me, an economist, please send us U.S. investors the cargo plane was going to drop out of the sky full of Americans who were dying to invest in Morocco. So we spent a lot of time working on the investment climate, trying to improve the investment climate as a first step towards attracting more American investment. When the king was to make his state visit to the U.S. I suggested to the palace that we arrange for him to call on American bankers and businesspeople in New York, which he did. Let them discuss firsthand what the American business community is looking for and what Morocco could offer. In Casablanca at the U.S. consulate we opened up a one-stop business center to make it easier to get the information that was available. I also set up regular briefings with the business community. We launched a business roundtable, something that I initiated with our commercial counselor when I was chargé d'affaires. These were regular meetings, briefings, open sessions with the business community and me as the chargé d'affaires with the idea that when our new ambassador arrived it would become the ambassador's business roundtable which it did. We also launched in my time a U.S.-Moroccan trade and investment group which is still ongoing. So there were a lot of efforts to increase investment and to assist Morocco. Economically Morocco had strengths and weaknesses. On a plus side, Morocco has a very diversified economy unlike many other countries. They had agriculture, tourism, light industry, money from phosphates, money from remittances. So it was more diversified, but on the negative side, the real problem is a very high unemployment rate which could possibly lead to instability. There is the rise of fundamentalism, certainly in neighboring Algeria. There is always the question could this spill over to Morocco. The unemployment rate was about 18%. There is a large income gap between the rich and the poor. Corruption was a problem. A very large percentage of the population was under 25. Amongst the unemployed, many were university graduates. So a real key issue was youth unemployment. Europe had a similar problem at that point, and it was really an issue in Morocco too, how do you employ the youth. What does this mean for the long-term stability of the country?

Q: Were there either customs or rules and regulations that made it not a very receptive economy for investment?

PLAISTED: Yes. There were concerns. The whole legal framework was one. You have to have full confidence in the judiciary in most of these countries before American firms will go in and invest. Was the legal system completely fair and open? The degree of corruption - of possible payouts behind the scenes - was another concern. American firms are bound by codes of conduct, and beyond codes of conduct bribery is illegal for U.S. businessmen operating overseas. So that climate was a concern for businesses coming in. The regulations were something of a labyrinth. You needed to clarify what are the regulations and really have the government itself out there promoting investment. Having the king himself at that level indicate his interest in attracting more investment certainly helps. And then actually carrying it out because often in Morocco the king can want something to happen but to have it actually take place requires action on a number of other levels. So, yes, there were impediments to investment. Something I always point out is, we are in an age of globalization. American businesses can go anywhere, so you had better convince them why they should come to Morocco.

Q: Did you find the hand of France in everything, or had that changed?

PLAISTED: No, I didn't. I think that had changed. In fact I think the Moroccans were almost trying to make a point that they certainly weren't dependent in any way on France, a nationalistic pride in a way. You would certainly see French influence in the culture. I was speaking French at dinner parties, French was our common language. The language of Morocco is actually a Moroccan Arabic, so if you speak classical Arabic, it is not going to get you very far. You had to speak Moroccan Arabic, so the language on the diplomatic circuit that we all shared was primarily French. You see French influence in the culture, but they are trying to move away from France. There was a time earlier when many of the top government officials were marrying French wives. When I was in Morocco there seemed to be a big move afoot to get divorced from your French wife and remarry with a Moroccan wife. In the foreign ministry you were really not supposed to be dating foreigners. So it was a rise of nationalism of sorts and also a degree of paranoia fearing foreigners would learn too much about the Kingdom.

Q: What was your impression of the Moroccan foreign service particularly as you would see it reflected in their ambassador here in Washington? Was the word getting through to the king or was everything predicated on how the king felt about things? Was there a good foreign service that was bringing back information?

PLAISTED: I am not sure how active their embassy here was in feeding back information at the time when I was in Morocco. We weren't working that closely with the embassy here, at least I wasn't in Morocco. It all depends on your access to the king. It depends on who their ambassador is here in Washington. Later their ambassador became someone who had been the minister of culture during my time. Then he became ambassador to the U.S. He went on to be foreign minister. In fact he is still foreign minister today. Mohammed Benaissa definitely had the king's confidence, that is King Hassan's. He is still foreign minister today under Mohammed VI. Someone like that, yes, he does have access to the king, and can probably pick up the phone. Today it very much depends - as it does in the U.S. foreign service, but even much more so because of Morocco's being a monarchy - on the personalities of their ambassadors here in Washington.

I found the officials in their foreign ministry, in general, to be quite highly educated, quite reasonable. We didn't always agree, but I would lay out the arguments for the position the U.S. wanted them to take, and, depending on the issue, they would often have to bring it to the king's attention. Or I would go and see how close I could get to meeting with the king to talking with his top counselor, if it was really a major issue where we truly wanted the king's support such as troops for Somalia or election observers for their parliamentary elections. They were very educated people, quite rational. I was concerned as a female how are they going to react to a woman making these demarches. Something I have always done, I think I learned it early on, I don't come in and say, "Hi, I'm Joan. Weak woman that I am, please, would you do this for the U.S." Rather I would say, "The President of the United States, President Bush, President Clinton, would like to call this to your attention and for you to consider this course of action." It didn't matter if I were a green frog, or at least I wanted them to think it didn't matter if I were a green frog. I was speaking for the President of the United States. I am the spokesperson for the President of the United States. That I learned early on.

Q: You mentioned human rights. Was there a problem?

PLAISTED: Yes, there was indeed a problem at that point. The U.S. was very active in pushing human rights, liberalization, democratization. I was often over talking to their ministers about releasing some of the political prisoners, about their treatment, about getting access for more of the NGOs to come in and look at prison conditions. A very sensitive issue between the U.S. and Morocco was always the release of our human rights report. And, of course, when it did come out we wanted to get as much publicity as possible within Morocco. It was very much an issue. But there was progress. In fact it was the day after the first ambassador I served left and I was Chargé that their most noted political prisoner was released, actually to the embassy right after the ambassador departed. So it was very good news, but there was also a bit of a crisis on how to handle this. What did we do? We quickly got in touch... I think his wife was in the U.S. We got him in touch with his wife. I believe she came to Morocco. There was some question about whether or not he was really free to leave the kingdom. He had nothing. He was staying at the political counselor's home for a while, wearing his clothes. So it really was something of an issue, but he eventually was free to depart for the United States. We were always asking Morocco to sign the major human rights conventions which they have not done. They did in my time adhere to one of the major human rights conventions.

On the democratization front I set up a working group in the embassy to look at what can we do to promote democracy here, to promote human rights. Morocco had a parliament; they had parliamentary elections, but one of the things we did was to work with them to just set up basic parliamentary procedures. They had a parliament, but it didn't really operate the way a parliament would operate in England or someplace else. We would get experts to come in and talk about the functioning of parliament. Also we sent as many of their parliamentarians as possible on international visitors programs to the U.S. This was another idea the embassy working group on democracy came up with, to really concentrate on the parliamentarians and to show them what we thought they ought to see in the U.S. - the court system, how our congress functions, not that it is always a great model. I was very active in trying to identify women's groups for international visitors programs to come to the U.S. too. At one point we were trying to put together a group of potential political leaders who were female. The political section came in and told me they couldn't do it. The women just weren't out there. They couldn't find any candidates. Of course I wouldn't take no for an answer, but it was very difficult. I started making calls to come up with this little group of women to send as perhaps future political leaders. It wasn't easy, but we were really working on the hard issues of democracy, human rights, women's rights. I was so pleased. I just went to a reception at the Moroccan embassy here. The ambassador, the present Moroccan ambassador, made a speech. It was the second anniversary of Mohammed VI coming to the throne. I couldn't have written a better speech. He said all the right things. He came out in support of democracy. He mentioned the progress they were making on human rights. He mentioned women's issues. He mentioned opening up the country, economic liberalization, just all the right grace notes. He knew he was addressing a U.S. audience, but he would not have said these things without knowing that the king was on board for his making the speech.

Q: The ideas are penetrating.

PLAISTED: The ideas are there not only in terms of lip service, but also more in terms of reality, they certainly have penetrated in the last six years or so.

Q: You mention prisoners. I can't think of his name now, but he was one of the ambassadors at the United Nations, later he became the assistant secretary for south Asian affairs. But he made a call with some other people and got some prisoners...

PLAISTED: In Morocco?

Q: Maybe it was after your time. But I understand there were a considerable number of prisoners on both the Algerian and the Moroccan side that had been sitting around in the middle of the desert for 20 years.

PLAISTED: Yes. The prisoners from the western Sahara, from the Polisario, right. And the exchange of prisoners was always one of the major issues. Secretary James Baker was appointed as the UN coordinator after my time, he was working with the UN on trying to resolve the western Sahara issue which was an issue in my day. It is still an issue today. It has not been resolved.

Q: Well, what was happening during your time, '91-'94, on the Polisario front?

PLAISTED: The king back in 1988 had accepted the idea of a referendum. The UN was to develop a peace plan. This was UN resolution 609 that called for a settlement plan and created this institution called MINURSO. In September of '91 during my time MINURSO was deployed to the Sahara. Their duties were monitoring, enforcing the cease fire, and organizing the referendum. During the time I was there, September '91 to March '94, it was a period of really false starts, a lot of mutual bad faith where neither side was really comfortable. Both sides wanted to be very certain that if there were a referendum, if it ever did come to an actual referendum, that they were going to win. Well, both sides could not be accommodated. They could not both win.

Q: Was there much of a population to referend with?

PLAISTED: No, there wasn't. But Morocco had been sending people into the Sahara, moving people in so if it did come to a vote, they were going to have more voters down there. It came down to the issue of whom do you count. The Polisario wanted to use the original Spanish census. The Moroccans, of course, wanted a much more liberal definition because there were additional people who were now in this area. So, it was and it still is a very difficult issue. The Secretary General of the UN became involved and came up with a five point compromise. Another UN resolution was passed in March of '94, resolution 907 on the criteria. They moved forward to try to register voters, they did get about 230,000 applications for voters although there were only, you were saying how many people were there, there were only 74,000 people there at the time of the 1974 Spanish census. MINURSO in my time was slowly working its way through all these applications. They had gone through about 10,000. The process could be challenged indefinitely, and it still hasn't been resolved today. I think the bottom line is, no one wants to really have a vote or referendum until you can be very certain it is going to come out in your favor.

Q: Back some time, I think either in the late '60s or '70s, you had considerable support for the Polisario movement. I mean really strong support mainly from Senate staff members for some reason. You know sort of the radicals of the '60s were taking this cause up. You had a king on one side and you had these so-called freedom fighters or something like that. It became a real political issue. Had this died down, I mean was this gone?

PLAISTED: Not completely. There was one staffer in a very prominent senator's office, Ted Kennedy's office, who had this bent on the Polisario, so that was still there. One thing I was concerned with as the chargé d'affaires was that we didn't have any way to really find out what was going on in the western Sahara. We could only send very low level officers. We would send junior officers down there. This is such a complicated issue. So working with the military, I eventually got Washington to liberalize the regulations so we could send the American military who were stationed at the embassy, the higher level officers, down to look at what is really happening in the western Sahara and to come back and brief us.

Q: The problem being that you couldn't send, you couldn't go down, others couldn't go down because this is a form of recognition. We always get into this.

PLAISTED: I could never go down, the ambassador is not going down. But a colonel at the embassy who follows the western Sahara, who knows the issues, knows whom to talk to, knows the history, he is the one I want to send down there. He's the one, rather than a junior officer. We just didn't have the right to do that in my day. We were able through a lot of banging on the doors here back in Washington to get Washington eventually to come around and agree, yes, someone who really knows the situation, we will let you send them down.

Q: Were you getting any, cooperation is not the right word, but were you working together with our embassy in Algiers? Because they were in a very difficult situation at that time. Fundamentalism was dangerous there. It was not a friendly environment.

PLAISTED: We were certainly in close contact, sharing and reporting what we would pick up on the western Sahara with our embassy in Algiers.

Q: Did you get into one of these spitting contests between, you know sometimes our embassy Kashmir versus New Delhi or Karachi or something?

PLAISTED: No, no difference, none at all. We had very fine ambassadors in Algiers when I was in Morocco, and we never had any real disagreement with the embassy in Algiers.

Q: After Mike Ussery left, who took his place?

PLAISTED: Frederick Vreeland who had been a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Near East Bureau. He also had been assigned to Morocco in the '60s. He loves Morocco. He was very farsighted and bought a piece of land in the Palmeraies which is now one of the highest priced real estate areas in Marrakech. He built an elaborate home there that just goes on and on. We held a country team off site meeting there to brainstorm to think more long-term. Afterwards, we were all to board a bus to go to the plane to fly back up to Rabat. I looked at Ambassador Vreeland and I said, "We are short one person, our USIA officer. She's lost. She can't find her way out of your house." So I literally went back in the house and started yelling for her. She was lost. It was so elaborate you couldn't find your way out of there. But that is just to say Ambassador Vreeland, when he came to the post, he knew Morocco very well.

Q: Was he a career officer?

PLAISTED: No, he was a political appointee, but he had spent many years with the U.S. government, so he certainly had a very good background, and was well received in the country. He was so well received that the Fourth of July party which he hosted shortly after he arrived included all his old friends. His wife and I are in the receiving line with him saying you have got to move them along. People were backed up for 45 minutes. Tell your old friends you will give them a call, we will get together. Of course you see your old friends of 20 years ago, you want to say more than hello and move on. So he had many friends, knew the country very well, spoke French beautifully, and was really a fine representative. He very much had his agenda, issues that he was out promoting.

Q: What were they?

PLAISTED: The Middle East peace process, of course, to the extent the embassy got involved in the Middle East peace process, the notion of democratization, human rights. He was very big on women's rights. He always liked to mention women's rights, education, and the Moroccan economy.

Q: He wasn't there too long was he.

PLAISTED: He was there a very short time. I was chargé¹/₂ longer than he was ambassador. He was there for less than a year, just about a year.

Q: Why was that?

PLAISTED: Because it was the change in administrations. He was a Bush appointee. Then when Clinton came into the White House, as a political appointee ambassador, Ambassador Vreeland had to resign after having been there for just a short time. That is when we really had a long period of time from the departure of Ambassador Vreeland until the arrival of Marc Ginsberg when I was chargé¹/₂ for almost a year at that point.

Q: How long did you work with Marc Ginsberg?

PLAISTED: For just a few months before I departed post.

Q: Did you find that you had problems moving back and forth between chargé¹/₂ to DCM and DCM to chargé¹/₂? Sometimes this can be a very difficult thing for an ambassador to deal with because you have become a power center of your own. How did you play that role going back and forth?

PLAISTED: It all depended on the ambassador I was dealing with. It was always very informal with Ambassador Vreeland. If he would be gone for some period of time, I would literally move into his office and the political counselor would move into the DCM's office. I would just sit at his desk, you know, put my papers inside his desk drawers on top of his papers. That was perfectly fine. It was that type of atmosphere. I could move back into my office in two minutes if I had to, if he suddenly returned. I certainly felt I had his full confidence. I just saw him in Rome; we are good friends, colleagues to this day. There was a lot of trust in the relationship. The first ambassador Mike Ussery too, he was a friend. He was a colleague. He trusted me; I certainly trusted his judgment. He was very clear on what his priorities were, what he expected from me. He knew he was on his way out. There were certain issues he wanted me to keep him abreast on, that he wanted to follow very closely, such as Middle East peace. Other issues he wanted me to handle. The third ambassador had not had that much experience with the Foreign Service, and came on board with more of a concern which is very typical. Is this a group of people I can trust? Who is this DCM? We just didn't have the same relationship I had with the previous ambassadors. There was a very unfortunate incident when he first arrived. My secretary was an absolute pro; she had served many ambassadors. I had drafted a very sensitive cable. I had put the ambassador down for approval, of course. As she had done for the previous ten or eleven months, she saw my initials. Not stopping to think we have an ambassador now, she pushed the button and in the electronic age sent the cable to Washington. He was absolutely livid. We did manage to recall the cable. So I think moving back and forth from Chargé to DCM depends on the relationship which, of course, is built up after you work with someone.

Q: One of the things, it is a theme that ran through other people I have interviewed dealing with Morocco or who have been on the periphery in other posts, was King Hassan really enjoyed having political appointee ambassadors. He felt he could co-opt them more. I mean there was talk about one of our ambassadors there, a political appointee, who started talking about "our king."

PLAISTED: Oh, yes, right.

Q: I was wondering whether this represents a period that had gone, or did you have that problem?

PLAISTED: It was an issue in Morocco. There were times when I really thought should I remind his majesty that he didn't appoint me, the chargé d'affaires. There were times when you really wanted to say, and I did, I represent the U.S. We would like you to see your mutual interest in this issue, but I am not an appointee of your government. There was still that attitude I think coming down from the palace that the American embassy should be doing the king's bidding. He did, of course, like ambassadors who could in theory pick up the phone and call their good friend the President. And you know very well if an ambassador is that close to the President, the last thing he is going to do is to call up and ask to speak to the President. He may ask to speak to the National Security Advisor or the deputy if the National Security Advisor isn't available. But he knows his friend the President's time is pretty valuable. He is not going to pick up the phone and chat on behalf of Morocco. But the king always did want someone who had that closeness or at least would give him the illusion that he could pick up the phone and call the President.

We had the GATT ministerial meeting to launch the World Trade Organization in Marrakech in 1994. Vice President Gore was there, along with two cabinet officials and a delegation of about 130 people. Vice President Gore wanted to talk to President Clinton about an idea he had discussed with King Hassan over lunch. I had spent weeks with all the White House advance and communications people to line up everything that goes into a vice presidential visit. We went out to the communications truck. The COMSAT communications satellite wouldn't work. So the one time when the king really did have direct access to the President, it didn't work. Vice President Gore couldn't use the phone with all this sophisticated communications equipment the White House advance had so laboriously installed. In retrospect it was really pretty funny.

Q: How did you find Moroccan society? In some Arab societies, you really don't get very far with them outside of the official reception office type thing.

PLAISTED: In general the people I was dealing with, the people I would meet, I really liked the Moroccans as a people in general. All levels of the society were quite interesting. Many were Francophone, the language, the culture was somewhat French. The people you would meet even on the streets in the medina were in general fairly friendly. I have stayed in touch with colleagues in Morocco to this day, everyone from people in their foreign ministry to the people who were the official residence staff because they were just such wonderful people and so delightful. So in general I had very good experiences with the people in Morocco.

Q: Was it a problem being a single woman in this sort of society?

PLAISTED: It was very unusual for a woman to be in such a high position in Morocco. It is very unusual to be single, too. But I considered this part of my role. I have always enjoyed the public diplomacy side of issues. I would make a couple of speeches a day. I think I made six speeches in two days at the time of the Fourth of July in French and English on TV. So I considered it was very much part of my duties to get out there and be seen, in part as a woman. I have a friend who is the chairman of the anthropology department at Columbia University. She was doing research in this little tiny village way outside of Marrakech. They were watching TV. I was at the airport in Rabat seeing the king off on his state visit to the U.S. On TV, you see all these military officials. You see the king's advisors and his family, and then you see this woman dressed in turquoise shaking the king's hand, not bowing lowly and kissing his hand as they all do. The little girls my friend was watching TV with said, "Who's that?" I really stuck out in the film clips. "Well, she's the chargġ½, the acting ambassador at the American embassy." They sort of looked again. "She is a woman?" "Yes." "Well, can she do that?" I really did want to get out and make speeches and be known throughout the country.

There was one very funny incident in retrospect. The Moroccans were rightfully very proud. It was the opening of the magnificent new mosque in Casablanca, just an incredible structure - almost all indigenous architecture, indigenous materials. The king, naturally, was going to open the mosque, but women are not allowed in the mosque, or at least certainly not on the ground floor. He did, of course, want to invite the diplomatic corps. What do you do with a female chargġ½ of the United States of America? So this went on, this debate went on, and the mosque was actually to open on my birthday just by coincidence. They couldn't really tell me what was going to happen. Was I going to be invited? They certainly could not invite the entire diplomatic corps, but exclude the United States. Our consul general in Casablanca also should be invited, she was a woman.

Q: Was that Ann Carey?

PLAISTED: Ann Carey, yes, Ann and I.

Q: Was she quite pregnant at the time?

PLAISTED: No. She wasn't. So what they finally decided was that all the diplomatic corps, mostly infidels, would be upstairs in the balcony which is where they would normally have women in the mosque. We would all be up there in the balconies where they placed the women. That way I could be with the diplomatic corps. So we were all sweltering up in the top balcony. Ann and I were completely dressed in black with our heads wrapped in these shawls. We even had to cover our ankles. As we were going out the residence door, of her residence in Casablanca, I said to her husband, "You have to take a picture of the two of us" wrapped in our Arab shawls all dressed in black which he did. It was published in the State Department magazine. I sent a copy to my mother and said, "Now find your daughter's photo in this magazine." There were the two of us completely disguised going to the opening of the mosque.

Q: Well then in 1994 you were up.

PLAISTED: I think of all the things that happened when I was in Morocco we talked about - democracy, human rights, the Middle East peace process, the thing that stands out in my mind the most was when I was chargi½, we received which was at the time, a very credible threat. Hezbollah had targeted the embassy.

Q: Could you explain what Hezbollah is?

PLAISTED: Hezbollah is debatable. The French foreign minister almost got thrown out of office for calling them a terrorist group. To the United States and to me, after living through this threat from Hezbollah, we certainly treated them as a terrorist group - a group originally based in Lebanon operating in the Middle East. We received a lot of specifics: it would be a car/truck bomb. The vehicle would be driven onto the embassy compound, or as close to the embassy compound as possible. The moment we received this threat, we instantly went into action. I was the chargi½. Originally we had about 660 people in Morocco. We had managed to cut staff substantially so we had about 500+ people at this point - Americans, Moroccans, and some other nationalities working for the embassy, consulate, and Voice of America. I was responsible for their security, and we had this very specific threat.

The security officer and I, our regional security officer, I remember we were walking the compound the day we received the threat and talking about how we can step up security immediately, which roads to close down. Then I realized I am out of my league. I am not a security expert. We truly have to get more help. Our security officer was very good but we needed all the expertise we could get. I talked to the military base in Germany in Wiesbaden. They were the closest to come to our assistance. They agreed to send down some security experts immediately. The experts were very impressed with the measures the security officer had already taken at the embassy. Of course during this time we are having staff meetings to alert the staff and the community to the threat and to explain to them why they had to park two blocks from the embassy. We closed the whole compound, but we couldn't close the busy road in front of the embassy. I went immediately to the Moroccan authorities, to the palace, to tell them we had received this threat and to remind them it is their responsibility to protect us. The Moroccans were quite cooperative, gave us police protection, closed down any streets you could possibly close down within reason. You couldn't cut off the main artery, the main highway in front of the embassy, but the Moroccans closed down the other streets, and they did give us stepped up 24-hour protection. We brought in more concrete barricades.

Then I even went back to Washington. I wanted to see the head of diplomatic security to do everything possible to protect the embassy against a car bomb. I was told, in the final analysis, if Hezbollah pulls a car with a bomb in it up to your embassy, Lady, you are going to lose some people. You know, it is probably going to be people on the ground floor. You might not die if you are up in your office, but people who are walking into the embassy at the time and in your ground floor offices will die. If Hezbollah manages to pull a car bomb up to the embassy, some people are going to die under your watch. That was a terrible thing to live with. I wanted to talk to the head of diplomatic security. I was received by his deputy, who told me, hey, we have worse threats in the world than the one you are facing. If Hezbollah wants to do this, well, you have to live with it. You are going to lose some people. I was furious. This was just not a very satisfactory meeting at all. You have got problems; we have got bigger problems.

When I look back on my tour in Morocco, and when I retired from the Foreign Service, I think what I was most relieved about was thank goodness this never happened, no one died under my watch in the Foreign Service, because it would be just such a terrible thing to have to live with to have the embassy blown up. Now why it didn't happen we are never really going to know. Was the threat real in the beginning? There was some thought later that maybe the threat wasn't a real threat, but at the time it sounded very specific. Had Hezbollah indeed targeted the embassy? Embassy Morocco probably was a soft target if you are looking for embassies to target. Did they indeed target the embassy, and then realize that we had stepped up security?

Q: Hezbollah is a group based in Lebanon which has been considered on our part a terrorist organization which is very much involved in attacks on Israel, and is financed by Iran. Although it was done by a different organization, our embassies in Nairobi and Tanzania were both blown up not too many years later by a different group, probably Osama bin Laden. But the point being the security people today I think would take quite a different attitude because, to use a diplomatic term, their ass is on the line in something like this. We had the embassy blown up in Beirut, but that was back in the '80s.

PLAISTED: That had already happened. Ours was exactly the scenario that actually did happen later in East Africa. And it was horrific.

Q: Oh, yes. It is one of these things that isn't overly understood. Did you have an armored car?

PLAISTED: I immediately got the armored car back. I was chargi½. The ambassador did have an armored car. I wasn't using it. The ambassador normally had three palace guards that would follow him everywhere, including in a follow car. When I became chargi½, I just kept my driver and my car as the deputy chief of mission. That was one of the first things we did to get the palace guards back immediately and use the armored limo. At one point a new armored car was delivered. I had to really fight Washington to hang on to the old one for an extended period of time so we could get the acting DCM in the other armored car.

The bodyguards would follow me everywhere. If I wanted to go to the beach on weekends, here would come the parade of cars, the Ambassador is going to the beach today. I went skiing outside of Marrakech. I was down in Marrakech on business, and I had always wanted to go skiing in the Atlas Mountains. So I went up skiing with these big bodyguards. I had rented a room in a Moroccan-style ski chalet for them. They had two single beds in this little room on the ski slopes. They took one look at it and then looked at me and said, "Is it okay if we come back tomorrow?" Of course they wanted to spend the night in Marrakech. So they turned down the accommodations and left me at the ski resort where I guess I was pretty safe.

I had a German shepherd in Rabat whom I had named "Killer," hoping others would think this gentle dog was fierce. I loved to take Killer out for walks particularly on the weekends. I was not allowed to leave my compound without at least a couple of security guards. So I had to try to explain to the German shepherd why I could no longer take him for walks. It was a very frightening period and very stressful.

Q: These things, they are not idle threats as we know.

Well, this is probably a good place to stop now, so we will pick up your next assignment.

PLAISTED: Which is going to be Office Director for Thailand and Burma.

Q: All right. You really were bouncing around weren't you? You know, you were in Africa, Europe, Switzerland, and now somewhere back in Thailand.

PLAISTED: I always think of my tours as going from Europe to Asia, then back to Europe, to Asia. This is the way it worked out. I loved Asia for the future and its future potential and Europe for the lifestyle.

Q: We will pick this up in 1994 when you became Office Director for Thailand and Burma.

Today is August 15th, the ides of August, 2001. Joan you had something to say about staffing at the embassy in Morocco before we go on.

PLAISTED: I was just very pleased to see by the time I left Morocco we had been able to reduce the size of both the American staff and to a lesser extent the local staff substantially, and also really strengthen the whole planning process of the mission program plan. We cut the American staff by 24%. It certainly wasn't easy. It took quite a lengthy process to do it. There had been an earlier inspection report before I arrived with the inspectors suggesting that the staff could be cut substantially. The figure wasn't quite as high as 24%. To get the agencies to go along was very difficult. With the military, we had them do a military manpower survey which identified where cuts could be made. We managed to cut some State Department positions. And with one of the agencies we had to utilize a procedure called the NSDD 38 where the decision literally goes to the Secretary of State and then to the NSC, because one of the agencies was resisting the cuts. We went through the NSDD 38 process, and Washington directed the agency to get on board and make the staff cuts the chargé¹/₂ was asking for.

Q: It is not hard to guess which agency.

PLAISTED: But we did win out and the agency did cut staff.

Q: There is a natural accumulation of staff in a nice post. You don't find, I am sure, that Algeria had that much of a problem. You know there is a tendency to load it up, and if it comes to a war, it moves beyond just being what is necessary. It becomes sort of a nice place to go. People bid for it and want to go there.

PLAISTED: We were also able to cut the FSN, the local staff, by 17%, but we did that in a very humanitarian fashion, mainly by attrition, not by firing anyone. So I was very pleased when I left we had a right-sized mission and also had a much clearer sense of direction. There wasn't any mission program plan when I first arrived. Because of all the traumas of the Gulf War, Morocco was exempt. There were more immediate things to worry about than setting the long term direction for the embassy. But after the Gulf War, after I arrived, we were able to really sit down with the embassy staff. We held some off-site retreats and began to really think outside the box. What are our long term interests in Morocco. How can we achieve them? What happens under different scenarios?

Q: Did you run into people in the corridors who said you knifed me in the back? What do you mean by cutting out positions in Morocco?

PLAISTED: No, but it was controversial. I think in the end it was certainly what had to be done to downsize staffing. We received very high praise for the work on the mission program plan. I worked three weekends in a row at home. It was cited by State as one of the best mission program plans in the world.

Q: The new king, Mohammed, had not arrived.

PLAISTED: No.

Q: Were you all looking at Mohammed and saying what is he going to be like? Was it obvious that Hassan was not going to be around?

PLAISTED: Hassan had been on the throne for approximately 35 years by that time. He had named the crown prince as his heir apparent. Obviously at some point the transition was going to take place. One of the really lively topics of conversation was is the crown prince prepared to take over or not. I think there were many who thought about five years earlier he wouldn't have been, but he was slowly getting more experience, carrying out more official duties. His father, the king, was bringing him in on more events. The prince was traveling more. During the years I was in Morocco he went to the Rio conference on the environment. He traveled throughout Europe. About that time too he completed his degree from the University at Nice. At that point he was gaining more experience. In my own personal encounters with the crown prince, I always thought he was quite intelligent, engaging. He had broad interests. He was very interested in jazz, and through some friends he borrowed my James Bond movies. He was at that time running around with a very flashy jet set international type crowd. There were some comments about the people in his entourage.

Q: Crown princes are entitled to that. Usually they turn into a prince Hal. Well then you came back to Washington, DC and you came to the Thailand and Burma office. You were there from '94 to when?

PLAISTED: I was there a rather short time as the Office Director for Thailand and Burma in the State Department from September '94 to July 31, '95.

Q: You had been through a lot of the trauma in Thailand before. How were relations with Thailand?

PLAISTED: Thailand is a very important ally of the U.S., but the relationship was frayed a bit at the edges. That was really due to differences on Burma policy, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia at that time, and some trade disputes with the U.S., mainly intellectual property rights. I think also some high level visits that had been scheduled had to be canceled including the Secretary of State's. The Thais were concerned. So we certainly tried - and I think we were successful - to put the relationship back on a very positive path with Thailand. It was mainly through high level visits during the time I was on the desk with just one series of briefing papers after another after another, preparing for the principal's visits to Thailand. We had several visits during that short period of time. The Secretary of State had a very successful trip to Thailand. This was Warren Christopher in November of '94. The Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai met with President Clinton twice within a very short period of time in October of '94 and then again in November of '94, and they got along quite well. Our economic relationship became a lot stronger because we had our first ever U.S.-Thailand economic consultations.

Q: You mentioned there was a disagreement over Burma. What was that?

PLAISTED: It was really the whole approach to take towards Burma. Strobe Talbott represented the U.S. at the post ministerial conference with ASEAN, the Southeast Asian nations meeting, the summer before I came on the desk. He really was very concerned that the U.S. was being isolated on Burma policy. With our emphasis on human rights, we were taking the right approach but we really had to do more to coordinate with our friends and allies in the Southeast Asian countries so they would understand the thrust of our policy and perhaps take a more like-minded view. He was quite concerned when he sat down with the heads of state.

What we did on U.S.-Burma policy was to coordinate much more carefully, not just with our Southeast Asian counterparts, but first within the U.S. government. There were a lot of differences. This was very controversial amongst the U.S. government agencies and even within the State Department. What takes precedence, human rights and the Bureau of Democracy and Human Rights? State's counternarcotics bureau wanted to take certain counternarcotics initiatives which the human rights people just didn't think we could do. So, first, we had to coordinate the policy amongst the U.S. agencies. We were eventually able to take some initial steps on counternarcotics, exchanging information with Burma really for the first time, and organizing some training seminars in Burma. We were able to take those steps on counternarcotics without damaging U.S. human rights interests. It was a very delicate balance. So first we tried to coordinate policy within the Department of State, secondly to coordinate policy more amongst all the U.S. government agencies. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State would chair interagency meetings, bringing together all the interested players in Washington. The meetings were pretty lively. At least we got everyone together in the same room and started to be a little more like-minded towards Burma. Finally, we worked much more closely with the ASEAN governments by going out and making demarches.

Very much at issue with Burma at that point was Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been under house arrest. Her anniversary was coming up, six years of house arrest. We were working very closely with the human rights groups in the U.S., with groups overseas, with her husband, Michael Aries who is a professor in the UK. I talked to him about once a week. There were many groups around the world who were really trying to do everything they could to put some pressure on the Burmese government to seek her release from house arrest. Finally, in July '95, on the sixth anniversary of her house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi was released. That was the good news when I was on the desk. It didn't last forever. She has been put under house arrest twice since, and remains so today.

Q: Before we move more to Burma, how was Thailand's government at that time? Had they pretty well shucked the military type of government?

PLAISTED: Yes, they had had an election. The new prime minister was Chuan Leekpai at that time. He was someone who really did believe in democracy and shared many of the same ideals that we had. This came out in his meetings with President Clinton. Thailand really did show a solid improvement and commitment to everything the country should stand for - democracy, human rights, and counternarcotics cooperation with the U.S., too. We moved forward on certain trade issues. Thailand did come forward to sign an intellectual property agreement which certainly helped on the economic side.

Q: Moving over to Burma, what did we want? One can say, "Free Aung San Suu Kyi," but more than that, she represents a broad political movement. Did we see any prospect of doing anything on that?

PLAISTED: I think ultimately what the U.S. and democratic nations wanted was a recognition of the election results in Burma from 1989 when Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic party won the elections and were never allowed to come into power. I think ultimately we wanted a democratic process. Whether it was a return to recognize those election results or to hold future democratic elections, that is ultimately what we were asking for in Burma. Also, we were concerned about the real suppression of the people's human rights, the treatment or mistreatment of so many of the minority tribes in Burma. We were also asking for counternarcotics action. This is an area with the world's highest production of opium, with exports from Burma. We wanted their government to really crack down on the supply side.

Q: Were there any revolts or this type of thing going on while you were there? I know they had a series of tribal, warlord, and student problems. Were these going on?

PLAISTED: There were a series of refugee problems with minority tribes in particular fleeing into Thailand and causing some problems on the border as they crossed into Thailand putting economic strains on the neighboring country. This was occurring during my time, and there was a question of how can Thailand cope with these refugees. Sometimes Thailand would forcibly return the refugees across the border, an action that could be endangering their lives. The Burmese army was after them. That was always an issue, too.

Q: What was your impression of our embassy in Burma? Was it able to do much there or was it just sort of there?

PLAISTED: Our embassy was very active in pushing the U.S. agenda. We had an excellent Chargé. We don't have an ambassador in Burma because of the problems we had after the '89 killings and the election results not being recognized, so we downgraded from an ambassador to a chargé. In essence we had a mission in Rangoon that was as active as it possibly could be under those circumstances in pushing the U.S. agenda. We also during my time had a high level mission going to Burma to really sit down and talk directly with the Burmese government. It was headed by Tom Hubbard, our deputy assistant secretary of state. It was the first high level U.S. mission sent to Burma since 1988. What I remember was trying to coordinate the U.S. government's position. What was my boss Tom Hubbard, what was he going to be able to say when he got there because of all the conflicting views, human rights, drugs, counternarcotics? So what we did on the desk is, we insisted, I insisted, that we be able to draft the instructions to him, and then clear these with the National Security Council, get the NSC to chop off to get all the agencies on board. That was the one way we could get cleared interagency instructions.

Q: Did you get the feeling that the Burmese government gave a damn about what we did?

PLAISTED: They did to some extent because they really did want more support on the counternarcotics side from the U.S. Also I think they were very concerned economically with the power that we had to prohibit new foreign investment or even to have some impact on the U.S. investment that was already there. They were actively putting in a gas pipeline between Burma and Thailand. So I think to some extent, yes, they were concerned about how they were viewed by the United States. At the same time the Burmese government and others would argue that how they viewed the democratic process or how they treated Aung San Suu Kyi and her followers was an internal affair of their government, and we shouldn't interfere. It is the classic Chinese argument, we shouldn't interfere in their internal affairs and sovereignty.

Q: How did you find the Burmese embassy? Were they effective?

PLAISTED: There were restraints on us here in Washington. We weren't able to deal directly with the Burmese ambassador and the Burmese embassy, so we had to play it more cautiously. The Burmese embassy would take a party line in support of their military government, the same thing I ran into up at the United Nations. The Burmese permanent representative, their UN mission there, would spout the official government line. So I felt we weren't going to break through. We are not going to change their official line. At the UN every year there would be a General Assembly resolution on Burma. You have to get the right balance between criticizing the human rights situation and giving the government of Burma credit for anything it may have done correctly. By working very closely with the drafters of the resolution - it is always drafted by the Swedes - the U.S., for the first time, was able to co-sponsor the Burma resolution which was in part due to all of our efforts in getting the U.S. government agencies aboard. We were also able to get a G-7 statement on Burma calling for Aung San Suu Kyi's release and the democratic process to move forward in Burma.

Q: Was there the feeling that the plight of Aung San Suu Kyi might have been obscuring the real problem? In a way I could see how they could let her go, kick her out of the country. Was this a concern of ours? By being there, she was a real thorn in their side. If you are out of the country, it wouldn't have been as much of a case.

PLAISTED: We certainly had no intention of encouraging her to leave the country. She was the spokesperson for the democratic movement. She herself always made the point that the larger issue is the return to democracy in Burma, not her own personal house arrest but what it stood for - the need to recognize the election results. She also made it perfectly clear she had no intention of ever leaving Burma. She knew if she left that chances are she would never be allowed back into the country again. I think she was correct, so it was clear that if she were released as she was, she certainly didn't have any intention of hopping on the first plane to join her husband in England and their two sons. In fact, the Burmese authorities, it was so inhumane in my view, just within the last few years Michael Aries, her husband, developed a cancer that was spreading quite rapidly. He wanted to go to Rangoon to see his wife one last time. The Burmese government would not give him a visa to visit her while he was dying of cancer. He subsequently died not being allowed to see his wife again.

Q: Who was running Burma? This was as we saw in this '94-'95 period?

PLAISTED: This is the so-called SLORC, which is a very good acronym. SLORC, it was very much the military who were in charge.

Q: Was Ne Win still a figure there?

PLAISTED: He was still alive, but he was behind the scenes. He wasn't active in policy at all. He had been shunted to the sidelines, but occasionally you would hear something about Ne Win speaking from his home. He really didn't have any input into the SLORC policy decisions.

Q: He wasn't like the man in Singapore sitting on the side calling the shots.

PLAISTED: Lee Kuan Yew, no, not at all.

Q: Well, after this time in '95, whither? Is there anything else we can talk about on Burma?

PLAISTED: There was a lot of congressional interest at that time on Burma. I would brief Senator John McCain and Congressman Bill Richardson on a fairly regular basis on what was happening on Burma. At the very end Thailand's ambassador at the UN whom I knew well was named ambassador to Washington, and we had a new U.S. ambassador going out to Thailand, Will Itoh. I was able to bring them together and really outline for them, here is what we haven't been able to accomplish yet. Here are the two new ambassadors. I really outlined a rather ambitious agenda for the two of them over quite a fine lunch. It was hosted by the Thai ambassador in New York at one of the better restaurants, Daniel. Here is the challenge for you two: to finalize the bilateral tax treaty, the treaty we had been working on for some time, to conclude a civil air agreement, and to make more progress on intellectual property rights. Over the next few years they were able to deliver on these important parts of our bilateral relationship.

Q: Well, then in '95 where...

PLAISTED: In '95 I had been nominated to go out to the Marshall Islands as ambassador, but I was caught up in this large group who were known as the Helms' hostages. Senator Jesse Helms, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, held us up. There must have been about 18 of us at the end. We were just not going to get confirmed until he got what he demanded - that one of the foreign affairs agencies be cut, AID, USIA or ACDA. One of the agencies had to be cut, he insisted. It was a real holdout. It was quite uncertain when - and even if - we were ever going to be confirmed. So in the interim, I was asked to go up to the United Nations as the senior advisor to cover the Asian issues. It was a great time to be up at the UN. It was the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, so we had many heads of state, heads of government in New York at the time for the celebrations. Ambassador Albright herself had visited recently with Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma. Ambassador Albright was very interested in promoting U.S. Burma policy, trying to foster democracy. I remember meetings we had in her office with the Japanese ambassador. Ambassador Albright would really be quite tough and straightforward trying to get Japan to take what we considered a more reasonable position on Burma, not just to move forward with economic assistance, but at least to make a few points with the Burmese government about what they should be doing in terms of restoring democracy.

Q: The Japanese ambassador, I guess they haven't taken a terribly firm position, they have taken sort of a back seat haven't they?

PLAISTED: Absolutely, wanting to stay in the background, not really wanting to speak up, and at the same time moving forward with their economic assistance to Burma. We questioned if this was counterproductive and suggested at least putting some conditions on their assistance.

Q: What issues were you particularly involved with?

PLAISTED: The major issues were in the General Assembly that year, including the Middle East peace process which seems to be a perennial issue. There were a number of Palestinian resolutions. We were able to line up Micronesia to join the U.S. and Israel in opposition to certain Middle East resolutions. Another major issue at that point was UN reform. There were study groups on the UN in the 21st century, looking at what was required in terms of decreasing the UN budget, decreasing the number of bureaucrats, improving productivity. And there was the whole question of do you renew the mandate for the Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, or do you get someone who is more reform minded to come in. So the whole issue of UN reform was something I was talking about with the some 25 ambassadors and their staff from the Asian countries. Another tough issue at that point was a resolution on land mines that called for a moratorium on the export of anti-personnel type land mines and for the eventual elimination of land mines. This is a goal that President Clinton had first proposed in a speech to the General Assembly. We were able to obtain 13 Asian co-sponsors for the moratorium on land mines. We were able to gain support for the code of conduct attacking bribery. An issue that came up at that point too was the Nigerian government's arbitrary execution of human rights leaders. A very hard-hitting U.S. sponsored resolution was introduced into the General Assembly that strongly condemned the Nigerian government. I met with most of the 25 Asian ambassadors or their staff and we also went out with demarches to their capitals to get very strong Asian support and co-sponsors for the resolution condemning Nigeria. Then there were the traditional issues that always come up such as the Cuba resolution that condemns the U.S. for our embargo where we always go down in defeat.

Q: Of the countries you were working with, which were the most responsive and which were the least responsive?

PLAISTED: The most responsive were always the Pacific islands, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia. More recently there have been other Pacific islanders who since this time have joined the United Nations. I served at the UN five years later in 1990 and some other newer Pacific island countries, like Palau, had joined. They weren't a member of the UN in 1985, but they are today. I could get their ambassador to fly up from Washington. They don't even have an office in New York, but on an important enough issue where Palau had an interest, their ambassador would take the shuttle to come on up and push the voting button. Kiribati, where I also served as ambassador, is one of the most recent nations to join the UN. Kiribati, too, doesn't have a UN mission but they could send in their proxy vote to vote to join us on some of the important resolutions. So it was really the smaller island countries that with effective lobbying, and they would realize it was in their own interest to support some of these issues, would come on board. The least responsive I would say was certainly Burma because they often saw things differently from the U.S. perspective and the perspective of most other countries.

Q: How about China?

PLAISTED: China, it depended on the issue. Sometimes we had like-minded views. I had very good conversations with the Chinese ambassador on our mutual interests at the UN, and, on other issues such as human rights, China had a very different perspective. China, it depended on the issue. Singapore could sometimes see things quite differently. They were very active trying to be contentious at times. So sometimes Singapore would be quite outspoken on issues. We didn't always see eye-to-eye with their permanent representative.

Q: What was your impression of the United Nations and the organization? We were talking and pushing hard then for reforms. Did you feel that it was overstaffed and not very effective in areas?

PLAISTED: The UN was like any other major international organization. It was quite bureaucratic. There were ways to cut costs, save money. I also felt very strongly that it was time for the U.S., past time for the U.S., to move forward with UN reform, but at the same time, not to hold the entire UN process hostage by not paying U.S. dues. This was part of our obligation to the United Nations. It was very hard to preach reform when the question would always come up, well, when is the U.S. going to pay its dues. Well, when the UN reforms. This was something of a vicious circle.

Q: Did you feel that our withholding the money was really based on reform or was it based on UN bashing by Jesse Helms and others?

PLAISTED: It was based on a visceral mistrust of multilateralism on the part of certain people. I think Senator Helms did have a very genuine concern for wanting to reform the UN, and some of the pressure that he put on probably did spur change in the United Nations. I was quite pleased that in the year 2000 we finally at the very last minute were able to push through a compromise at the United Nations where the U.S. is able now to move forward in paying at least most of our past assessments due to the United Nations. Assuming the money is actually paid, it should make my job lobbying up at the United Nations, which I hope to do again in this upcoming General Assembly session, somewhat easier.

Q: We are always looking at relations between governments in our profession. How did you find relations with our mission at the United Nations and the Bureau of International Organizations at the time? Sometimes this waxes and wanes during this period.

PLAISTED: Most of the time we agreed, but there could be times on certain issues, particularly with developing country issues, where the U.S. Mission up at New York did not always see eye-to-eye with the instructions that we were getting or knew we were about to get from IO. There were tugs of war at times. In the final analysis you have got to go with the instructions you receive from Washington, but there were certainly a lot of battles on some of the issues, with the U.S. Mission in New York saying this is absolutely ridiculous. You have to look at our larger interests at the UN and maybe the U.S. should take a different tack on some of these issues where we did have a little leeway to achieve our greater goals. I have seen the U.S. Mission at the UN successfully turn around Washington to get them to change the U.S. vote, to change the U.S. position.

Q: When she became Secretary of State there were some people who faulted Madeleine Albright for running the Secretary of State with a small coterie around her and not reaching out and all. How did you find her method of operations at the UN?

PLAISTED: One thing that struck me with her UN operation, she was always very well prepared. She had an incredibly busy schedule every day. Every night there would be a briefing book prepared for her for the next day's activities which meant a lot of work on our part. She wanted to be certain she really knew the issues, knew what meetings were coming up, knew the U.S. position. I have been in meetings with a number of secretaries of state. When I was in meetings with her in New York, and I have been in meetings with her as Secretary of State, too, she was always very well prepared. She is going to follow the agenda. If she has five points, she is going to mention all five, unlike other secretaries of state who sort of go off on their global view of the world, you know in the meetings with Kissinger. With Ambassador Albright, what really struck me was her diligence.

Q: Well then how long were you left in this sort of limbo?

PLAISTED: It was really quite exciting in a way because I arrived in New York in mid-September for the beginning of the General Assembly session. I knew that once I was confirmed, I would be sworn in as ambassador and immediately sent off to the Marshall Islands, but we had no idea when this was going to take place. So I would try and do as much as I could every day, every weekend, professionally and personally. I would go to all the latest plays because I didn't know if that next week I was still going to be in New York. This lasted throughout the entire General Assembly session, so by the end of it I had seen just about every opera, every play, every tourist site, which is of course impossible in New York, but I really made the very most of my stay in New York. It wasn't until the very end of December '95 that an agreement was reached between Jesse Helms and the State Department. Subsequently Helms released the almost 20 of us by that time to go off to our posts. So I was finally cleared to go off to post. I had had my Senate hearing in September. This had come up suddenly when I was at the United Nations. I was told you had best come back right away because your hearing has just been scheduled.

Q: Did you have any problems with that?

PLAISTED: It was led by Senator Thomas who is the head of the East Asian subcommittee. I was a little concerned because of my work on Burma. Senator Helms always took a very active interest in Burma and certainly didn't always see things the State Department's way. I was the person most closely linked to U.S.-Burma policy at the day-to-day level as the office director. I was prepared in case the committee asked me any difficult questions on Burma. That was my one concern. Senator Helms' staffers whom I had worked with were there, but no questions came up on Burma.

When I first arrived, I went up to talk informally with Senator Thomas. I introduced myself and he asked me about my background. When I told him I had a Masters in Asian Studies, I had worked about half my career or more on Asia, starting with my first job on the Pacific islands, he was visibly relieved. I could just tell he was thinking, oh, thank God, I have somebody going out who knows something about the area. When I started mentioning my background on Asia I could just see his whole face sort of light up. This is not someone with absolutely no background whom we are being asked to confirm. I was very well prepared for the hearing, as well as one could be since I had never been out to the Marshall Islands before.

I was up at the same time as a colleague, who later became a good friend, Don Gevirtz, who was a political appointee nominated to Fiji. There were a number of generic questions that could have come up. He was a businessman and quite smart. He just didn't have the background I had on all these issues. So he and I came up with a little signal that if we were asked, or if he were asked, some question that was something where I knew the answer, he'd sort of nod, or I would nod, and he would know that I could handle the question for both of us. The one difficult question that came up was addressed to me, and was on a very specific educational issue that I knew nothing about. I had never heard anything about it. I was just trying to figure out what to do. My first reaction was to crawl under the big conference table. I had no idea what the senators were asking about. At that point Don looked at me and he nodded. It was a question for Fiji, and I was so relieved. So he took the question. The issue was with Fiji, not the Marshall Islands, so the political appointee saved me on that one and answered the committee's question.

Q: You were ambassador to the Marshalls from when to when?

PLAISTED: And also to Kiribati for an exceedingly long time. I went out to post in early February of '96 and left in July, it was July 14, 2000. So I was out in the Marshall Islands serving as ambassador for 4 ½ years. Tours are usually three years, I was our longest serving ambassador in Asia. Even then when I did leave, my successor still hadn't been confirmed, and it was a little unclear if I should leave or not. I finally just got on the plane. Am I supposed to come back or not? I had things scheduled and couldn't reach anyone at the higher levels. I was sort of getting conflicting advice from the State Department. The East Asia bureau told me you had better stay until you talk to the assistant secretary. I think we want you to stay on. The personnel bureau in July of 2000 said it was all right. You can leave. I finally said I am getting on the plane. My successor didn't get out to post until about six months later.

Q: Well, let's talk about the Marshall Islands. What is the name of the capital?

PLAISTED: It is Majuro.

Q: What does that mean?

PLAISTED: It is just the name, the geographic name of the particular island. It's the name of the atoll where the capital is located.

Q: What was America's role there when you got there in '96? And to Kiribati, we will cover that separately. Let's stick with the Marshall Islands.

PLAISTED: To explain America's role, I should probably go back a little bit historically on the Marshall Islands. Our first contact was when American whalers and missionaries first arrived in the 19th century. You saw Germany, Russia, and Spain all competing for influence in these south sea islands. The Marshall Islands in 1885 came under German administration. Then after WW I, Japan administered the Marshall Islands under a League of Nations mandate. WW II really saw the Americans coming in force. There were very important WW II battles, bloody battles that were fought on Kwajalein and Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands. At the end of the war the Marshall Islands became a U.S. strategic trust territory under the United Nations. After 1947 the U.S. administered the Marshall Islands as a U.S. strategic trust territory. We conducted a series of nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands from 1946 to 1958. This was at the very height of the Cold War.

As part of the preparation of the Marshalls for self governance, by 1979 they had elected their own president, the first president of the Marshall Islands who was still president when I first arrived. That was Amata Kabua who was the father of the Marshall Islands. It was originally thought that the territories in the Pacific that the U.S. administered - Palau, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and also the northern Marianas - would stay together. Instead the Marshalls, particularly Amata Kabua, led a movement in the '70s to break the Marshalls away from the rest of the trust territory. In 1978 the U.S. sponsored a referendum and the Marshallese voted to become an independent entity themselves, separate from Micronesia and Palau. Then in 1979 the first president was elected. In 1991 the United Nations formally recognized the end of U.S. responsibility for administering the Marshall Islands. In 1992 the Marshall Islands gained recognition as a UN member. That just explains our very close historic ties as the former trustee with the Marshall Islands.

The main U.S. interests today in the Marshall Islands are strategic interests. The agreement that we reached with the Marshall Islands is called the Compact of Free Association. Under this agreement the U.S. is responsible for the defense and security of the Marshall Islands. We have on Kwajalein a very important missile testing and space tracking U.S. army facility. Security interests in the Marshall Islands are paramount. Secondly, under the Compact, we talk about the U.S. supporting the Marshallese efforts to move toward economic self sufficiency. It is very much in our interest to promote their efforts toward economic self sufficiency, the long term economic development of the Marshall Islands. Thirdly our interest there is trying to get a government that is really devoted to transparency, accountability, good governance, and real democratic parliamentary elections. Finally, in terms of the embassy, the U.S. had an important interest to protect American citizens in the Marshall Islands.

Q: What was the embassy like?

PLAISTED: It was a very small embassy. I had managed embassies with very large staffs, 665 people in Morocco and 370 people in Taiwan. This is the first time in my life I had ever served in such a small embassy. It was really a shock to see the small size of the staff. We had a total of some 16 people, counting the gardener and my household help. In terms of major staff members we had the ambassador, the deputy chief of mission, and my office manager/secretary. A couple of times I was fortunate enough to select an office manager/secretary who was so competent she could work as a third officer because we truly needed someone to help with some of the substantive work. We had a locally hired military advisor who was an anthropologist by background. The regional administrative officer I shared with the ambassador to Micronesia. We would get very junior not very well trained administrative officers, and they would spend most of their time off island attending administrative conferences. The one time we had somebody on temporary duty who was actually well-trained, a retired FSO-1, it was the difference between night and day. He actually knew what he was doing. He not only was able to do the work of a regular administrative officer, but also able to train the staff and give them direction because he came to the job with the substance. It was a very small embassy.

I was doing things I hadn't done since I was a junior officer. Our Assistant Secretary was coming for the South Pacific forum meeting. The deputy chief of mission, Don Ahern, never got sick. He had been a pilot in the air force and was trained never to be sick because then you can't fly. Right before the Assistant Secretary's visit, Don came down with a horrible flu and really couldn't come to the embassy. So I ended up writing all the briefing papers. I was very pleased to see I could still write briefing papers.

Just keeping the embassy up and running could have taken all my time. I had to constantly remind myself there are more important policy issues to deal with. I would go in on a weekend to write a think piece and water would start streaming from the ceiling because of the poor maintenance of the building. I had to take care of the water leak first. I think Washington had no idea how difficult it really was just to run a small isolated post. We were one of the last posts to ever get E-mail. Both our classified and unclassified communications systems would go out periodically. Telephones would go out. There were times it was sort of nice not to be in touch with Washington, so I am not completely complaining about Washington not being able to contact us for days or weeks on end, but it was quite frustrating to have the communication systems going out so often. We were trying to get a classified fax machine, which seemed to be beyond Washington's capabilities. So just administering a small embassy really was much more of a task than I ever imagined it would be.

Security issues were always coming up. After the very tragic bombings of the embassies in East Africa, we received instructions the Department was finally going to carry out the recommendations in the Inman report. (Retired Admiral Bobby Inman had chaired the Secretary of State's Advisory Panel on Overseas Security.) One was the embassy should be set back 150 feet from the major road. Another was to close off the road in front of the embassy. I went in with a cable back to the Department that was apparently quoted by the Secretary of State on the seventh floor which said, "If we are going to set back this embassy 150 feet, that is going to put us out over the ocean which the staff might rather like. We can fish at lunch time." There was only one main road on the island that passed right in front of the embassy. Closing this off would cut the town's access to the airport. Another directive that came out was to have 24 hour surveillance. Unless Washington was going to bring in teams, and they weren't talking about this, there is nobody trained in 24 hour surveillance, and we are not going to be able to train people. We had difficulty training the local guards to stay awake at night. There was another recommendation to install highly sophisticated bomb detection equipment in the entryway of all our embassies. Again, who is going to maintain this equipment in the embassy. We just didn't have the capabilities to do this. At the same time as ambassador, I didn't want to go in with the definitive message saying we refuse to take the highly sensitive bomb detection equipment, and then have the embassy bombed shortly thereafter. You don't want to be in the position of turning down some of these innovations. I just felt that diplomatic security did not have a good understanding of the true security needs of a small embassy. Kids would break in and steal computer equipment in the Marshall Islands. We had alarms on the windows, but the contact points would keep falling off in a humid island environment. I kept asking for a little alarm you could buy at Radio Shack that you put on the ceiling. It is a motion detector you set at night. That would be enough to scare little mini robbers away who might break into the embassy at night. That wasn't on the approved list of equipment so we never could have a simple motion detector. The administrative issues really were a challenge, just trying to keep the little post up and running and trying to keep the morale of the staff up too because it was such a small staff. We were so isolated. People had to get off the island.

Q: Oh, yes. With these security concerns, did the Department of State take into account that we have got a bunch of different posts? Yours was one of the smallest but others were the same caliber. Did Washington say let's send out a security team to go out and come up with recommendations on what can and can't be done or were they trying to do this all from Washington?

PLAISTED: I think they were trying to do it from Washington. That was one of my recommendations, one of my swan song cables when I left the Marshall Islands. I certainly recommended earlier too to the department that the diplomatic security bureau look specifically at the needs of some of these small posts which are quite different from the needs of Embassy Paris or Embassy Morocco.

Q: How do you get there?

PLAISTED: You have to stay overnight in Honolulu if you are coming from the continental U.S. From Honolulu there were flights three to five days a week depending on the season to the Marshall Islands. It is a direct flight once you get to Honolulu, stay overnight, and continue on Continental Airlines for a 5 ½ hour flight.

Q: What was the Marshall Islands' government like? How did you deal with it?

PLAISTED: During my time there were three different presidents of the Marshall Islands. It was always a parliamentary government with 33 senators, who in turn elected the president. The president had quite a bit of the power, particularly the first president of the Marshall Islands who was still there when I arrived, Amata Kabua. Amata Kabua and the second president who was his cousin, Imata Kabua, were both hereditary traditional Marshallese chieftains. So you are dealing with the tribal chief. The third president was Kasai Note. For the first time in the history of the Marshall Islands, a commoner was elected president. That ended the rule of the traditional chiefs in the Marshall Islands. I can characterize the presidents if you would like me to.

Q: Yes, I would.

PLAISTED: The first president, Amata Kabua, was really revered by his people. He was the George Washington of the Marshall Islands. He was the father of his country. He had a background as a secondary school teacher which in Marshallese parlance means he was one of the better educated people on island. He had been very active in the congress of Micronesia. He was the one who really led the movement for the Marshall Islands to split away from the rest of the trust territory. That is how they all became independent countries out there - the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau.

Q: What was the genesis of wanting to split?

PLAISTED: I think in his mind he thought the Marshall Islands was so much more valuable because they had the U.S. army base on Kwajalein. They would be so much more valuable to the U.S. separately, as a separate country, than they would be linked with Micronesia and Palau. The people supported him in the referendum. Later the northern Marianas voted for commonwealth status. As a commonwealth they became U.S. citizens and had certain other rights, too. I had many people in the Marshall Islands come up to me and say, do you think we could have another referendum? I think they were implying that given the choice today, they would have opted for commonwealth status. And that was one of their original choices.

In 1979 Amata Kabua was elected by the parliament as the first president of the Marshall Islands. I always enjoyed my conversations with him, dealing with him. I think many of the Marshallese either revered him so much or were scared to death of him because he had a lot of power as a traditional chief. He could remove you from the land, and land rights are everything. As the American ambassador, I was certainly not afraid of him. I was one of the few people who could really talk with him in the Marshall Islands, who could talk with him openly.

There were times when we disagreed and other times he would be very charming. I remember calling him at the last minute. An American businessman who had an interesting proposal for transportation from one island to another came into my office. I called the president to see if I could come to see him just for 15 minutes with this American businessman to present his ideas. Six hours later we were still out having drinks with the president. He was very friendly, fairly pro-U.S., but also had a good sense of his country.

There was an unfortunate case of an Australian who wanted to get a license to open up a bank in the Marshall Islands. These little island countries are often the subject of scams and quite vulnerable. This Australian had a very bad reputation. He had been closed down in Australia by their securities and exchange commission. So he wasn't the type of person you would really want coming in to open up a bank in the Marshall Islands. The IMF banking commissioner had refused to recommend a license for this Australian businessman. Yet Kabua wanted this approved. I raised it with the president, and his attitude was, you know, everyone deserves a second chance in life. Well, maybe everyone deserves a second chance in life, I told the President, but frankly, that said, you are president of the Marshall Islands and this looks like a scam. The Australian ambassador had given Kabua documents showing the difficulties the man had had with the Australian securities and exchange commission. I told the President he didn't want to inflict this on his people. This was all a very private conversation. He went ahead and approved the license. The IMF banking commissioner left the island seeing he had been overruled, so the Marshall Islands lost the banking commissioner, too. A couple of months later to his credit, President Kabua in a private conversation with me said, "You know, Joan, if I had that decision to make over again, I don't think I would have approved the Australian bank coming in." By that time it did indeed look like fraud. So at least he admitted that he should have made a different decision.

But he was president only for a short time after my arrival. In November '96 I received a phone call at 3:00 A.M. asking if we could medically evacuate the president as soon as possible. Of course we started working on it immediately. I called our military advisor. We contacted the Coast Guard in Honolulu, and we were able to have a Coast Guard emergency medical evacuation launched. It seemed to take forever to get to the Marshall Islands, but the plane eventually came in and the president was quickly evacuated to Honolulu where he did recover. Kabua turned out to have a number of medical problems, but mainly a kidney problem. The first lady of the Marshall Islands, his wife, a lovely lady, gave the American embassy full credit for saving her husband's life. It certainly made our relations a lot easier for awhile on island. It was as if Martha Washington gave the Marshallese embassy here credit for saving her husband's life. Unfortunately, the President had a relapse when he was still in Honolulu and died around Christmas. It was quite a tragedy, quite a shock for the Marshallese people. Amata Kabua had been their one and only president since 1979.

One of our major goals in the Marshall Islands is to get the Marshallese to really move toward economic self sufficiency. The U.S. is providing 2/3s of the budget of the Marshall Islands. We give them more assistance on a per capita basis than we do to Egypt or Israel, among the highest in the world. Kabua realized the need for economic reform. We were trying to do more multilaterally so it wasn't just the U.S. saying this is what you should do Marshall Islands. We believed our message would be more effective if the Marshallese heard it from the Asian Development Bank and other countries, not just the U.S. There was an Asian Development Bank economic reform program. Amata Kabua was fairly firmly behind the need for economic reforms. He would talk about the need for trying to encourage more direct investment. One of the ways the Marshallese were shifting all this money that was coming in under the compact, \$60-70- million a year, was to put about 1/3 of the people on the government payroll, many of whom were not doing much of anything. You can't have a country that is sustainable with 1/3 of the people on the government payroll. So that was something obvious. President Kabua had to overrule his ministers who didn't want to cut people in their departments and say, "Look, this is something we have got to do for the future of our country, for the good of the country." And Kabua was someone who could carry it off. If he said you had to do it, the minister of education would cut staff. So I give him credit for seeing the larger picture and what the Marshallese had to do in terms of shifting resources from the public sector to the private sector.

After his death, the parliament, the 33 senators, 32 after his death, had to elect a president from amongst their members. There was a lot of jockeying for position. Who knows if Kabua had ever noted who should be his successor. There were so many people who claimed to be the heir apparent. I always wanted to talk to the ghost of Amata Kabua to see whom he really preferred. I had had earlier conversations with him, too, when I tried to draw him out, asking him who do you think should replace you someday. It was never really clear. So there was quite a bit of uncertainty after his death as to who should take over.

His cousin, Imata Kabua, another traditional chieftain, was finally selected. His cousin was one of the main landowners on Kwajalein where we had the military base. Imata had quite a different sense of leadership from Amata Kabua. In his inaugural address, Imata stressed the need for independence of the judiciary, and how he would respect the judiciary and its integrity. Alas, this reminded me subsequently of how countries (such as Taiwan flying so many flags trying to be sovereign) often emphasize their very weakest point. The independence of the judiciary really became a major issue under Imata Kabua. The judge would make the right decision. But after he made the right decision, he would be removed and another judge would come in to replace him.

Imata could be a very intelligent interlocutor. There were times I had some very good conversations with him, but he had a tendency to drink too much, and when he did, he would become very aggressive. I remember a rather funny scene in the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Tom Pickering's, office when he was receiving President Imata Kabua. Under Secretary Pickering, as he often does when the U.S. ambassador is present, was telling President Kabua how fortunate he was to have someone of my top standing as the U.S. ambassador to the Marshall Islands. Pickering was going on about my great background, economically and politically. President Kabua, who has said nothing up to this point, suddenly pops up and says, "And besides, she has a great wine collection." I was about ready to crawl under the couch in the under secretary's office. That is the last thing you want to be known for by the president of the country to which you are assigned. But, to put it in perspective, that was important to Imata Kabua. He did try to liquidate my wine supply a few times.

The relationship with the top leadership in the Marshall Islands, the foreign minister and others at that time, was often called prickly. It was a rather difficult period. It was difficult to deal with them, and when it came time for elections, the foreign minister and the finance minister were not re-elected. The reform program that I mentioned aimed to shift resources away from the public sector to the private sector was all but dead under Imata Kabua. He made it quite clear he did not want the ADB advisors. I had private conversations with him asking him where are you going to get your overall economic information. The Marshall Islands just doesn't have any native economists. You don't have to take their advice, but at least get the facts and figures on which you can base your own decisions. These people are here as macro economists who are being provided at no cost to your government to advise you. (They were funded by the U.S., Japan, and the Asian Development Bank.) Don't kick them out. You don't have to take their policy advice, just take their information. You can ask them to develop information for you. But he went ahead and had the Asian Development Bank advisors removed. The economic reform program was largely dead. The economy was slipping further, and it was a very difficult time.

A very contentious parliamentary election was scheduled for November of 1999. You had Imata Kabua and his faction on one side, and, on the other, a party that was running on a good government platform. I almost had to stop making speeches because their platform sounded as if it was exactly what I had been emphasizing and Secretary Albright was emphasizing in our speeches. The opposition party was running on a platform of good governance, democracy, human rights, an independent judiciary, anti-corruption, transparency, accountability - everything a good government should stand for.

It was a very close election, but the opposition led by Kasai Note thankfully won. He was subsequently elected President in January of 2000 by the Marshallese parliament. In fact, President Note would sometimes give me credit for his election. That is the last thing a U.S. ambassador wants. The embassy was certainly neutral and we made it a point to stay out of the elections. But I think it was very clear in terms of what his party stood for, that they were the party of good government supporting the same goals as the U.S. He subsequently found it difficult to translate the very best of intentions into action, although I think his intentions were very good, very fine. It was a much easier government to deal with. A real friendship replaced the prickly relationship we had with the previous leadership of the Marshall Islands. It was the first time you had a commoner who became president, ending the hereditary chieftains role as president. Democracy, I think, certainly made great strides in the 1999 parliamentary elections in the Marshall Islands. As an aside, the representational costs for lunches and dinners at my residence went way down, because it was the first time that the food cost more than the liquor. Most of the new cabinet members didn't drink, and those who did might have one glass of wine with dinner.

Q: A couple of things about the economic setup. What was the population of the Marshall Islands complex, and then what could they do to be self sufficient?

PLAISTED: A census was taken just right before I left. The population of the Marshall Islands turned out to be less than predicted, about 51,000 people as opposed to 56,000 or more. There are a number of things that could be done to reduce some of the dependency on the U.S. for funding, such as shifting resources from the public sector where too many people are on the government payroll to the private sector, and improving the foreign investment climate. During the term of the second president of the Marshall Islands, we saw some open hostility to foreign entrepreneurs coming in. The idea of not respecting an independent judiciary made it very difficult. How can local and foreign businessmen operate in an environment where you can't count on legal decisions always being implemented? The judges would often make the right calls, but the powers that be would try to overrule them or not enforce their decisions. Respect for the judiciary, which is very much the case under President Note, is an important step. Having only 51,000 people makes it a heck of a lot easier to stimulate the economy. You don't have to do too much. StarKist Tuna came in with a tuna loining plant to export tuna loins directly to the United States and hired 300 workers. There was quite a demand to work in this tuna plant. In terms of resources, the Marshall Islands has tuna, some possibilities for tourism, and copra. International prices for copra, coconut husks, have been quite low. The Asian Development Bank is working to adjust fishing policies so that, in addition to licensing the tuna boats, the Marshall Islands could entice more boats to pull into port in the Marshalls to buy gasoline and resupply from local stores. This could be a major source of revenue. We did start to see more boats coming into the Marshall Islands.

Q: Was there a problem of Japanese and maybe American, Russian, and other boats basically poaching? Were there Marshallese boats?

PLAISTED: Marshallese, no. The Marshalls doesn't do any deep water tuna fishing. There was a rather disastrous time when they did buy some tuna boats and proved they really couldn't operate them and then tried to sell the boats back to the country they had bought them from. Now their emphasis has been more on letting mainly the Chinese and some other nationalities do the fishing. Their hope is to get more revenue from the spinoffs.

Q: What more can be done to improve the economy?

PLAISTED: One of the basic things that has to be done in the Marshall Islands is to improve the educational system. They get a lot of funding for education through U.S. and Asian Development Bank grants without really making a dent in better educating the youth. The Marshallese under the Compact are very fortunate to have the right to live, work and study in the U.S. Some of the more enterprising young people go off particularly to Hawaii for high school and a few are going to college. Some of them are returning to the Marshall Islands now. You really have to provide at the local level a better educational system and also better health care for the people. As a nation about 2/3rds of the people are overweight and about 2/3rds have diabetes.

We are working with the Marshalls to look at the large amount of U.S. assistance - roughly about \$60-70 million a year - that comes into the Marshall Islands under the Compact that is scheduled to end in October of 2001, which is going to be quite traumatic. If we are still negotiating, which we will be, the Compact's funding will continue automatically for two more years. October 2003 is the definitive cutoff date. We are beginning negotiations. One of the things we are really looking at on both sides is what proposals can the Marshallese come up with to improve health, education, the environment, and the domestic and foreign investment climate so that the next time around we can really target the U.S. assistance. What happened to all this assistance? The Compact was negotiated at the height of the Cold War. The United States didn't want to be known as a colonial power. We didn't attach many strings to this money, we just gave it to them. It largely went into their general fund. Over the years we provided over a billion dollars to the Marshall Islands. Unfortunately, the Marshallese have very little to show for it. The thought now within the entire U.S. government and I think within the Marshallese government too is that any future assistance really has to be much better accounted for, so the Marshallese will have something to show for any future assistance.

Q: What was your relation with the Kwajalein missile base, our installation there? How did that work?

PLAISTED: We have on Kwajalein a U.S. army facility, always run by a U.S. colonel. This is where the U.S. tests long, medium, and short range missiles. We launch long range missiles from the west coast, from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, and send up the interceptor from Kwajalein. To date we have had two successful intercepts and two that weren't successful. For short range missile testing, we negotiated with the Marshall Islands government to use part of an island atoll to launch a SCUD type missile and this test was successful. Missile testing is a very important part of what we are doing at Kwajalein.

Kwajalein is also an important space tracking facility where we track foreign launches and track all the space junk, all the space debris. Have you seen the movie where the Martians invade and are attacking the White House? I asked a three star general who was in charge of the U.S. space program what his plans were. What if suddenly this scenario happens, what are your plans? He said he was going to call the U.S. ambassador! I always thought you may see me on CNN with a little hairy Martian in each hand. If it is a really advanced civilization maybe this will be two little Martian women.

The U.S. has a number of benefits from this installation in the Marshall Islands. It is a very isolated area. If we want to recover something from the shot, we can shoot it into the lagoon. If we don't want to recover anything, and want to be certain no one else recovers it either, we just send it off into the deep ocean.

The Marshallese, on their side, receive some real benefits from the base on Kwajalein. It is their largest private employer. In fact it may even be the largest employer on island now because they are finally cutting down on the number of government employees. We have about 3,000 Americans on Kwajalein counting dependents. We employ 1,300 Marshallese on base. These are considered some of the best jobs you can get in the Marshall Islands. The average salary comes out to about \$10,000 a year in a country where the per capita income is a little over \$1,000. It is a very good salary. The Marshallese take in about \$14 million in wages each year. The government receives about \$15 million in taxes from the base. There have been Marshallese students in the schools on Kwajalein starting with kindergarten. The first class just graduated last year of Marshallese who have gone through grades one to twelve in the Kwajalein school system. This is quite an added benefit. Bases always have surplus equipment. The Marshallese government gets the first right to all the surplus equipment. It is only after they have said no, we don't need this, that the U.S. will turn around and sell it as surplus equipment to some other country. We have a Job Corps Program on Kwajalein that prepares the Marshallese kids who are mostly from the island near Kwajalein of Ebeye for vocational training in the U.S. Many of them will go on to Honolulu, where I have met with them. Most are quite enthusiastic about this Job Corps Program and feel very fortunate to be selected to learn trades in the U.S. That is another benefit to the Marshallese of having the Kwajalein missile base located in the Marshall Islands.

Q: Did you get involved in any negotiations on this? This is the one thing that the Marshalls have that they can hold, to try to work the best deal possible.

PLAISTED: We began renegotiations on the Compact as called for in October 1999. Yes, I was on the team for the renegotiations. We have a negotiator here in Washington, a compact negotiator. Al Stayman is the official negotiator for the U.S. government, but I was certainly part of the team for the opening of the negotiations in Honolulu. What is really up for renegotiation are all the economic provisions of the Compact. As for the lease for the missile base on Kwajalein, we had the right to use the base for 30 years. In 1999 we were to inform the Marshallese whether or not we wanted to renew the lease for another 15 years. Of course we sent a diplomatic note from the embassy saying we did want to exercise our right to use the base for another 15 years. The base is really not up for renegotiation as part of the Compact.

Q: At one point in all these Pacific islands, one of our prime objectives was strategic denial, that is to keep the Soviets from putting ships and bases on these islands. Has that completely gone by the board? During your time there, were we looking over our shoulders to see if the Chinese might want to play games on this?

PLAISTED: When the U.S. was in the Marshall Islands at the height of the Cold War, the concept of strategic denial was very important to counter the Russians. It is debatable how valid strategic denial is today. I think the Marshalls is still of strategic significance to the United States. It is a vast ocean space. These are important shipping lanes between Hawaii and spots further west in Australia and Southeast Asia. We do not want to have an adversary control these shipping lanes. Now there is no one today, not the Chinese, not the Russians, who is threatening these open shipping lanes, but it is very important to keep the lanes open. We don't know what the future threats are going to be. I think this area still is of significance strategically, although the Cold War has long ended and relations have certainly changed with the Marshall Islands since the days of the Cold War.

Q: Now on the personal and personnel side, how did you keep from going Island happy? I mean also not just you but...

PLAISTED: The whole embassy team. When I first went out to the Marshall Islands I was so afraid of not having enough to do. I am a very active person and had been posted in Paris, Geneva, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Rabat, not a series of hardship posts. I shipped out 800 pounds of books. I was buying every classic to either read or re-read. I had two copies of War and Peace in case I wanted to read it in two different translations. The embassy had a tennis court. I bought an automatic tennis ball launching machine, quite an expensive piece of equipment, so I could take up tennis. I bought oil paints and canvasses, just about everything I could think of. I shipped my chessboard out to the Marshall Islands. Coming back 4 ½ years later I shipped back 800 pounds of books, and the canvasses are still white, unpainted. I did use the tennis ball launching machine, and learned how to play tennis to some extent.

What I found personally, and I think it is true for other members of the embassy staff, too, was we were such a small embassy. We were awfully busy. It would have been very difficult to live there without working so intensely. Of course as ambassador I was on call 24 hours a day. I would get calls in the middle of the night that someone in Kiribati had just been bitten by a barracuda and was bleeding profusely and could I please send in the Coast Guard immediately. I think our Embassy staff did save a few lives. The substantive issues really kept me quite busy.

What I did for recreation, what I really enjoyed, was I took up scuba diving. To this day I can't swim very well, and I don't like to get my head under water. But I became quite an avid diver. The Marshalls has some of the loveliest coral in the world, and great fish of almost every tropical variety. What you are almost always guaranteed to see when you are diving are sharks. I can remember quite vividly the first time I ever saw a shark. I was just snorkeling in the Marshall Islands when a shark came swimming by to check out my dive buddy. I quickly learned the different species. The white tipped shark is the shark that is considered less dangerous. The black tipped sharks and your grey reef sharks are very territorial. If they start circling you, you had better swim as fast as you can to get out of their territory. They are telling you that you are in the shark's living room, you had better get out as quickly as you can. Very often, particularly when I was first there, I would spend my weekends under water to get away from the land sharks. I was up on Bikini professionally and was pleased to be able to dive there. I wanted to see the experiments that the Department of Energy is conducting to show how you can grow indigenous plants on Bikini that aren't dangerous to eat.

Q: To make a note, today when you think of bikini, you think of a very minute female swimsuit. But there were nuclear explosions set off at Bikini atoll during the late '40s.

PLAISTED: In fact, the Bikini swimsuit was named bikini because it was so atomic in its impact. It had that type of impact. The Department of Energy through Lawrence Livermore has done a great job of showing how you can grow indigenous plants there and how it would be possible for the people of Bikini to resettle, but there are no permanent resettlements now on Bikini. Today it is the world's best sunken ship dive site. For the Bravo test in 1954 the U.S. was testing the impact of the atomic bomb on ships. Well, lo and behold, they sink. The world's only divable aircraft carrier, the Saratoga, is on Bikini. There are sunken submarines. Another great ship you can dive is the sister ship of the Bismarck but that is closer to Kwajalein. So I loved diving Bikini. I was only the second or third woman to dive Bikini. Bikini mainly attracts all these macho guys. It is not sports diving. It goes beyond recreational diving. It is deep. It starts at about 110 to 120 feet and goes down from there. You can only stay down for about 20 minutes. It is rather frustrating when you are on the landing deck of a ship as large as the Saratoga and you can only cover a small portion of it in one dive. Then coming up you have to breathe nitrox. Bikini is an incredible underwater wreck diving site today. So diving was what I enjoyed doing most in the Marshall Islands.

In terms of the embassy staff, I always made certain we would celebrate everyone's birthday. We would have a big dinner at the residence, come up with funny little gifts for each other, I would bring out some good food, good wines. Also, it was very important that everyone get off island as often as possible. We would head to Honolulu or take the pouch up to the military base on Kwajalein. That was always a good break to go up to Kwajalein to pick up the material for the Embassy in the classified diplomatic pouch. There was a commissary there and a small golf course. Mostly it was a change of scenery. That was until diplomatic security, in another one of my disagreements with them, brought in professional couriers. I really don't know why. But I made it a point to get everyone off island even if it was just to go to Kwajalein or to go and visit some of the outer atolls which are just pristinely beautiful.

Q: What about Kiribati where you were also our Ambassador?

PLAISTED: Kiribati was a British protectorate until they became independent in 1979. The president today is President Tito, who was reelected during my time, too. I got to know him quite well. When I went over to present my credentials, I discovered that his father had been employed by the U.S. army right after W.W.II where he learned all these American folk songs which he had passed on to his son who subsequently became the president of the country. One of my foremost memories of the president is of the reception he hosted after I presented my credentials. The Peace Corps volunteers and American missionaries were there. He suggested he and I sing "Home on the Range" together. I gave quite a good representation of the United States until he turned to me and said, "Joan, you know the second verse don't you?" Of course I didn't. The president knew the second verse. I didn't even know "Home on the Range" had a second verse. Actually it has five verses I learned subsequently.

The major U.S. presence in Kiribati is the Peace Corps. I have the highest respect for the volunteers who are often on these very isolated outer atolls doing very good work that is highly appreciated by the local people. When I was first named Ambassador, we had 20 Peace Corps volunteers in Kiribati, and they were all in the educational field. The President met his wife through the Peace Corps. She was helping to train some of the Peace Corps volunteers when he was asked to give a lecture and they fell in love. Of course they both have fond memories of the Peace Corps. He was always asking me for more Peace Corps volunteers, saying this is the way the U.S. can really help. We did manage to more than double the number of volunteers to 40 some in my time. Now about half of them are working on health projects. The Chinese have a mission in Kiribati. The Australians and New Zealanders have high commissioners, since Kiribati is a commonwealth member. The Chinese have built a satellite tracking station.

The president has done a lot to try and protect the local culture to preserve the dancing traditions. After I presented my credentials, one of their schools put on a dance ceremony. I was absolutely fascinated for about the first 10-15 minutes. It was the next two hours and 45 minutes that were hard to sit through as the VIP. But the dancers are really superb.

Q: Are they dancing what we think of as the hula or doing a different kind of stomping dance?

PLAISTED: If you watched the millennium on TV - CNN still reruns it - you see these little girls with the palm trees behind them dressed in their Hawaiian style hula skirts and straw bras doing a dance that is something like a hula. But they have a number of different dances, too. The Marshall Islands has a dance called the stick dance. It is the most amazing thing I have ever seen. The young boys constantly jump over fast moving sticks. They turn completely around and click these sticks together, but they do this so quickly that you can hardly even see the sticks moving. You hear the clack, clack of the stick dancers. It is an incredibly talented dance. For Kiribati's independence day they would host the battle of the bands and the battle of the dancers. The staff of each ministry was expected to get up and participate in the song and dance competition. You would have the Minister of Foreign Affairs trying to top the Minister of Finance who was trying to outsing the Minister of Health. I sent in a report to the State Department on one of my trips where I represented the U.S. at the independence day celebrations. I recommended that to increase morale in the State Department, we could host singing and dancing contests among the various bureaus. That was another one of my recommendations they never ran with in the U.S. Department of State.

Q: Well, are there any other issues we should cover at this time? Other embassies to mention?

PLAISTED: During my time, the Marshall Islands shifted their relations from China to Taiwan. Now they are receiving substantial economic assistance from Taiwan.

Q: I would imagine it makes good sense. They have nothing else to bargain with.

PLAISTED: Taiwan is very active in courting a number of the Pacific islands, and most successful in getting some of them to change their recognition from China to Taiwan.

Q: How did you find your instructions from the State Department? Did you have any particular problems?

PLAISTED: One concern I had during the 4 ½ years I was in the Marshall Islands was that under the Compact the Department of the Interior is responsible for coordinating the funding. Put simply, DOI wasn't doing it. A lot of U.S. money flowed into the Marshall Islands, \$60-70 million a year. When I first arrived, I was trying to get a handle on just how much assistance the U.S. was providing to the Marshall Islands. There was direct assistance. The Marshall Islands was also eligible, as if it were a U.S. state, for 44 federal programs, including health and education. Their students benefited from Pell grants. The U.S. Postal Service is there. The Marshall Islands is one of the few independent countries that has a U.S. zip code. All this assistance was flowing in, and no one could figure out within \$10 million how much the U.S. was providing each year. This is very serious. So I started doing some rough calculations. I insisted that the Department of Interior accountants sit down with me to try to come up with a more accurate accounting of just how much comes in a year, and which U.S. government programs are included. How much money is flowing in to the Marshall Islands? When I finally got them to focus on it, we still couldn't come up with an accurate figure within several million dollars. I kept pointing out omissions to the accountants. So I worked quite diligently just to get an accounting of the different programs to get a more accurate idea on what money is flowing into the Marshall Islands annually. I was pulling together the information for the U.S. government; that cable was actually sent out of the U.S. embassy. It really should have come out from Washington.

Then I lobbied Washington hard to try to identify all the various programs. What are all the federal programs going to the Marshall Islands? Are they beneficial or not? With the Compact renegotiations do we want to continue these programs or not? I had sent in a number of cables to the Department of the Interior to their Office of Inspector General to ask the Department of Interior to take a much more active role in the annual audit process. Under the Compact, the Marshall Islands has to provide an audit each year to the Department of the Interior. The Department of Interior pays \$600,000 every year to an independent auditor in the Marshall Islands to audit the accounts. Every year the independent auditor pockets the \$600,000 and comes out with an oversimplified report that concludes, we can't get all the statistics, we are limited in our data collection. The auditors do make specific recommendations for each department in the Marshallese government, recommendations that are seldom followed up on. The next year it is basically the same audit report. But trying to get the Department of the Interior to do more was almost hopeless. I asked that they actually audit the annual audit reports. Let's get better audit reports. The DOI would only do one audit of one organization in the Marshall Islands each year. That just wasn't enough. I tried to get them to be much more proactive, which in spite of all my efforts really didn't happen. Eventually the General Accounting Office came in and started studying some of these issues that I had been raising with the Department of the Interior. GAO came in and started doing more investigations in the Marshall Islands of how U.S. money was being used or misused, and, more importantly, sought recommendations for the future. Assuming we are going to continue some level of assistance, let's make certain future assistance is spent more wisely.

I had very strong differences with the Department of the Interior on another issue, too. The U.S. Congress had legislated that DOI was to send to each island country - to the Marshall Islands, to Micronesia, to Palau - someone called a federal programs coordinator who would serve with the embassy and coordinate the 40 some federal programs in country. How is the money being used? The coordinator was to look at the different programs and see how they were used or misused and how limited funding could be better utilized. The Department of the Interior would argue that Congress never provided funding for all three federal programs coordinators. They provided funding for just one position. So we never did have a federal programs coordinator in the Marshall Islands despite all my efforts. Interior eventually did base someone in Micronesia who was supposed to cover the three countries, but he hadn't set foot in the Marshall Islands for a year. I tried valiantly with limited success to get both the Marshall Islands and DOI to do more in terms of accountability, and to try to use the limited powers that we did have under the Compact. I urged the Department of Interior to take a more proactive stance to coordinate funding which really was a Department of the Interior responsibility.

Also I was trying to get the State Department to take a much more proactive role with the Marshall Islands. I actually did get State to hold a few more inter-agency group, IAG, meetings with the State Department in the chair coordinating the different agencies. This was in 1999, when we were about to begin Compact negotiations. Well no one was really doing the type of rigorous thinking and interagency coordination we had to do to get the U.S. government prepared to begin negotiations with the Marshall Islands. I wanted State to take that initiative. The IAG would usually be chaired by the deputy assistant secretary of state who has a vast area of responsibility. This individual often handled a dozen countries or more in Asia. There were always small and large crises that didn't allow for longer term thinking on the Marshall Islands. But there what you do is if the DAS can't chair the meeting, he/she has the office director take the chair. Somebody sits in the State chair. In my days I was sitting in the State chair in interagency meetings on Burma when the deputy assistant secretary couldn't do it. I thought it important to get a state umbrella over all these different government agencies with all their different programs in the Marshall Islands. That was something very difficult to do. So I was always trying to fight the valiant fight. The only time I could make some progress on these issues was if I would come back to Washington and run around to the different agencies or sit down with Interior Department accountants. We could have done a much better job on the U.S. side in trying to ensure that U.S. funding was better utilized in my opinion.

Q: When did you depart the Marshall Islands?

PLAISTED: I came back to the U.S. in July 2000. I officially retired and then went back to work as an Advisor/Ambassador at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations for the fall General Assembly session, something I've done every year through 2005.

Q: What were you doing there in 2000?

PLAISTED: I again served as the Asia advisor, the senior advisor for Asia. I remember being in Secretary of State Albright's meeting with President Wahid of Indonesia who was less than dynamic and in meetings with the Korean and the Chinese foreign ministers. There were a number of high level meetings because the heads of state and the ministers of foreign affairs were all there for the millennium summit. The major UN issue that session was UN reform. We needed to work out something so the U.S. would be able to pay our back assessments we owed to the United Nations. That agreement fell into place at the final hours at the end of the General Assembly's main session thanks to the efforts of Dick Holbrook and the administrative counselor at the U.S. Mission to the UN and many other people. There were various votes where I lobbied the Asian Ambassadors particularly on the issue of which countries to elect for two year rotating Security Council seats. The vote probably went the right way because of the support of the Pacific islands and some of the smaller Asian countries, including Mongolia. I or one of my colleagues would sit down with the Mongolian ambassador for awhile and present the U.S. perspective in such a way that he realized this is really the position Mongolia should be taking, too. We often could find an ally in Mongolia which was quite a pleasant surprise.

Q: Well, I guess this is a good time to say goodbye. You've certainly had a fascinating career and have served our country in so many ways in so many different places.

PLAISTED: The Foreign Service really is, as advertised, "the most interesting career in the world." I'm fortunate to have been able to realize my dream to be of service to my country.

Q: Great.

End of interview